





# COSIMO MATASSA

BEN SANDMEL

## NO AUDIO ENGINEER HAS THRILLED MORE LISTENERS

**A**udio engineers rarely get credit for their crucial contributions to hits. But the *sound* of a recording—just as much as a song's rendition—often provides the intangible element that puts it across. Listeners rarely identify this certain something as the hook that grabs them. Without its imperceptible appeal, however, they simply may not respond, and a hit will not ensue.

No audio engineer has thrilled more listeners by imbuing more hits with more sonic excitement than Cosimo Matassa. Matassa worked on a shoestring budget. His J&M Studio in New Orleans occupied less than three hundred square feet. He used extremely minimal equipment. But Matassa had a keen ear and a knack for making technically primitive recordings that burst with punch, presence, and instant danceability. What's more, he chanced to live in one of the world's great musical cities. And he began recording there in 1945, at the dawn of a period of intense creativity

that lasted until the early sixties. This era came to be known as the Golden Age of New Orleans rhythm & blues.

Born on April 13, 1926, Matassa started out in music by selling used records from his father's jukebox business. Sales were brisk, so he expanded his stock to include new releases. Then he had an epiphany. "It seemed to me," he said, with considerable understatement, "that a recording outlet for a city with so much music in it was a good idea." And thus he came to create one.

Matassa recorded a host of New Orleans R&B icons during the city's glory years, including Fats Domino, Lloyd Price, Irma Thomas, Frankie Ford, Lee Dorsey, Ernie K-Doe, Aaron Neville, Huey "Piano" Smith and the Clowns, Smiley Lewis, Shirley and Lee, and the Meters, among many others of equal merit. The happy results, for generations of rock and R&B devotees, were dozens of timeless gems, including Domino's "I'm Walking," Price's





COURAGE AND  
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MATASSA HIGH PRAISE AND  
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“Lawdy Miss Clawdy,” Thomas’ “It’s Raining,” K-Doe’s “Mother-in-Law,” Ford’s “Sea Cruise,” Guitar Slim’s “The Things That I Used to Do,” Lewis’ “Shame, Shame, Shame,” and Smith’s “Rockin’ Pneumonia and the Boogie Woogie Flu,” ad infinitum.

An A-list of musicians played on these records: drummers Earl Palmer and John Boudreaux; bassists Frank Fields and Lloyd Lambert; saxophonists Lee Allen, Herbert Hardesty, and Red Tyler; guitarists Justin Adams and Roy Montrell; pianists Huey Smith and James Booker; and the multi-instrumentalist Mac Rebennack, who would come to

be known as Dr. John. Not to mention some true renaissance men—such as Dave Bartholomew and Allen Toussaint—who wrote and arranged songs, produced sessions, *and* played trumpet and piano, respectively. All of these people made vital contributions to the classic Crescent City canon. But none of their music would have sounded nearly as good on record without the expertise of the beloved, respected man known to everyone in town as “Cos.”

The early fifties success of hometown artists Domino and Price, on hits engineered by Matassa, created quite a buzz in the music business. Record execs from labels based





**OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP** Matassa in the studio in the 1950s; Cos still at it in the 1970s. **THIS PAGE** With old friends Fats Domino and Dave Bartholomew (from left), 1999.

outside of New Orleans—especially Imperial, Specialty, Chess, and Atlantic—wondered why such consistently great and great-sounding records kept emanating from the Big Easy. More important, they mused, did these hits represent a surefire success formula that would also work for out-of-town artists? It would—and could, indeed—if such companies hired Matassa and his cadre of great players. One particularly dramatic instance occurred when Little Richard—the pride of Macon, Georgia—came to J&M and cut the definitive R&B/rock & roll gems, “Tutti Frutti” and “Long Tall Sally,” for Specialty in 1955 and 1956, respectively.

The secret of his success was quite simple, Matassa insisted: “I always tried to capture the dynamics of a live performance. These guys were doing these songs on their gigs and that was the sound that I was trying to get.” Earl Palmer, who played on “Tutti Frutti,” “I’m Walking,” and “Lawdy Miss Clawdy,” said, “Cosimo was a genius. I’ve seen engineers use two dozen mics to get the sound he got with three. He knew how to position mics and he knew each mic like it was a person. They put drums in a separate room now, or behind a baffle, but Cos never had no baffles in that room—you couldn’t fit one.”

Despite such acclaim, Matassa always downplayed his innovations and their seminal effect on R&B and rock. “Pioneer? That’s a guy with an ass full of arrows,” he once quipped. No wonder Allen Toussaint described this modest, self-effacing man as “quiet royalty.”

In addition to his audio acumen, Matassa created a refuge from prejudice and segregation. Behind the closed doors of his studio, black and white musicians played on one another’s sessions at a time when they faced arrest for performing together in public. Matassa took considerable heat for his egalitarian stance, and pulled no punches in assessing the realities involved: “Fats Domino sold twenty million records in a row, and the *Picayune* [New Orleans’ daily newspaper] never heard about it? Now if he’d gotten in a knife fight, he’d have been on the front page . . .” Such courage and integrity brought Matassa high praise and deep respect in circles where compliments are hard-earned. “I love Cos,” Dr. John stated recently. “Cos is one of my true heroes. Cos was one of the cats, one of the musicians.”

Matassa’s fine work helped spur the emergence of such important hometown labels as Minit, Instant, and Matassa’s own company, Dover. By the mid-sixties, though, the Golden Age of New Orleans rhythm & blues had run its course, deposed in large part by the British Invasion. Matassa stayed in the studio business for another decade or so, then remained active in various capacities on the New Orleans music scene, enjoying the acclaim of an elder statesman. Health issues have reduced his visibility of late, but not his deserved veneration. And now we welcome Cosimo Matassa to join his peers as a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

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