

Professor Longhair

"The Bach of Rock," New Orleans composer Allen Toussaint called him. The cornerstone of New Orleans rhythm & blues piano, Professor Longhair's astounding music influenced the work of Fats Domino, Dr. John, James Booker, Huey "Piano" Smith, Art Neville, and Allen Toussaint himself. Longhair's unique appeal lay in his offbeat songs, his warbling voice and the infectiously syncopated piano style which he once described as a blend of "rhumba, mambo and calypso."

He was born Henry Roeland Byrd on December 19, 1918 in Bogalusa, Louisiana and moved to New Orleans with his mother two years later. As a youth he tap-danced for tips on Bourbon Street, and later beat on lard cans and orange crates with a "spasm band." By the early Thirties, young Henry was frequenting the South Rampart Street honky tonks to hear barrelhouse blues pianists like Kid Stormy Weather, Drive 'Em Down, Sullivan Rock, Little Brother Montgomery and Tuts Washington. In 1936, Henry Byrd was befriended by Sullivan Rock, who began taking him along on gigs and eventually showed him how to play his first song, "Pinetop's Boogie Woogie." he soon joined the pianistic competition on South Rampart.

After the war, a flurry of recording activity swept New Orleans. Longhair got his first break at the Caldonia Club in 1948, and his colorful pseudonym from Caldonia owner Mike Tessitore. The following year, "Professor Longhair & the Shuffling Hungarians" made their first records for the Star Talent label, including "She Ain't Got No Hair" and the original "Mardi Gras In New Orleans."

In 1950, Longhair signed with Mercury and had better luck with "Baldhead," a remake of "She Ain't Got No Hair" which reach #5 on the R&B charts — the only chart record of his career. Although 'Fess was under contract to Mercury, Atlantic Records' Ahmet Ertegun lured him into J&M Studios later that year, where they cut ten magnificent sides including "She Walks Right In" and "Walk Your Blues Away."

In the period 1953-64, Professor Longhair waxed sides for a number of labels, but their popularity was limited to the New Orleans area at least in part because of the artist's unwillingness to travel. In 1964, Longhair created the Mardi Gras anthem "Big Chief" for Watch. But he soon sank into obscurity, and by the end of the decade was sweeping out a record shop and playing cards for his meager living.

Unbeknownst to 'Fess, he had become a mysterious legend among blues record collectors on both sides of the Atlantic. He was eventually tracked down by Quint Davis and Allison Minor, organizers of the first New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival. "He wasn't playing at all then," Davis later recalled. "He was in a totally depreciated state physically, along with poverty and rejection. But he had this great spirit to endure. He was willing to start over with nothing, for an unknown public."

The reincarnation of Professor Longhair took place at the 1971 Jazz Fest. Everything but his fingers came to a halt that afternoon as fans and musicians rushed from other stages to hear him. Allison Minor: "It was like he was suddenly ten years younger."

Longhair's comeback progressed slowly at first. A session for Bearsville Records went unissued until 1987. By the mid-Seventies, however, 'Fess had toured Europe several times and cut an album for Capitol through the intercession of Paul McCartney. A New Orleans club christened Tipitina's was opened specifically to give Longhair a venue in his home town.

In November, 1979 the pianist recorded his best album, *Crawfish Fiesta* (Alligator). Sadly, he would not live to see its release. Professor Longhair suffered a fatal heart attack on January 30, 1980, less than 24 hours before *Crawfish Fiesta* hit the street. His wake and funeral drew friends and celebrity admirers from far and wide. The crowd nearly demolished the tiny Majestic Funeral home, and the "second line" of dancing mourners which followed his hearse to the cemetery stretched ten city blocks.

—Jeff Hannusch

