FATS DOMINO

Antoine "Fats" Domino was born on May 10, 1929, in New Orleans, the city he still calls home. A quintessential New Orleans musician, Domino became the city's biggest homegrown star and remains a joyful ambassador of the New Orleans sound. The success of "The Fat Man" established Domino as an R&B star, and the crossover success of "Ain't It a Shame" turned him into a rock & roll headliner, though even then he made a point of calling his music "rhythm & blues" to emphasize his musical roots. Domino felt he was carrying on a tradition rather than breaking away from it, and consequently his music displayed none of the rebellious energy that sparked the rockabilly wildmen and his own polar opposite, Little Richard. Indeed, the graceful dignity and easygoing manner of his music is one of its great charms.

Fats displayed that same charm and grace as a performer and personality. He seemed like a rhythm & blues Santa Claus—jolly and kindly, without a hint of sex or rebelliousness. In other words, he seemed *safe*: he never set his pianos on fire or caused any scandals, there were no "hidden meanings" lurking behind his songs, and he didn't appear eager to lead your sons and daughters down the road to juvenile delinquency. His unthreatening image helped him avoid much of the parental suspicion and outrage that accompanied the advent of rock & roll. More importantly, it helped him overcome the racial biases and fears that kept many black performers of the fifties off the charts and in the shadows. Domino's low-key personality and image kept the focus of his appeal where it belonged—on his unique and immensely pleasurable music. Of rock's initial wave of solo performers, only Chuck Berry and Little Richard were similarly able to transcend racial prejudices and reach anything close to the wide audience they deserved: Berry by becoming the Eternal Teenager, Little Richard by being such a clownish lunatic that race became a secondary issue. Mild-mannered Fats outdid them both and ranked behind only Elvis and Pat Boone in terms of consistent sales in the 1950's.

"The Fat Man"

Antoine Domino was one of nine children, the only one to inherit his jazz violinist father's musical ambitions. A school dropout at 14, Fats nearly lost those dreams and several fingers in a factory accident, and only reclaimed them after a long and painful struggle to regain his mobility. (He never did achieve the facility of the great boogie and barrelhouse players, and stuck instead to a constant-chording style.) Domino established himself in the local clubs like the Hideaway, where he was discovered in 1949 by Dave Bartholomew and Imperial Records president Lew Chudd. Bartholomew: "We went down and Fats was singing a song the prisoners used to sing, 'Junkers Blues,' you know, a song about the junkie. In December 1949 most people didn't know what that word meant. We went down and we heard Fats and we really liked it. So I told Fats would he like to record and introduced him to Lew and we went on from there."[i]

"Junkers Blues" was rewritten as a theme song for Fats and recorded at the end of 1949. "The Fat Man" hit the national R&B Top Ten in 1950, beginning a long association between Domino and Dave Bartholomew, his co-writer, arranger and alter-ego. "The Fat Man" was recorded in Cosimo Matassa's studio with Bartholomew's stellar band, highlighted by Herb Hardesty and Alvin "Red" Tyler on riffing saxophones, and drummer Earl Palmer's aggressive swing. The focus of the record is Fats himself,

wailing away in a surprisingly high and gritty voice and pounding out a mistakenly over-recorded piano part. (Bartholomew liked the resulting up-front sound of the piano and used the unbalanced mix for the record, which in turn became a model for subsequent sessions. Fats also employed a vocal gimmick on the record—an odd, trumpet-like falsetto "wah-wah" sound that he abandoned on his later recordings.)

Domino hit #1 on the R&B charts in 1952 with "Goin' Home," and scored several more R&B hits through the early fifties—including 1953's "Please Don't Leave Me," later covered by the Johnny Burnette Trio—as he honed his uptempo style. A bluesy slow number from 1950 called "Every Night About This Time" introduced the other, slower side of Fats' style and the steady piano triplets that would accompany his pop hits (and nearly every fifties rock ballad).[ii] His other "trademark," his peculiar but endearing French Creole accent, came more to the fore as he began to sing in lower registers and as his overall style became smoother, calmer, less bluesy and more in keeping with Fats' even temperament. Fats was settling into a groove, fine-tuning a melodic style that turned out to be perfect for the rock market.

"Ain't That a Shame"

Domino finally broke the pop barrier in 1955 with "Ain't That a Shame," which contains all the classic Fats Domino elements.[iii] A modified 12-bar blues, written by Domino and Bartholomew, "Ain't That a Shame" is a rollicking good-times number despite its broken-hearted lyrics. As always, Fats refuses to take himself or his problems too seriously: the "ain't that a shame" refrain sounds more like a shrug than a sigh. With its easy-rhyming lyrics, instantly memorable tune and strong, midtempo dance beat, "Ain't That a Shame" was a natural crossover hit.

"Ain't That a Shame" is firmly rooted in New Orleans R&B tradition: the propelling bass riffs, rhythmic variety and unlabored tightness of the ensemble playing give the record a sound that simply couldn't have come from anywhere else. The song opens with a stop/start call-and-response between Fats and the band, then glides into the refrain, where the beat straightens out and the band divides into a multi-layered accompaniment: Fats plays straight chorded triplets on the piano, the guitar and bass double on a gentle boogie-bass riff, the saxes smooth out the texture with long held notes, and Earl Palmer gels it all with a swinging shuffle on his cymbals, booming downbeats on his bass drum and crisp backbeats on his snare. The syncopated verses and full-band refrains alternate throughout the song, embellished by a sax solo that gives the band and the song a chance to stretch out. Thanks to Bartholomew's arranging skills and the band member's natural rapport, the dense accompaniment sounds as loose and lively as a New Orleans parade band.

The repeating bass riff in "Ain't That a Shame," a descendent of Professor Longhair's boogie-rhumba, was one of Dave Bartholomew's musical signatures and is a key feature of most of Domino's songs. The solos on Fats' records were always taken by a saxophone, usually played by Herb Hardesty, that mirrored Fats' voice with a languid melodic style (which became an appropriately frenzied squall when backing Little Richard). Special note should be made of Earl Palmer, rock's first great drummer and the man responsible for the rhythmic push-and-pull that makes "Ain't That a Shame" and other early New Orleans hits so exciting. His snare cracks and parade beat bass drum anchor the song while his drum fills and playful offbeat kicks drive it forward and bridge

the different sections. (The equally able Charles "Hungry" Williams took over the bulk of the drumming in Matassa's studio in 1957 when Palmer moved on to California and great acclaim as a session drummer for Phil Spector, Ricky Nelson, the Beach Boys and many others.)

"Ain't That a Shame" went to #1 on the R&B charts and reached #10 on the pop charts in the summer of 1955. Released at the peak of the cover song era, "Ain't That a Shame" was quickly covered by Pat Boone, who took his pallid version to #1 on the pop charts. Fats' next big hit, 1956's "I'm In Love Again," outsold the Fontane Sisters' cover version, however, and no one tried to steal his version of "Blueberry Hill," which was also released in 1956—the biggest hit of his career.

Fats Domino, Rock & Roll Star

Released in 1956, "**Blueberry Hill**" was a time-honored standard (Louis Armstrong's 1949 version probably inspired Fats to do the song), as was "My Blue Heaven," a hit for Fats the same year. Although Fats and Bartholomew generally wrote his material, Fats' easygoing style lent itself well to popular standards and made them sound wholly original. Although his version of "Blueberry Hill" was supremely tasteful, some older critics feigned outrage at the rock "perversion" of "their" song, and even Dave Bartholomew had serious doubts about the wisdom of recording it: "It had been done a million times before and I wasn't too interested in Fats doing it. But he insisted he wanted to do 'Blueberry Hill...' Lew Chudd asked me what did I think and I said it was horrible, pull it off the streets fast, you're gonna ruin Fats. He said, 'What do you mean, we just sold two million records,' and that was in two weeks."[iv]

"Blueberry Hill" opens with one of rock's classic intros—a triadic piano figure that ushers in Fats' wistful remembrance of that night on Blueberry Hill when the moon stood still and "you were my thrill." *Something* certainly happened up there, but the amiable Fats disarms the sexual overtones that other rockers might have exaggerated, just as his delight in the memory of the night overcomes the fact that the girl's gone and all of her promises "were never to be." The band arrangement of "Blueberry Hill" is similar to that of "Ain't That a Shame," though slower and calmer. The verses are shaped by a graceful boogie riff in the guitar and bass and by Earl Palmer's snare backbeat. Palmer's cymbals double Fats' piano triplets, giving the relatively slow "rock-a-ballad" a constant inner pulse. The saxophones play long held notes through the verses to create a smooth background texture, then supply a lilting countermelody to Fats' vocals in the bridge section ("the wind in the willows..."); as the saxophones come to the fore, the guitar/bass riff drops out, giving the bridge section a contrasting dreamy feel—suspended between the verses as that night is suspended in time.

"**Blue Monday**," a 1957 hit written by Domino and Bartholomew, is a further example of the rhythmic dynamics and subtleties that were second-nature to the New Orleans bands. Here, instead of being a calm hiatus, the bridge section ("Saturday morning...") heightens the tension as the full band piles onto Fat's triplet piano rhythm before fanning back out for the return of the verse/refrain ("Sunday morning..."). The beat itself never changes, but the *articulation* of the beat—the way it is played and felt—changes dramatically, from a multi-layered arrangement to a pounding unison crescendo

and back again. And as always, the Fats' voice rides above the hard-driving arrangement as if it took no special effort at all.

For the most part, Fats' style varied little from one record to the next, though there was a gradual softening of his sound. Mindful of the fact that his primary audience was now teenagers, the themes of his songs grew younger, the tunes and lyrics grew simpler and the arrangements were embellished in an attempt to change with the times. "I'm Walkin'," "Whole Lotta Loving," "I'm Ready" and other late-fifties hits were sped up to rock & roll dance speed, the size of his backing band grew larger ("Be My Guest" has an almost Big Band swing sound), sweet choirs were occasionally added, as in "Valley of Tears," and some of his more lightweight numbers, such as "The Rooster Song" and "I'm Gonna Be a Wheel Someday," had novelty-style productions that fit their nursery rhyme lyrics.

Walking to New Orleans

Fats' steady stream of releases sold well and kept him in constant demand for television, movie and live appearances. His innocent songs and uncontroversial image also helped make him one of the few rock "founding fathers" to escape the fifties unscathed, though 1960's "Walking to New Orleans" was his last Top Ten hit, an appropriately melancholy good-bye wave. His records continued selling at a steady, if diminished, rate until 1963, when he left Imperial for ABC Records. His new label tried unsuccessfully to repeat the pop success they'd had with Ray Charles by burying Fats under glossy, middle-of-the-road material and "Modern Nashville" productions. Domino left ABC in 1965 for even deeper obscurity at Mercury Records, then ended up the decade on the Reprise label, where he had a minor hit with a cover of the Beatles' "Lady Madonna" (a song directly inspired by Domino's New Orleans style).

Although his recording career never recovered, Domino has remained a popular live performer on the "oldies shows" and the Las Vegas nightclub circuit. Fats continues to work comfortably within a tradition—including, now, his own, and he has weathered the decline of his career as gracefully as he handled his sudden leap to stardom. Fats was a calm in the center of the storm—his mere presence lent a certain dignity to rock & roll, and the ever-present smile on his face made it seem that his life was as easy and happy as the songs he sang. Pushing seventy, he sings his old songs, as always, without a hint of strain. His voice and charm remain perfectly intact and his classic hits remain true classics.

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[i]Broven, "Walking to New Orleans," p. 30.
[ii] The piano triplets were probably inspired by Little Willie Littlefield's 1948 hit "It's Midnight."
[iii]The title was originally "Ain't It a Shame," though he sings "that."
[iv]Broven, p. 67.