NEW ORLEANS RHYTHM & BLUES

While "Dixieland" and later jazz styles dominated the New Orleans music scene until World War II, club blues and barrelhouse piano styles charted a parallel course and spawned a unique style of rhythm & blues in the post-war years. The Latin flavor and rhythms, the bass-heavy boogie feel, the rhythmic variety, the piano and sax-dominated band instrumentation and the spirited ensemble playing of traditional New Orleans styles combined to give the city's R&B a distinctive sound and character.

Behind the Scenes

Jump-blues singer **Roy Brown** scored the city's first big rhythm & blues hit in 1947 with his self-penned "Good Rockin' Tonight," released on the DeLuxe label. ("Good Rockin' Tonight" was also a hit the following year for Wynonie Harris on Cincinnati's King label. Elvis turned it into a rockabilly rave-up six years later.) DeLuxe's success with New Orleans artists inspired other record labels to take notice of the city and her abundant talent, most notably the California-based **Imperial** and **Specialty** labels, which were the recording homes of Fats Domino and Little Richard, respectively, and were the dominant presences in New Orleans through the 1950's. Unlike other musical centers, New Orleans was slow to establish hometown record labels, which forced the local artists to depend on outside labels for many years. In fact, the city had only one major recording *studio*: the tiny J&M studio run by **Cosimo Matassa** (later called simply Cosimo's), where all of the city's great R&B and rock & roll recordings were made from the forties through the sixties. Matassa's "live in the studio" approach was geared to capturing a great performance with no tricks or gimmicks, and though his studio was far from modern, even in those days, the sound he captured still sounds remarkably fresh.

Bandleader **Dave Bartholomew** was another behind-the-scenes figure who played a crucial role in the development of New Orleans R&B. Bartholomew's crack band was very popular in the city's clubs and, more importantly, formed the core group of sessionmen at Matassa's studio. The tight-knit **Studio Band** changed personnel only gradually over the years and always had a keen musical rapport and a gutsy sound that inspired the singers they backed and contributed much to the success of their records. Bartholomew himself achieved his greatest fame as a songwriter and arranger, working independently at first, producing sessions for Shirley and Lee, Smiley Lewis and Lloyd Price, then as the musical director of Imperial Records' New Orleans operations, where he secured his place in history with his collaboration with Fats Domino.

Fats Domino hit the R&B charts in 1950 with "The Fat Man," featuring the Bartholomew band, and was a major R&B star through the early fifties before crossing over to the pop market in 1955. Domino's success and the distinctive sound of his music further heightened interest in New Orleans. Matassa and the Studio Band found themselves in great demand, and Bartholomew's bass-propelled arrangements formed the blueprint for the next decade of New Orleans recordings. The emphasis on piano, saxophones and bass riffs set New Orleans music quite apart from the trebly, guitar-dominated sound of the rockabillies and the blues-derived guitar emphasis of Chicago's Chess Records rockers, Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley. The rhythmic inventiveness and

variety of New Orleans styles also stands in sharp contrast to the more one-dimensional, repetitive rhythms of most early rock & roll.

Professor Longhair

Professor Longhair was New Orleans' most beloved musical figure and the patriarch of a line of great piano players—Fats Domino, Huey "Piano" Smith, Allen Toussaint, Art Neville, Dr. John and many others—who anchored the New Orleans R&B sound. Born Henry Roeland Byrd in 1918, the self-taught "Fess" developed a thoroughly unconventional approach that mixed jazz, ragtime, blues, boogie-woogie, calypso, rhumbas and all types of dancebeats into a carefree carnival sound and style that embodied the spirit of the city. He described his own style as a "gumbo" and a mixture of "offbeat Spanish beats and Calypso downbeats" topped by his boisterously rowdy singing.[i] Longhair's highly syncopated **boogie-rhumba** style—boogie bass lines set to a rhumba beat—influenced Dave Bartholomew's bass-driven arrangements and became a widely recognized New Orleans trademark.

Professor Longhair began playing professionally in 1949 and quickly achieved a cult status that he was never able to parlay into national recognition. "She Ain't Got No Hair" (later re-recorded as "Bald Head") and "Mardi Gras in New Orleans" were among his first recordings, released on the Texas-based Star Talent label. He recorded "**Tipitina**," one of his best-known songs, for Atlantic Records in 1953, then went on to record for a dozen other labels, only rarely producing a record that moved beyond the "local hit" category. After many obscure years of menial work and ill-health, Professor Longhair was finally rediscovered in the early seventies. He reclaimed his rightful spot with a triumphant performance at the city's Jazz and Heritage Festival, and he remained the revered elder statesman of New Orleans R&B until his death in 1980.

Smiley Lewis

Among the many Domino followers in the early fifties was Smiley Lewis, who was also on the Imperial label, produced by Bartholomew and backed by Bartholomew's band. Although he was never able to break into the rock market, Lewis had a sizable R&B hit in 1952 with "The Bells Are Ringing," and hit again in 1955 with the original version of "**I Hear You Knocking**." Lewis' songs have tended to be better known in their cover versions: Gale Storm's 1955 cover of "I Hear You Knocking," for example, made it to the Top Five on the pop charts, as did Dave Edmunds' 1971 version, while Lewis' "One Night" was covered by Elvis Presley in 1958.

Lloyd Price

Lloyd Price recorded for Specialty Records, whose owner, Art Rupe, had come to New Orleans in 1952 in search of his own Fats Domino-styled singer. Rupe discovered the 17-year-old Price at the end of an otherwise fruitless talent audition, and was struck by his intense and pleading vocal delivery. "**Lawdy Miss Clawdy**" was recorded with Bartholomew's band and features Fats himself on piano. The record was a #1 R&B hit, and was popular with young white listeners as well (Elvis was one of many who later covered the song). After a stint in the army, Price switched to ABC Records and scored a number of pop hits in the late fifties, including 1959's "**Stagger Lee**," a hard-driving

update of the traditional African-American folk song "Stagolee." Price actually did two versions of the song, since Stagger Lee's cold-blooded murder of Billy—while the chorus chants "Go Stagger Lee!"—in the original was deemed a bit much for impressionable pop ears. Price's other hits, such as "Personality" and "I'm Gonna Get Married," were done in a pop style with syrupy choirs and slick productions that were far removed from his New Orleans roots.

Guitar Slim

Specialty Records also struck gold in New Orleans with Guitar Slim (born Eddie Jones), a blues guitarist and singer, and hence something of a rarity among New Orleans frontmen. Slim hit #1 on the R&B charts in 1954 with "**Things That I Used to Do**," an ingenious wedding of Slim's gritty voice and guitar blues to a classic New Orleans R&B band backing. The man responsible for the unique blend was none other than Ray Charles, who arranged and played piano on the record. (Charles was strongly impressed by his visits to the city in the early fifties and by his work in Matassa's studio, which inspired him to start his own band and to take his own music in a new, rootsier direction.)

Guitar Slim was a famously flashy performer and an inventive guitarist who exploited the full range of effects then available with the electric guitar. Fellow New Orleans artist Al Reed recalls Slim's live act: "...this guy had cords on his guitar that were something like 200 feet long. This guy would play on stage with his band, he would get off the stage, walk out of the door at the club, go out into the middle of the street, still playing guitar and never drop a beat, *never* drop a beat... he had an electric sound like you never heard and they would open the club doors wide so that the sound could just go in and out of the club, and he would draw people off the street."[ii] Guitar Slim followed "Things That I Used to Do" with "The Story of My Life," then shifted his base to Specialty's studios in California, where he continued recording in rather spiritless fashion. Slim never regained his stride, and died of alcoholism in 1959 at the age of 32.

Larry Williams

Larry Williams was a New Orleans native with a job as Lloyd Price's valet and a singing style strongly influenced by Little Richard, both of which helped get him signed to Specialty Records. Williams launched his career with a 1957 cover of Price's "Just Because," then began writing his own Little Richard-style tunes full of rhyming nonsense lyrics and lots of energy. He had a succession of moderate hits through 1957 and 1958, including "Short Fat Fanny," "Bony Moronie," "You Bug Me, Baby" and "**Dizzy Miss Lizzie**." Williams was all but forgotten in America when the Beatles revived his name by covering three of his songs: "Dizzy Miss Lizzie," "Slow Down" and "Bad Boy," all sung by Williams fan John Lennon (who also recorded "Bony Moronie" on his solo *Rock 'N' Roll* album).

Shirley and Lee

"The Sweethearts of the Blues," Shirley and Lee, recorded for the California-based Aladdin label. They began their career in 1952 with "I'm Gone," followed by "Shirley Come Back to Me," "Shirley's Back," "Lee Goofed," "Feel So Good" and various other installments of their romance. Backed by Matassa's Studio Band, the pair

recorded a number of R&B hits built around their alternating declarations of love and highlighted by Shirley's endearing buzzsaw of a voice. They finally hit pop charts in 1956 with "**Let the Good Times Roll**," a New Orleans classic and a wonderful mixture of teenage innocence and breathless eroticism. As Shirley and Lee trade verses, the song alternates between a humorously stilted circus rhythm and a swinging sax riff and dance beat, then collapses into sparse repeating downbeats for the bridge section: "feel so good when you're home, come on baby, rock me all night long!" Shirley and Lee continued as a team until 1963, but their remaining hits never equaled the inspiration of "Let the Good Times Roll."[iii]

Clarence "Frogman" Henry

With Clarence "Frogman" Henry, Chicago's Chess Records tapped into New Orleans via its Argo subsidiary. Henry's first hit, 1957's "**Ain't Got No Home**," was in the gimmicky novelty vein into which New Orleans records often tended to fall. Henry sings the three verses of "Ain't Got No Home" with three different voices, singing first in his normal voice, then in falsetto and finally with an inhaling, playground joke voice to illustrate the story of the lonely boy, lonely girl and lonely frog that "ain't got no home." The croaking voice gave him his nickname, which proved to be more of a hindrance than a help since he had no intention of making a career of singing like a frog. Henry hit again in 1961 with the elegant "But I Do" and "You Always Hurt the One You Love," before dropping back into the local club scene.[iv]

Huey "Piano" Smith & the Clowns

Huey "Piano" Smith & the Clowns recorded for Ace Records, the first prominent local label to appear in New Orleans. Huey Smith was a veteran sessionman, songwriter and performer, and a direct piano descendent of Professor Longhair. He also inherited Longhair's playful sense of humor, and turned his "Clowns" recordings and live shows into one long party. The Clowns were one of New Orlean's most popular live acts, and though their crowd-pleasing singalongs didn't always transfer well to the studio, their records were pure fun in the best New Orleans tradition. Their one pop hit, 1959's "**Don't You Just Know It**," is driven by Smith's piano playing and a chorus of alternating voices singing partytime gibberish (like the stirring "aah-ha-ha-ha, gooba, gooba, gooba, gooba") in shouted unisons and rowdy call-and-response.

Ironically, Huey "Piano" Smith & the Clowns' greatest record didn't even bear their name when it was released. "**Sea Cruise**" was written by Smith and recorded by the Clowns in 1959, with Huey on lead vocals. Ace sensed a massive hit and, eager to establish itself as a prominent label, increased its odds by keeping the Clowns' explosive backing tracks but replacing Smith's rather quirky vocals with white singer **Frankie Ford** (who turned in a fine performance).

"Sea Cruise" opens with the sound of ship's bells and foghorns that set a maritime mood and return periodically in a demented touch of genius. An irresistible bass & sax riff rumbles to life out of the bells and horns, joined by the kinetic energy of Huey Smith's double-time calypso piano. Although it was something of a stolen hit, "Sea Cruise" is a masterpiece of good times and great musicianship, and a high water mark for New Orleans R&B.

Fats and *Little*: Two Sides of the New Orleans Coin

"The Fat Man," "Lawdy Miss Clawdy" and "Things That I Used to Do" were a few of the R&B hits that focused attention on New Orleans and laid a groundwork for things to come. The advent of rock & roll opened new markets to the New Orleans musicians, who saw the "new" sounds as anything but new, and viewed rock & roll as more of a challenge than a threat. In 1955, the city provided rock & roll with two of its first true giants: Fats Domino and Little Richard.

Fats Domino was the homegrown hero with a solid R&B career under his belt by the time he crossed over into the pop charts with "Ain't That a Shame." Little Richard, from Georgia, was one of the many "outsiders" sent to New Orleans by their record companies to capture the sound of the city and its famous studio and sessionmen. Their styles and temperaments couldn't have been less similar: Fats' music always straddled the vague line between R&B and rock & roll while Little Richard eagerly plunged across it. But both men benefited greatly from the New Orleans sound that drives their records and makes them more closely related than it might seem. Inspired by their examples, many other New Orleans artists took aim at the rock market, but none matched the success and far-reaching influence of the two pillars of New Orleans' contribution to rock & roll.

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[i]Arnold Shaw, "Honkers and Shouters," (New York: Macmillan, 1978), p. 492.
[ii]John Broven, "Walking to New Orleans," (Sussex, England: Blues Unlimited, 1974), p. 54.
[iii]Shirley made an unlikely comeback as "Shirley and Company" in 1975 with the disco hit "Shame, Shame, Shame," co-written and produced by fellow veteran Sylvia Robinson (of Mickey & Sylvia, who had a 1956 hit with "Love Is Strange").
[iv]"But I Do" was written by Bobby Charles, who also wrote "Walking to New Orleans" for Fats Domino, and wrote and recorded the original "See You Later, Alligator," later a hit for Bill Haley.