

NEW ORLEANS IN THE SOUL ERA

New Orleans music adapted to the softening pop sounds of the early sixties with lighter beats and an emphasis on catchy hooks and novelty-styled tunes. Although softened, the music was still full of lively rhythms and ensemble work and still retained a distinctly "New Orleans" sound. In fact, the Twist and the other dance crazes that swept the country in the early sixties inspired something of an R&B revival that was right up New Orleans' alley. Huey Smith's "Pop-Eye" and Chris Kenner's "Land of 1,000 Dances" are notable New Orleans dance tunes of the era, and the Twist King himself, Philadelphian Chubby Checker, owed much—including his nickname—to Fats Domino and the New Orleans sound.

The long-overdue establishment of local record labels kept Cosimo Matassa's studio in high gear after the involvement of the outside labels began to wane at the end of the fifties. Minit, Rex, Ric, Ron, Rip, Instant, Fire, Fury, Red Bird, Watch, Dover and many other small labels came and went in the late fifties and through the sixties. Although none achieved the consistency of Chicago's Chess or Detroit's Motown labels, they provided a crucial outlet for local artists.

Minit Records, founded in 1959, pioneered the new styles, followed quickly by Instant and a rash of other labels that seemed to spring up daily. The recording was still centered around Cosimo Matassa's studio, now home to a younger group of sessionmen led by pianist/writer/arranger **Allen Toussaint**, who inherited Bartholomew's influential role. Most of New Orleans' early 1960's hits came from veteran local performers who managed to come up with a one-shot fling at the national pop charts. Toussaint and Minit Records had their first hit with Jessie Hill's "Ooh Poo Pah Doo" in 1960. Other standout Toussaint productions included Ernie K-Doe's "Mother-in-Law," Benny Spellman's "Fortune Teller," the Showmen's rock tribute "It Will Stand," Barbara George's "I Know," Aaron Neville's "Over You," Art Neville's "All These Things" and Chris Kenner's "I Like It Like That." The few New Orleans hits from the period that were not produced by Toussaint include Lee Dorsey's "Ya Ya" and "Do-Re-Mi," Joe Jones' "You Talk Too Much," Barbara Lynn's "You'll Lose a Good Thing," and the Dixie Cups' "Chapel of Love," and guitarist Earl King's "Trick Bag" and "Come On" (later covered by Jimi Hendrix).

The arrival of the Beatles brought most New Orleans operations to a halt, and the city's music was slow to mirror black music's transition from R&B to soul music. New Orleans regained some of its stride in the mid-sixties: New Orleans native Irma Thomas made a handful of great soul records for Imperial in 1964, including "I Wish Someone Would Care" and the gospel-style "Time Is On My Side," quickly reworked by the Rolling Stones; Robert Parker's 1966 hit "Barefootin'" is a dance-soul classic, and Aaron Neville hit again that same year with the soul ballad "Tell It Like It Is." The major New Orleans soul star turned out to be "Mr. Ya Ya" **Lee Dorsey**, who hooked up with Allen Toussaint in 1965 and crafted a contemporary, funk-soul dance style. Dorsey's mid-to-late sixties hits included "Ride Your Pony," "Working In the Coal Mine," "Holy Cow," "Riverboat" and "Get Out of My Life, Woman." An ill-conceived switch to topical "message" songs and the changing audience tastes of the early seventies brought Dorsey's career to a halt. He died in 1987 after a decade of local appearances and unsuccessful comeback attempts.

Toussaint remained active as a producer, arranger and much-covered songwriter, expanding beyond his New Orleans base to work with The Band, John Mayall, Joe Cocker and many other artists. Although New Orleans' heyday was well-past by the end of the 1960's, the spirit of its music has been kept alive by "**Dr. John**" (Mac Rebennack), a piano playing veteran of New Orleans' glory days who recorded a tribute to his city's music called *Gumbo* in 1972 and had a pop hit in 1973 with "Right Place, Wrong Time." The city's musical traditions have also been sustained by the durable backup group the Meters, by "black Indian" Mardi Gras groups like the Wild Tchoupitoulas and the Wild Magnolias, by the resurgent popularity of brass band, Cajun and zydeco styles, and by the continuing appeal of the timeless **Neville Brothers**, the most visible ambassadors of the city's music, whose members have had hits that span three decades of New Orleans styles.

Although its artists rarely make the charts or break new ground, the sound of New Orleans lives on night after night in the city's clubs and festivals. Music still plays a large role in the daily life of the city, and the big beat and happy sound of New Orleans carries on like a living monument to the musical contributions of that unique city. New Orleans record man Marshall Sehorn summed up the spirit of the city this way: "You can go anywhere you want to, there's no music like New Orleans music... Nobody else has as good a time as we do, nobody else shakes their ass as much as we do, and that's everybody, everybody from young to old, black and white, Indians, jumpin', dancin', carryin' on and having a good time. And that's what it's all about, that's what this city is all about."ⁱ

ⁱBroven, "Walking to New Orleans," p. 217.