

Like the Mississippi River that gives New Orleans its crescent shape, the city harbors a free-flowing music scene, awash in its own history and ever open to outside streams of influence. Time is fluid there as well – sounds of the past flow amicably with newer musical styles. An inordinately high percentage of music-makers reside there. Regardless of instrument or style, many command the same admiration other municipalities reserve for civic leaders and sports heroes. To this day in New Orleans, high school boys carrying a trombone or trumpet – more than a football – get the girls. And the city’s top piano players are still addressed as professors.

Allen Toussaint is a senior member of that titled fraternity, a renowned songwriter and producer, who’s celebrated for his distinctively deft and funky feel on the piano and still active after more than fifty years in the business. No fading golden oldie is this piano professor, though many of his successes reach back that far.

The list of those who have benefited in one way or another from the Toussaint’s touch is staggering in its historic and stylistic range, stretching from the late 1950s to the present day, with no end in sight. His studio productions have sold millions of discs and downloads. His catalog of songs has generated hits on the pop, R&B, country and dance charts – many remain on heavy rotation in various radio formats. His tunes continue to pop up as TV themes and advertising jingles. He has an ever-growing international circle of fans, and though normally reluctant to tour, he’s become a more familiar figure at music festivals and popular nightclubs around the world.

Though Toussaint has begun to travel far and wide as of late, he never stays away from New Orleans for long – and his music never does. In so many ways, his enduring career serves as an ongoing tribute to the city of his birth.

Allen Toussaint's biography begins humbly. He was born in 1938 in New Orleans's Gert Town, a working class neighborhood that straddles Washington Avenue between Earhart Boulevard and Carrollton Avenue, and was raised by his mother Naomi and father Clarence. He's the "C. Toussaint" credited as songwriter on some early tunes; she's the "N. Neville" whose name appears more often. Toussaint inherited their love of music, taught himself piano, and caught a couple of breaks as a teenager – joining a local R&B band that also featured guitarist Snooks Eaglin; sitting in for Huey "Piano" Smith with Earl King; laying down piano parts at a Fats Domino session that the Imperial Records star could not make.

Like many musicians of his generation (and those to come) Toussaint drew heavily on the syncopated blues and trill-filled patterns invented in the 1940s by Professor Longhair, aka Henry Roeland Byrd. To this day, most in New Orleans simply refer to him as "Fess"; with musical accuracy and a typically deft turn of a phrase, Toussaint hails him "The Bach of Rock". When onstage, Toussaint rarely fails to credit his mentor, offering a rendition of "Tipitina," Fess's signature tune, mentioning the debt all modern piano professors share.

If Fess is New Orleans's Bach, Toussaint is its Amadeus: an instrumentalist of uncanny sure-fingeredness and a prodigious inventor of melodies that remain fresh in the ear for years. The parallel is furthered as he also happens to be a master crystallizer of traditional and innovative styles; those classic New Orleans street parade rhythms never sounded more modern than they did after he was done updating them.

Toussaint later proved to have a poet's ear for lyrics, plus a honey-toned

singing voice – unusually smooth and upper-register for one who is essentially a bluesman. Yet his debut on record was an album of instrumentals for the major record company RCA. In 1958, *The Wild Sound of New Orleans* by “Tousan” included “Java,” later a huge pop hit for trumpeter Al Hirt, and the boogie “Whirlaway,” a marvel of top-gear piano precision.

The late '50s were the wild and fiercely competitive days of R&B and early rock and roll. “Indie” labels were popping up all over. One would make a bundle for a moment, then disappear; others persevered. Toussaint learned fast – about publishing and song copyrights, and how to hang on to them. In the early '60s, he assumed the position of session supervisor for Minit and Instant Records, writing and producing singles for a variety of local artists. Some – like Irma Thomas’s “It’s Raining” and Art Neville’s “All These Things” – became local hits. A few – Ernie K-Doe’s “Mother-In-Law” and Chris Kenner’s “I Like It Like That” – broke big on the national charts.

From the outset, Toussaint was able to imbue his songs with an ageless quality that successive, melody-savvy generations appreciated – and covered. His tune “A Certain Girl,” a 1961 single by K-Doe, was the B-side of the Yardbirds debut single in '64; in 1980, Warren Zevon – no slouch himself as a songwriter – chose to record it too. Impressively evergreen among Toussaint’s songs is the single-chord gem, “Fortune Teller.” Initially a Benny Spellman hit in '62, the Rolling Stones and the Hollies recorded it in their early years, and the Who performed it on their famous *Live at Leeds* album in 1970. As recently as 2007 Robert Plant and Alison Krauss made it a part of their Grammy-winning album *Raising Sand*.

With Toussaint, no experience was wasted, not even a two-year stint in the military that began in 1963. In '64, he took his army band into the studio and under the name of The Stokes recorded “Whipped Cream,” a snappy instrumental with a jaunty horn line and a distinctive trumpet lead. Herb Alpert jumped on the melody a year later for the Tijuana Brass, recording it note-for-note, creating a hit single, a memorable album cover and a theme song for the TV sensation *The Dating Game*.

By the height of the '60s, Toussaint was New Orleans's premier producer. Partnering with record promoter Marshall Sehorn, a veteran of independent R&B companies, he built his own studio, dubbed it Sea-Saint, and established a series of record labels. As popular black music styles evolved from 1950s R&B to more soulful sounds and became powered by ever-funkier rhythms, so Toussaint's productions – with Lee Dorsey (who served as Toussaint's primary muse and voice), the Meters, Dr. John and others – morphed into a progressively heavier sense of syncopation, drawing heavily on New Orleans's distinctive street parade beats.

Toussaint's songwriting as well assumed a broader, sophisticated perspective. Some tunes focused on daily, workaday realities and urban life: “Workin' In The Coal Mine,” “Night People,” “Sneakin' Sally Through the Alley.” Others were more reflective, delivering messages of social protest and racial uplift: “Yes We Can,” “Freedom For The Stallion,” “Who's Gonna Help Brother Get Further.”

One song in particular – “Get Out Of My Life, Woman” – was so effective in defining a new, relaxed kind of beat, that for a number of years every touring ensemble and house band seemed to have it in their repertoire; it remains an R&B perennial, favored by the likes of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, Iron Butterfly, Jerry Garcia, and most recently, the Derek Trucks

Band. In the early '70s, Toussaint wrote “Play Something Sweet (Brickyard Blues)” for Scottish pub rocker Frankie Miller; with its equally funky groove and irresistible lyric it inspired versions by Three Dog Night, Maria Muldaur and B.J. Thomas.

Through the ensuing decade, Toussaint’s schedule book was never empty, as a litany of rock, R&B and even country stars made their way to Sea-Saint. His ability to write, produce and conjure radio hits from performers in any popular genre – or to simply come up with just the right horn line or song structure – made him an in-demand producer, composer and arranger. He worked with local New Orleans acts as well as such luminaries as Paul McCartney, LaBelle, the Band, Albert King, and Little Feat, on whose 1975 tour Toussaint performed as the featured opener.

During this period, Toussaint’s star as a recording artist began to rise, as he released a number of albums on major labels – *From A Whisper To A Scream*, *Life Love and Faith*, *Southern Nights*, *Motion* – that are all considered essential New Orleans classics today. They were filled with tunes that revealed a highly individual, astute worldview: “What Is Success,” “On Your Way Down,” “Southern Nights,” “What Do You Want The Girl To Do,” “Night People.”

Soon, many of Toussaint’s most personal songs became fodder for the pop and rock world, covered by Boz Scaggs, Lowell George, Bonnie Raitt, and Robert Palmer among others – not that he or his accountant were complaining. Even Toussaint’s most autobiographical composition – the atmospheric and wistful “Southern Nights” – was retooled as a bouncy, barroom number by Glen Campbell in 1977. It was a crossover smash,

topping both the pop and country charts and earning a nomination for Country Song of the Year.

After the high-flying successes of the '70s, the following two decades saw Toussaint primarily focusing on hometown productions and performances, serving as musical director for Vernel Bagneris's off Broadway play *Staggerlee* in 1985, and generating but one album under his own name – *Mr. Mardi Gras: I Love A Carnival Ball* – in '87. In '94 Toussaint joined a New Orleans R&B dream team that included old friends Earl Palmer, Red Tyler, Lee Allen, Mac Rebennack, and Edward Frank, to record *The Ultimate Session* under the moniker Crescent City Gold.

Two years later, with new partner Joshua Feigenbaum, he launched NYNO Records, producing critically hailed albums that delivered an overview of New Orleans' best, rising talent of the day including gospel singer Raymond Myles, trumpeter James Andrews, R&B veteran Oliver Morgan, zydeco guitarist Paul "Lil' Buck" Sinegal, and the New Birth Brass Band.

In the last fifteen years, Toussaint has experienced a growing resurgence of activity and recognition. Since '96, he's recorded seven albums and collaborated with the likes of Elvis Costello and Eric Clapton. He's been sampled by such hip-hop heavyweights as O.D.B., Biz Markie, KRS One and Outkast, and appeared nationally on TV and radio – often on the urging of such longtime fans as Paul Shaffer and Harry Shearer, and on the HBO series *Treme*. He's been Grammy® nominated and inducted into a number of Halls of Fame. Most recently, President Obama himself awarded him the National Medal of Arts in a special White House ceremony.

The weight of all these awards and appearances could not compare to the impact of Hurricane Katrina in 2005; Toussaint wryly calls the storm his

booking agent, crediting it for rebooting his career as a performer after flooding him out of home and studio. Urged by Feigenbaum and other friends up north, Toussaint, relocated to New York City and began to perform solo concerts, using Joe's Pub on Lafayette Street as a home base. Buoyed by a groundswell of support, he worked at something that years of success in the studio had allowed him to avoid: getting truly comfortable on the stage by himself, laying claim to his own songs.

Modesty had a lot to do with it; Allen Toussaint still is not the first person one would go to for information on Allen Toussaint. "I'm not accustomed to talking about myself," he once explained during a gig, "I talk in the studio with musicians. Or through my songs."

But over time, Toussaint developed his act – resurrecting material he hadn't touched in years, taking chances and improvising on established melodies, weaving personal anecdotes into his stage patter. He laced his music with memories of street characters and soul sisters, funky clubs and big-time successes. His show became his story, and his story came together and began to flow – which brings us to the musical treasure before you.

The what, when and how of this collection is comprehensively explained by its creator Paul Siegel – a veteran video producer, and lifelong enthusiast of Toussaint's work. As this DVD is an important historical document and an overdue personal testament from a musical genius to his fans, it also stands as a tribute to Siegel's passion for a man who – like too many of New Orleans's heroes – often evades the national radar.

What the world needs to be reminded of, New Orleans never forgets. The wild sounds of Toussaint are inextricably interwoven into the city's legacy; he's still unveiling new songs, taking on projects and making appearances – like guesting on Trombone Shorty's breakout album *Backatown* in 2010. He stands as one of the city's most storied citizens. Strolling in the French Quarter, dropping into Tipitina's or the House of Blues, Toussaint is always recognized and addressed with respect. He carries himself with an understated nobility – understated that is, save for the bright, color-coordinated suits and fisherman sandals: a Southern gentleman with Caribbean flair.

Nearly eight years after Katrina, New Orleans continues to recover, and Toussaint has returned permanently to the city he never truly left. Give him the heat and the humidity, the spice and the rice, the funky sound of a Second Line and the cool feel of a southern night. "I apologize," Toussaint sings, with the hint of a wink, "to anyone who can truly say that he has a found a better way."

– Ashley Kahn, May 2013