

MUSICIAN



ALLEN TOUSSAINT

At 75, the New Orleans music icon releases his first live album

By Jeff Tamarkin

FOR MORE THAN A HALF-CENTURY, ALLEN TOUSSAINT has reigned as contemporary music's Renaissance man. As a songwriter alone, his output is legendary—classics such as "Mother-in-Law," "Get Out of My Life, Woman," "Yes We Can Can," "Working in the Coal Mine," and "On Your Way Down" all came from his pen. Glen Campbell turned Toussaint's "Southern Nights" into a pop and country smash. And artists as diverse as Bonnie Raitt, Ringo Starr, Jerry Garcia, Robert Plant and Alison Krauss, Warren Zevon, Alex Chilton, Herb Alpert, the Yardbirds, the Band—and dozens more—have interpreted his compositions.

Toussaint is also a respected, in-demand producer, arranger and session pianist—and has recorded prolifically as a solo artist since the late 1950s. But until recent years live performances were relatively scarce. It wasn't until Hurricane Katrina devastated his home city of New Orleans that Toussaint—relocating to New York

City until it was safe to return—decided to bring his own music directly to audiences on a more widespread basis.

Toussaint furthers that mission with the release of his new record, *Songbook*, recorded in the cozy environs of Joe's Pub in New York City. In this intimate solo setting, Toussaint's performance is warm and compelling with the album featuring versions of his most popular hits, lesser-known tunes, and favorites by other writers.

At 75, there's no slowing down Toussaint. He's collaborated with the likes of Elvis Costello and Paul McCartney, has been inducted into three halls of fame—Rock and Roll, Blues and Louisiana—and in July was awarded the National Medal of Arts by President Obama at the White House. So what's left—perhaps writing music for a Twyla Tharp ballet? "That's a whole other world for me," he says. "Next I'd like to do something in the classical bag. At some point I'm sure I will."



'I don't consider myself a virtuoso vocalist so I prefer a fairly simple song.'

Why is this your first live album?

I'd just never felt previous performances were at a level worth recording. But a couple of people who heard my shows in New York thought it would be a good idea.

How did you select the songs?

I have a few things I always put in my show, including a medley of songs that were popular. But then sometimes other folks give me their thoughts on what I should add from my repertoire, including songs I had forgotten all about. Also, I do a couple of songs I didn't write—I think that's good for variety.

What makes a good song?

I like a good story. I don't consider myself a virtuoso vocalist so I prefer a fairly simple song—and if there's a pretty song, I like that too. I've done "American Tune" by Paul

'From that first touch of the piano, this is all I ever wanted to do.'

Simon, which is one of the most beautiful songs ever done. If it's to be an uptempo song, I like a groove that holds its own. I like uplifting songs. But I don't like "dictator" songs—one that shakes its fist at you.

Know a hit when you've written it?

No way do I ever know that. Some songs I may feel are better for what I consider the artistic value, or something special in it. But as far as whether it's going to have public appeal or be around awhile, never do I know such a thing.

You do it all—what's your favorite?

I'd say writing songs, arranging and playing piano—the behind-the-scenes things. Performing would be very last.

How did your album with Elvis Costello come about?

Elvis told me he always wanted to do an Allen Toussaint songbook. I was all for it. He chose many of the songs I had written, some I had totally forgotten—and we even wrote songs together, which was quite a luxury. Collaborating with Elvis was really magical.

Growing up in New Orleans, were you a big fan of jazz?

As much as New Orleans is noted for jazz, I got off into funk. Jazz songs are lovely, but I didn't play a lot from beginning to end, and not nearly as many as it would take to do an album.

Did Katrina affect your work?

It actually helped because it put me on the road. It put me out there to collaborate with others and travel more. That brought about inspiration I would never have had. I used to write mostly in one place and just from my imagination. But traveling the world, you get so much more inspiration. So Katrina was a huge blessing for me, and my music.

What did you hear growing up?

The radio had a lot of hillbilly music with saloon-type piano, and of course I heard gospel, which was absolutely wonderful. Then, late in the evening I would hear boogie-woogie on the radio, and I just thought that was most exciting. My mother was a classical buff, and on Sundays she would listen all day. So I was well rounded as far as hearing things. And when I was very young I heard Professor Longhair.

Did you emulate his piano style?

I had to be sort of a chameleon so I tried to play everything. Much of my piano is from [Longhair's nickname] Fess, because I'm a Fess disciple. But I do know that there are some things that I've recorded and written and done that are far removed from him.

When did you know that you wanted to create music?

I first sat down at the piano when I was 6. I had a wonderful time as a child trying to learn these pieces and get simple melodies out. By 12, I actually began writing songs with lyrics. From that first touch of the piano, this is all I ever wanted to do.

How did you place your early hits?

By the time I got "Mother-in-Law" to Ernie K-Doe, he was with Minit Records, and Minit had hired me to be their music person. I got songs to artists like Ernie and Irma Thomas that way.

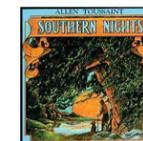
Do you have a preferred writing method?

I collect scraps and ideas everywhere I go, and I try to put them down in one form or another. I do it all the time, and I don't need to be near a piano. I make a note, or if I have a small recorder—or these days, even a cellphone—I put the idea down, and start it there.



Allen Toussaint, 1971

Allen Toussaint recorded his first solo album in 1958, but this self-titled effort more than a dozen years later heralded his emergence. With an ace team of musicians, Toussaint deftly matches his easygoing demeanor with deep soul on tracks like "What Is Success" and "Everything I Do Gonna Be Funky."



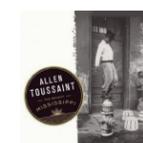
Southern Nights, 1975

The title track, recorded by Glen Campbell, is one of Toussaint's best-known compositions, but his own version is decidedly different. The rest, more pop-leaning than his earlier output, is nonetheless soulful, and fits snugly between what label mates the Meters and Randy Newman were releasing at the time.



The River in Reverse, 2006

This post-Katrina collaboration between Elvis Costello and Allen Toussaint works especially well on multiple levels. Featuring four new songs written together, an update of a Professor Longhair tune, and originals penned separately by each, it's a seamless blend throughout. Joe Henry produced the record, which features Costello's band, the Imposters.



The Bright Mississippi, 2009

On Toussaint's second Henry-produced set, he teams with top-shelf jazz players like Don Byron and Brad Mehldau on vintage blues and jazz tracks including "St. James Infirmary" and "Day Dream." The Monk-penned title track is about as "out" as Toussaint's ever ventured on his chosen instrument.



Rolling With the Punches: The Allen Toussaint Songbook, 2012

Allen Toussaint's legend was built on his songs, which have been covered by a vastly diverse array of artists. This 24-track import collection features many of the best—Warren Zevon, the Judds, the Pointer Sisters, Boz Scaggs, Solomon Burke and more.

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Onstage in New Orleans, 2010

Shirley Wehrhage

'I collect scraps and ideas everywhere I go and try to put them down in one form or another.'

Favorite cover of one of your songs?
I dearly love what happened with Glen Campbell and "Southern Nights." I never imagined it would be a mainstream kind of song. I hadn't thought of it that way at all.

How did you get involved in production?
I was always interested in the songs on the radio and how they were arranged, how the strings were recorded. When I'd listen to a record I would learn all of the parts. Whenever there was an amateur singer around, they wanted me because I knew the parts of the songs.

What were the studios like then?
Primitive—like *Jurassic Park*—but we were very satisfied. We used Cosimo Matassa's

recording studio. He was a wonderful man, very intelligent with a marvelous sense of humor. We stayed at two tracks for quite a while. When I first went in I could remember recording, as weird as this sounds, straight to disc. If someone made a mistake you'd have to stop, and they would break the disc and put another one on! But we went from two- to three- and then eight-track.

How'd it feel to be awarded a National Medal of Arts by the president?
It must be the top of the list of highlights as far as accolades. It was absolutely wonderful, and the president and first lady were such marvelous hosts. They were totally hands-on, sincere and first-class. They spent time with us—it was delightful. And what an honor!

UNDER THE COVERS

The list of Allen Toussaint songs covered by others is long and distinguished. Here are the tales behind three, as told by the composer.

"Mother-in-Law"
(Ernie K-Doe, 1961)
"Back then comedians used the mother-in-law [joke] more than any other subject. So I wrote the joke as a song."

"Working in the Coal Mine"
(Lee Dorsey, 1966)
"I had no idea what coal miners go through, and that's why that song is fairly shallow. But when you're writing all the time there's a flood of ideas, and you grab them."

"On Your Way Down"
(Little Feat, 1973)
"I saw someone being rude to someone else in a parking lot, and I got a piece of paper and jotted down the plot of that song."

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JACK JOHNSON
Flow rider

SHERYL CROW
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