

Toussaint is one singular attraction

by *George_Varga*

Anyone hearing Allen Toussaint perform live who is unfamiliar with his extensive musical track record might think they've stumbled into a show by the world's most versatile one-man cover band.

Think again.

Allen Toussaint Toussaint doesn't simply cover songs that have been featured on albums or on stage by artists as varied as Elvis Costello, the Rolling Stones, Devo, Otis Redding, The Judds, Lee Dorsey, Robert Palmer, Bonnie Raitt, the Grateful Dead, Warren Zevon, Irma Thomas and Jamaican reggae stalwarts The Mighty Diamonds. Rather, this soft-spoken New Orleans music legend and 1998 Rock and Roll Hall of fame inductee performs songs he wrote that were subsequently recorded by the Rolling Stones, Devo, Redding, et al. He'll do just that Tuesday night at the Birch North Park Theatre, his first San Diego solo date since a 1985 Belly Up Tavern gig.

"I will definitely try and choose songs that were made popular by other artists, the most popular songs I can think of. I will always try and cover all of those, because those are the ones that put me on the map," said Toussaint, who has written more than 700 songs since launching his career as a teenager in the 1950s.

"And I'll do other songs of mine, good-feeling songs that didn't make it (commercially), but since we're here and we have the evening I'd like people to hear them. I use a set list, although I may deviate from it. But I do use one. Because by the eighth or ninth tune, I don't want to repeat what I've done already, or wonder 'Did I do that one yet?'"

For good measure, this tireless singer, songwriter, arranger and producer will also include a few favorites by other artists. Likely candidates, he predicted, include Bob Dylan's "Mama, You've Been on My Mind," Paul Simon's "American Song," and "How Come My Dog Don't Bark (When You Come 'Round)," a 1950s chestnut by Prince Partridge, one of New Orleans' most obscure musicians, then and now.

As prolific as he is multitalented, Toussaint, 69, is also one of pop music's foremost producers and arrangers.

His past clients have ranged from Simon, The Band, LaBelle and Paul McCartney to such fellow New Orleans music luminaries as Dr. John, The Meters and The Wild Tchoupitoulas. He has also made more than a dozen solo albums, dating back to 1958, and last year earned rave reviews for his "The River in Reverse" duo album and tour with Elvis Costello, who hails Toussaint as "a master of music."

His impact also extends to his incisive piano playing, which draws equally from blues, boogie-woogie, gospel, funk, rock, jazz and classical. And Toussaint's wonderfully soulful singing, simultaneously earthy and urbane, so influenced blue-eyed English rock-soul star Robert Palmer and Little Feat's Lowell George that both based a fair part of their vocal styles on his.

Palmer scored an FM radio favorite in the mid-1970s with his version of Toussaint's "Sneakin' Sally Through the Alley." George recorded two Toussaint songs - "Two Trains" and "What Do You Want the Girl to Do?" - the first with Little Feat, the second on his only solo album in 1979.

"I feel highly flattered," Toussaint said of the musical emulation by George and Palmer, both now deceased. "For one thing, I'm flattered they were interested enough to not only give it a listen, but to go and record it, which meant they had to live with it and learn it. It's a wonderful feeling and I can't express enough gratitude for the people who have covered songs of mine.

"Lowell had one of the biggest hearts of anyone I ever encountered. He was a very dear man, musically, and as a human being. And he was funky as all get out! But he also had a beautiful mind and was so innovative."

The same description applies to Toussaint, who has earned accolades from countless musicians and is noted for both his spotlight-shunning demeanor and his consistently dapper appearance. A father of three adult

children, he was just 13 when he co-founded his first band, The Flamingos, with future New Orleans music stars Snooks Eaglin on guitar and Ernest Kador Jr. (the future Ernie K-Doe) on vocals.

At 17, Toussaint had his big breakthrough when famed producer Dave Bartholomew hired him to play the piano parts on three Fats Domino songs, including "I Want You to Know," while Domino was away on tour.

"Fats loved it, and he said he couldn't tell if it was him or me playing piano on those three songs. That was one of the greatest compliments of my life," he recalled by phone from New Orleans last week.

"After that recording session I was taken a bit more seriously by others who did sessions. As both a recording man and a businessman, Dave Bartholomew was the best mentor I could have chosen. Musically, (legendary New Orleans pianist and singer) Professor Longhair was quite an influence on my life."

During the same year he subbed for Domino on record, Toussaint replaced Huey "Piano" Smith in guitarist Earl King's band. In 1956, at 18, he had his first song recorded, "Long Lost Love," by Roland Smith. He has rarely looked back since.

Like few others, Toussaint never wastes a single note or emotion in his songs. The result is a sense of musical concision that almost verges on selflessness. "I've always liked songs more than I've liked me," he explained. "I have more interest in how to make the song and singer work. And when I'm the song and the singer, I still have priorities. The song is going on, so I have to remember that and let it live, as if I'm a separate entity from it. I love arranging and to see that one part of the song compliments the other, by laying back when you should and being there when you should."

Like many other displaced New Orleans musicians, Toussaint had to flee his hometown in the wake of Hurricane Katrina two years ago.

He is now living in New York, but flies back home twice a month to check on the rebuilding of his Gentilly neighborhood home. His Sea-Saint recording studio was so severely damaged by Katrina that he doesn't know if it can even be rebuilt. Regardless, he is determined to move back to New Orleans as soon as possible.

"I'm optimistic things are progressing," he said. "It will take about another 10 years for us to reach some level of normality, but it will be better than ever because there are people here working very diligently. It's just a very slow process."

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The Toussaint songbook

From "Whipped Cream," used as the theme for TV's "The Dating Game," to songs for dozens of artists on either side of the Atlantic, Allen Toussaint has written more memorable music than almost anyone else around. Here's a partial list of songs by this New Orleans music legend that have been covered by other artists:

- "Working in the Coal Mine" (Lee Dorsey, Devo, The Judds)

- "Fortune Teller" (Benny Spellman, The Rolling Stones)

- "Freedom for the Stallion" (Boz Scaggs, The Oak Ridge Boys, Elvis Costello)

- "What Do You Want the Girl to Do?" (Lowell George, Boz Scaggs)

- "Ya Ya" (Lee Dorsey, John Lennon, Ike & Tina Turner, Buckwheat Zydeco)

- "Play Something Sweet (Brickyard Blues)" (Procol Harum, Three Dog Night, Maria Muldaur, Frankie Miller)
- "Lipstick Traces (on a Cigarette)" (Benny Spellman, The O'Jays, Amazing Rhythm Aces)
- "Two Trains" (Little Feat, Supercharge)
- "A Certain Girl" (Herman's Hermits, Warren Zevon)
- "Sneaking Sally Through the Alley" (Robert Palmer, The Mighty Diamonds)
- "Everything I Do Gonna Be Funky (From Now On)" (Lee Dorsey, Lou Donaldson)
- "All These Things" (Art Neville, Joe Sampley)
- "Pain in My Heart" (Otis Redding)
- "Mother-In-Law" (Ernie K-Doe)
- "Whipped Cream" (Herb Alpert & The Tijuana Brass)
- "Ruler of My Heart" (Irma Thomas)
- "Get Out of My Life" (Grateful Dead)
- "What Is Success?" (Bonnie Raitt)

- "Keep It Together" (Rufus)
- "Shoorah Shoorah" (Betty Wright)
- "Yes We Can Can" (Lee Dorsey, The Pointer Sisters)
- "Southern Nights" (Glen Campbell)
- "Java" (Al Hirt)
- "Night People" (Robert Palmer)
- "It's Raining" (Lou Ann Barton)

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