

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Every Memory Lingers With Me Yet

I got it bad like I told you before,
I'm so in love with you,
Don't leave me no more.

Without ever having taken a puff, one has to be deeply moved by the haunting and romantic lyrics of *Lipstick Traces (On a Cigarette)* by Benny Spellman. In the canon of New Orleans' all-time great songs, this one has the distinction of being part of one of those 45 singles that has two dynamite cuts (both sides A and B). The flip side classic is Benny's uptempo *Fortune Teller*, both songs written (under the pseudonym Naomi Neville) by Allen Toussaint:

Went to a fortune teller.
Had my fortune read.
I didn't know what to tell her.
I had a dizzy feeling in my head.
Then she took a look at my palm.
She said "Sonny, you feel kinda warm."
She looked into her crystal ball
And said "You're in love."

I said, "how could that be so?"
I'm not tight with none o' the girls I know.
She said when the next one arrives.
You'll be looking in her eyes ...

Just as the unsuspecting visitor to Madame Ruth (you know that gypsy with the gold-capped tooth) in Leiber and Stoller's 1959 hit *Love Potion No. 9* falls in love, so does Toussaint's victim in *Fortune Teller*. He ends up a "happy fella" who's "married to the fortune teller". In conclusion, Benny belts out, "We're happy as we can be, and now I get my fortune told for free!"

Lipstick Traces/Fortune Teller was on the Minit Label, number 644, entering the charts in May of 1962, but (after about six weeks) never

going higher than number 80 on Billboard's Hot 100 (yet 28 on the R&B charts). But boy were those songs popular in New Orleans!

Benny played just about every school dance, nightclub engagement and frat party in the city (this author hired him twice), usually multiple gigs in an evening. He really brought young people closer together, making the slow dance *Cherry Pie* last a very long time. Benny's other main claim to fame was providing the rich, deep, baritone vocals on Ernie K-Doe's *Mother-In-Law* and Earl King's *Trick Bag* (where he goes deep with "you ain't nothin' but a son-in-law").

And *Lipstick Traces* was revived by the O'Jay's three years after Spellman's recording, and later performed by Ringo Starr on his *Bad Boy* album. Delbert McClinton cut a great version. He is remembered for his memorable harmonica work on Bruce Channel's 1962 hit *Hey! Baby* and his own 1980 hit *Givin' It Up for Your Love* (which peaked at number 8 on the Hot 100). And Lillian Boutté (who sang in the gospel choir before being discovered by Allen Toussaint) named her 1992 debut album *Lipstick Traces*. She has been called New Orleans Musical Ambassador.

Artists from the United Kingdom have loved recording *Fortune Teller*, especially The Rolling Stones who cut their rendition on their first live album, *Got Live If You Want It!* It's also on the Stones' compilation *More Hot Rocks (Big Hits & Fazed Cookies)*. Other cover versions have been done by The Who (on *Live at Leeds*), The Hollies and The Merseybeats.

This fortuitous double-sided gem would not have come into being had not Joe Banashak decided to form the Minit label. He ran A-1 Record Distributors, Inc., which distributed every label of consequence in the New Orleans area but was "fed up" with making hits for others. He wanted a label of his own. He and Larry McKinley held a WYLD studio audition in early 1960 and landed a musical producer-songwriter genius named Allen Toussaint. One of the first records he produced for them, Jessie Hill's *Ooh Poo Pah Do* (Minit number 607), just soared up the charts.

Two other recruits passed the audition, too, but these singers had releases that at first fell flat (Minit numbers 604 and 606). They were none other than Benny Spellman and the much beloved New Orleans icon, Ernie K-Doe.

Benny had arrived in New Orleans quite by accident. Born in Pensacola, Florida, December 11, 1931, by some soulful serendipity Spellman happened to run into Huey "Piano" Smith and the Clowns at a Florida gig in 1959. *Don't You Just Know It*, the band crashed their transport vehicle on the way to the show, and Benny offered to drive them all the way back to New Orleans. They all connected as friends,

and Spellman stayed on in New Orleans as a member of the Clowns. Edgar Blanchard, leader of the house band at the historic Dew Drop Inn, invited Spellman up on stage (where he earned a club residency).

While waiting for his chance at Minit, Toussaint grabbed Spellman for the background vocals on a song that catapulted Ernie K-Doe into Rock and Roll history. *Mother-in-law* reached number one on both the pop and R&B charts. K-Doe sang the song but it was Benny that sang the deep bass "Mother-in-law" responses.

According to Toussaint, he kept getting bugged by Benny to produce a big hit for him like K-Doe's. Partly to shut him up, Toussaint wrote a double-sided masterpiece. Benny later left Minit and went on to record some good tunes for the Watch and Alon labels (as well as on Bandy and Mor Soul). Atlantic Records leased Benny's Alon master entitled *Word Game* in 1965. A little later, he cut *Sinner Girl* on the Sansu label. In 1988, Collectables Records put sixteen of his singles together into a retrospective 60s album (tunes often heard on New Orleans radio station WWOZ (90.7 on your FM dial).

Benny worked as a Miller beer sales and public relations executive for a number of years, making a brief return to the local music scene in the late 80s. But a stroke cut short his comeback, and today he lives in a nursing home in his hometown of Pensacola.

Benny believed he never got enough credit for his contribution on *Mother-in-law*, but recently things have changed. On August 02, 2009, the Louisiana Music Hall of Fame inducted Allen Toussaint, Benny Spellman and the late Ernie K-Doe during a steamy Sunday night ceremony at K-Doe's Mother-in-Law Lounge.

Of the three inductees, only Allen Toussaint could attend the affair at Antoinette K-Doe's eclectic lounge and shrine dedicated to her last husband. She couldn't make it either, having died Mardi Gras day earlier that year. Born Antoinette Dorsey, Mrs. K-Doe was a cousin of New Orleans R&B singer Lee Dorsey (another of Toussaint's top artists). She had known Ernie for many years before they became a couple around 1990. Toussaint had been inducted into the prestigious Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1998, but this honor was particularly meaningful.

Benny Spellman received his induction certificate and plaque earlier on July 11, 2009, at his assisted living facility in Florida. He was visited by Mike Shepherd and the prolific and ever-popular bandleader "Deacon" John Moore, who came to personally present him his award. The "Deacon" (guitar in hand) sang along with Benny the words to *Fortune Teller* and *Lipstick Traces*.

On being informed of his induction into the Louisiana Music Hall of Fame, Benny rejoiced:

"Thank you, Lord. Finally made it after all these years! All these years, I finally made it!"

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