

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Too Marva-lous For Words

New Orleans has maintained for years the title "Birthplace of Jazz", and (for those music aficionados who collected record albums in the 1960s) the Crescent City was known as "The Home of the Blues". "New Orleans Home of the Blues, Volumes 1 and 2" (on the Minit Label) were albums laden with classics by Jesse Hill, Lee Diamond, Aaron Neville, Benny Spellman, The Showmen, Ernie K-Doe and (of course) Irma Thomas. Irma was Queen of the Blues in those days with such hits as "Ruler Of My Heart", "Cry On" and "I Did My Part". When Irma oozed out the emotional "Wish Someone Would Care", everyone felt it to the depths of his soul.

Eventually New Orleans would have another queen, a dynamo blues belter and powerful gospel singer who left her career as a school secretary to travel around the world, representing her hometown in song. Marva Wright died Tuesday (March 23, 2010) at the home of her daughter in New Orleans East at age 62 of complications from two strokes she suffered last summer. She had been living there since her health declined last year.

Her manager, Adam Shipley, described her as "the Blues Queen of New Orleans" and one of the greatest "highlights to grace the stage at Tipitina's". That was but one of her many venues.

It would seem that Marva was a late bloomer on the music scene (not turning professional until 1987), but Marva actually began singing at nine years of age in church (with her mother as her accompanist at the Greater St. Stephen Baptist Church on South Liberty Street in Central City). That's when she met the famous Mahalia Jackson, a good friend and schoolmate of her gospel pianist mother (both attending McDonogh 24 Elementary School). Marva only chose singing on Bourbon Street and at Tip's as a second job in order to support her family. It would ultimately land her jobs all across Europe (France, Italy, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Norway and Sweden), the U.S. and around the world (Russia and Brazil).

Marva's rich blues vocals were first set in wax at a live set at Tipitina's in early 1989. This first recording was her rendition of Ruth Brown's Number One 1953 R & B hit, "Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean", which brought down the house.

From the Old Absinthe Bar to the Ritz-Carlton, from the Bourbon Street Gospel and Blues Club to the Storyville Jazz Parlor, Marva and her high octane, gospel-infused performances won her international acclaim. She played the Clinton White House in 1994, since Vice-President Al Gore and his family "used to come see me at Muddy Waters, across Oak Street from the Maple Leaf," Marva related. She would later perform at the 2008 Democratic National Convention Delegates Welcoming Party in Denver.

Marva-lous Marva made her national television debut on the 1991 CBS Super Bowl Special and performed for the 1993 Olympics Summer Trials. "Heartbreakin' Woman", Marva's first full-length album, garnered honors from the Louisiana Music Critics Association as Blues Album of the Year. With songs like "St. James Infirmary", "Built for Comfort" and "Bluesiana Mama", the Times-Picayune ranked it among that year's Top Ten albums.

Ed Bradley of "60 Minutes" would often introduce the "Bluesiana Mama" at Jazzfest. He was Marva's good friend since they first met while she was performing on Bourbon Street. Wright was often backed by her own band, the BMWs (which stood for the Band of Marva Wright).

Marva experienced the Blues first-hand when a mean woman named Katrina inundated her home in New Orleans East with nearly eight feet of water. She and her second husband, Antoine Plessy, moved to Maryland for a spell. But she became, like countless others, diasporized and disappointed (especially when it came to preparing New Orleans' traditional dishes). All the necessary ingredients just weren't there.

The Koko Taylor Foundation gave Marva Wright and Irma Thomas (more precisely known as "The Soul Queen Of New Orleans") a benefit at the House of Blues in Chicago. New Orleans' two queens were up there without their minks (lost to the storm). But they looked at each other and said, "We're still living."

Though never reaching the pinnacle of national success as Aretha Franklin or Etta James, Irma finally landed her first Grammy for Best Contemporary Blues Album entitled "After the Rain". It was a long time coming in a career of over forty-five years. Marva was rooting for her and told her she was going to get the Grammy. She called Irma right away in California to congratulate her. So happy that a New

Orleans woman won, Marva said she was also so "happy that *she* won".

The 39th annual New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival in 2008 included a spectacular performance by both Irma and Marva (along with Gretna vocalist Raychell Richard) in the over-packed Gospel Tent to pay tribute to New Orleans gospel legend Mahalia Jackson. So many people showed up the announcer had to threaten to stop the performance.

Singing backup for such artists as Joe Cocker and Allen Toussaint (and in numbers with Fats Domino, Lou Rawls, Harry Connick Jr., Aaron Neville and Marcia Ball), Marva will be greatly missed as she now joins a heavenly choir.

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