

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **New Orleans Piano**

*New Orleans Piano* is a 1972 album consisting of earlier recordings by New Orleans blues pianist and singer Henry Roeland Byrd, better known as Professor Longhair (December 19, 1918 – January 30, 1980). It contains material Atlantic Records had previously released by Fess that he recorded in 1949 and 1953 (such as “Mardi Gras in New Orleans”, first recorded in 1949 with his band, the “Shuffling Hungarians”) - plus alternate takes. Fess had a hit in 1950 with “Bald Head” and “Big Chief” in 1964. In 2003, *New Orleans Piano* was ranked number 220 on *Rolling Stone* magazine's list of the 500 greatest albums of all time, and in 2011 his 1953 recording of “Tipitina” was added to the United States National Recording Registry.

Fess wasn't the first great Crescent City piano player, nor was he the last. Who could forget Preservation Hall's beloved jazz pianist and singer, Sweet Emma Barrett (1897 – 1903)? Professor Longhair was, however, a true promoter of what Ferdinand Joseph LaMothe (1885 to 1890 – July 10, 1941), known professionally as Jelly Roll Morton, called that “Spanish tinge”. Jelly Roll recalled:

“I heard a lot of Spanish tunes. I tried to play them in correct tempo, but I personally didn't believe they were perfected in the tempos. Now take “*La Paloma*”, which I transformed in New Orleans style. You leave the left hand just the same. The difference comes in the right hand — in the syncopation, which gives it an entirely different color that really changes the color from red to blue.

Now in one of my earliest tunes, “New Orleans Blues”, you can notice the Spanish tinge. In fact, if you can't manage to put tinges of Spanish in your tunes, you will never be able to get the right seasoning, I call it, for jazz.”

W. C. Handy incorporated the “Spanish tinge” by adding a *habanera* rhythm within his tremendously popular “St. Louis Blues”, and it was undoubtedly a major element in the song's success. Fess added those Latin rhythms, too. As Allen Toussaint said of Fess: “Black or white,

local or out-of-town, they all had Longhair's music in common. Just that mambo-rhumba boogie thing."

Journalist Tony Russell wrote of Longhair, "The vivacious rhumba-rhythmed piano blues and choked singing typical of Fess were too weird to sell millions of records; he had to be content with siring musical offspring who were simple enough to manage that, like Fats Domino or Huey "Piano" Smith. But he is also acknowledged as a father figure by subtler players like Allen Toussaint and Dr. John."

Longhair, in the process of getting those wonderful sounds out, could be rough on a piano. Drummer extraordinaire Earl Palmer recalled a time a Kansas City club owner wouldn't pay them "because Fess kicked a hole in the piano".

That roughness wasn't much different from Jelly Roll Morton's instructions on how to rig a whorehouse piano:

"Find a salon, or a madam, that owns an upright. Old and loose in action. If it's in tune, beat it until it takes on that special out-of-tune twang. Don't make your sound too clean. It's a dirty old tone we're after. Pad the strings with old newspapers, or a burlap bag, and kick the front board hard for the Drum effect. Don't care how she looks, just how she sounds."

One must remember that New Orleans' (not to mention America's) "first genuine piano virtuoso", Louis Moreau Gottschalk (May 8, 1829 – December 18, 1869), was a pianist wunderkind. In his day, this New Orleans Jewish Creole youth was much admired by Europe's great composers. Three of his melodies, influenced by the slave rhythms of Congo Square ("La Bamboula", "The Banjo" and "Le Bananier"), captivated Parisian audiences. Chopin called the young man "the future king of pianists".

A few words should be mentioned about Isidore "Tuts" Washington (January 24, 1907 – August 5, 1984), a New Orleans-born pianist who exemplified the city's rhythm and blues style, also made famous by musicians such as Professor Longhair. Self-taught on the piano at age 10, "Tuts" studied under New Orleans jazz pianist Joseph Louis "Red" Cayou. In the 1920s and 1930s, he played for many major New Orleans dance and Dixieland bands. He later accompanied Smiley Lewis on several of his well-known hits. Washington's unique playing style incorporated elements of ragtime, blues, boogie-woogie and jazz (which Jelly Roll Morton bragged he invented in 1902).

Jelly Roll had that reputation for self-promotion and braggadocio, but he is widely recognized as a pivotal figure in early jazz. Even if he hadn't been its inventor, he was surely the first serious composer of the genre. By the age of fourteen, he was considered one of the best

pianists in Storyville. Widely regarded as the first jazz song to be published, Morton's "Jelly Roll Blues" (1915) was a big hit. His legacy also includes "Black Bottom Stomp", "Wolverine Blues", and "I Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say", securing his place in the pantheon of early jazz greats. He's even in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Morton's "Jelly Roll" sobriquet is a sexual reference from his tenure in the sporting houses of New Orleans' red light district. He got his start there by being discovered by Countess Willie Piazza, a most eccentric Storyville madam. She wore a monocle and flashed a cigarette holder a foot and a half long. Morton appears as the piano professor in Louis Malle's *Pretty Baby*, where he is portrayed by actor Antonio Fargas, with piano and vocals played by another great New Orleans pianist, James "Gonzo" Booker.

The late "Gonzo" Booker is one of those great American musical treasures, able to switch between jazz and gutbucket R&B with ease. Steeped in classical and blues traditions, he worked primarily in ragtime and barrelhouse boogie-woogie styles with a strong and creative improvisation. Check out what Morton calls the "Spanish tinge" on Booker's "Besame Mucho".

Ernie K-Doe said this of the innovative pianist, "Booker come off the piano, it got fire jumpin' off of it. Completely. Fi-yah. Just one of them things."

Harry Connick, Jr., parlayed his piano playing and smooth vocals into a successful recording and acting career. He started off as a musical child prodigy studying under the guidance of James "Gonzo" Booker, and is probably his most famous disciple. Connick, Dr. John, Henry Butler, among others, have recorded numbers referencing Booker. One should investigate Harry's first two albums (on Columbia), which display excellent examples of his Booker-style stride playing (before the crooning repertoire took over).

Henry Butler, referred to by Dr. John as "the pride of New Orleans", is a New Orleans-born jazz pianist known for his technique and his ability to play in many styles of music. He, too, can knock the crowds out.

Another blues pianist, Champion Jack Dupree (1908 to 1910 – January 21, 1992), was the embodiment of a New Orleans blues and boogie-woogie barrelhouse professor. He apprenticed with "Tuts" Washington and Willie Hall, from whom he learned "Junker's Blues" (the basis for Fats Domino's first hit "The Fat Man"). He also served as "spy boy" for the Yellow Pochahantas Mardi Gras Indian tribe before playing piano in barrelhouses and other night spots. His most successful recording was "Walkin' the Blues," which led to several national and European tours.

Meanwhile, Malcolm John Rebennack has been quite busy in 2011, having been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame on March 14. The five-time Grammy winner is better known by his stage name, Dr. John, "The Night Tripper". His voodoo-tinged *Gris Gris* album ranks 143 on *Rolling Stone* magazine's list of the 500 greatest albums of all time (higher than Fess). The famed pianist, guitarist and songwriter claims he's a reluctant lead vocalist frontman: "Frontmen had big egos," he said.

Dr. John claimed Huey "Piano" Smith "was so good to play with in sessions" and his "attitude was laid-back and funky". He wrote that Smith "wanted to be like Professor Longhair." Smith's piano playing incorporated the boogie styles of Pete Johnson, Meade Lux, Albert Ammons, Jelly Roll Morton's jazz style and the great playing of Fats Domino. Don't forget how extraordinary Fats was on other artists' sessions, ("Lawdy Miss Clawdy", for example). "Smith epitomized New Orleans R&B at its most infectious and rollicking," wrote music critic Steve Huey, "as showcased on ... 'Rockin' Pneumonia and the Boogie Woogie Flu'."

Allen Toussaint, brilliant pianist, composer and record producer, got his first lucky break at age 17 substituting for Huey "Piano" Smith at a performance with Earl King's band on the road in Alabama. After many incredible hit songs later, Toussaint was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1998.

Fats Domino was among the first inductees into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986, and in 1987 he was awarded the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. In 1998, President Clinton awarded him the National Medal of Arts, lost in the floodwaters of Katrina. President George W. Bush delivered him a replacement medal. In 2004, *Rolling Stone* magazine ranked Fats 25th on their list of the "100 Greatest Artists of All Time".

Fats Domino and Professor Longhair were major influences on a young Clarence "Frogman" Henry. His trademark frog croak on his 1956 hit "Ain't Got No Home" earned him his nickname, but we think of him more as a singer than a New Orleans pianist. In 1964 Henry opened eighteen Beatles concerts across the U.S. and Canada, and he was a regular performer on Bourbon Street for nineteen years.

Today, the tradition continues. I talked recently with Lawrence Cotton at the 2011 Ponderosa Stomp. This self-taught New Orleans-born pianist travelled with a band that backed up Joe Turner, T-Bone Walker and the legendary Guitar Slim. Lawrence left the road in 1958 after four years. But he's been playing around New Orleans ever since. Born in 1927, he's still playing a regular gig in the French Quarter.

Wynton and Branford's dad, Ellis Marsalis, has many great albums on Columbia. David Torkanowsky has been called fiery and eclectic, tapping the rhythm section of the Meters to play with him at the 2011 Jazz Fest (and naming the band "*Fleur Debris*"). Jon Cleary (although born in Kent, England) is a funk and R&B pianist and guitarist who is a vocalist, as well. He is a self-proclaimed student of the "musical culture and life of New Orleans". Marcia Ball, although born in Orange, Texas, is a two-fisted New Orleans style piano player, inspired by the playing of Fats Domino, James Booker and Professor Longhair (and the vocals of Irma Thomas).

Keith Spera wrote, "Tom\_McDermott\_ranks among the most fluent and knowledgeable contemporary practitioners of the New Orleans piano tradition. He has followed the music's evolution back to the 1800s and traced the 'Latin tinge' to its roots in the Caribbean and South America." The St. Louis, Missouri-born pianist and composer (born 1957) now calls New Orleans home. Tom began studying piano at age six and became a professional musician at 16. Two years after receiving a Master of Music degree from Washington University in St. Louis, he moved to New Orleans and became accomplished in ragtime and Dixieland jazz (playing in the "Dukes of Dixieland" through much of the 1990s).

He wrote of the "huge, huge fun" it was going to be performing (as himself) "on the HBO show 'Treme,' playing Jelly Roll Morton's 'New Orleans Joys' and 'King Porter Stomp,' in duets with the delectable violinist Lucia Micarelli". Tom also plays alongside clarinetist Evan Christopher, a California native who first moved to the Crescent City in 1994. Earlier this summer, McDermott took part in a two-week cultural exchange with musicians in Cuba, home to the *habanera*, a Creolized form of Cuban popular dance music of the 19th century. It was the first dance music from Cuba to be exported all over the world. Christopher also heeded the "Spanish tinge" advice of Jelly Roll Morton. The result was *Django à la Créole*, a CD that spices up "the Hot Club texture pioneered by Django Reinhardt by emphasizing hallmarks of New Orleans Jazz including blues, rhythms of the monde Créole, and collective improvisation."

Alas, Tom McDermott recently took a tumble and fractured his left wrist, but says he hopes to be totally functional again by the end of October (2011). As for piano players facing the unexpected, "Yes," Dr. John would say, "That's the tricknology of life."

**NED HÉMARD**

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