

Nov. 20, 2005---

Allen Toussaint has taken New Orleans music all over the world.

He wrote New Orleans R&B classics such as Ernie K. Doe's "Mother-in-Law," Lee Dorsey's "Working in a Coal Mine" and "Southern Nights," popularized by Glen Campbell. His "Whipped Cream" was recorded by Herb Alpert and became the theme for "The Dating Game." There are many others, and you've heard more of them than you might realize.

Born and reared in New Orleans, Toussaint, now 67, started playing piano at 7. His father, Clarence M. Toussaint, was a railroad mechanic and a weekend trumpet player. His mother, Naomi Neville, was a homemaker; Toussaint later would use her name as a songwriting pseudonym (Otis Redding's "Pain in My Heart"). The songwriter-producer-vocalist never left for Los Angeles or New York. Toussaint sacrificed business for the heartbeat of his hometown.

Until Hurricane Katrina ran him out of town.

For years, Toussaint has lived in the shadow of the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage fairgrounds. This is like Ernie Banks living across the street from Wrigley Field. But his house was gutted by Hurricane Katrina at the end of August.

"All my stuff downstairs is destroyed," Toussaint said last week from his temporary digs in New York City. "My Steinway piano. Equipment. My file cabinets -- with loads of handwritten music -- is gone as well. It's a disaster zone. But I've resolved it's the rearview mirror. I'll move back in the same neighborhood, but I will no longer depend on my lower level. I'm optimistic about the future. The city will be better."

During the storm, Toussaint held out until the last minute, which for him, was Aug. 31, two days after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. Early reports had Toussaint missing and/or an evacuee in the Louisiana Superdome. He did leave his house and checked into the Astor Hotel on Canal Street.

"By that time the water was seven feet high," he said. "There was no hope. I was able to get on a charter school bus that night and get a ride to the Baton Rouge airport. I was safe at all times. The next morning I boarded a plane to New York."

The move has not slowed him down. In the weeks since Toussaint relocated to New York, he's become acquainted with Elvis Costello. Last week, they began recording an album together. Costello is following the lead of Paul McCartney, the late Robert Palmer and Paul Simon, all of whom have collaborated with Toussaint.

Toussaint is also the centerpiece of "I Believe to My Soul" (Rhino/ Starbucks Hear

Music, Work Song), the Joe Henry-produced project that also features Mavis Staples, Ann Peebles, Irma Thomas and Billy Preston. The album is a fund-raiser for Hurricane Katrina victims.

Toussaint plays piano throughout "I Believe to My Soul," which was recorded in a week at Hollywood's historic Capitol B studios, and contributes four new compositions to the project.

"Joe gave me a call, but I had never heard of him," Toussaint said. "I said yes because of the way he described what he wanted to do. He's also working with me on the Elvis Costello project."

Toussaint's spiritual ballad "We Are One" closes the record. "It was a piece that I had written to do at the end of New Orleans Jazz Fest a couple of years ago. I never planned to record it, but for some reason it came up this time," he said.

On "I Believe," Toussaint even revisits the disco beat in "Mi Amour," while his fellow Crescent City songbird Irma Thomas offers one of the most powerful pure soul tracks by wrapping her voice around Tom Jans' "Loving Arms."

Toussaint cut his chops under the spell of Huey "Piano" Smith. At 17, Toussaint was recruited to replace Smith in the late Earl King's band for a show in Pritchard, Ala.

Smith went on to have hits such as "Rockin' Pneumonia and the Boogie Woogie Flu" and "High Blood Pressure," but in 1970, he banked the proceeds of a Coca-Cola commercial and became a Jehovah's Witness. Smith, 71, is now a preacher in Baton Rouge. Rumors of a comeback appearance always float around before Jazz Fest, but nothing has ever materialized.

"He's consistent," Toussaint said. "He never looked back. He had a magical touch on the piano. When he was on Earl King's 1955 hit 'Those Lonely, Lonely Nights,' he played fills on the piano that sounded like he was in a saloon. His writing? Sheer genius. If he stayed in the business, he would have come up with more magic. It flowed out of him."

Toussaint has embraced all kinds of music throughout his life. The Gilbert O'Sullivan 1972 hit ballad "Alone, Again (Naturally)" is one of his all-time favorite compositions. "When I first heard it, I loved the melody and the way he told the story," Toussaint said. "It was touching. The bridge went up to a nice level and came back to sit in a very good place. I liked that. I know there was much more where that came from, but I don't think we heard many more things from him."

Toussaint admitted he wrote the upbeat instrumentals "Whipped Cream" and its predecessor, "Java" (a 1964 hit for Al Hirt), while trying to be humorous. "Al Hirt came out with 'Java' while I was in the military," said Toussaint, who was stationed

in Ft. Hood, Texas. "On weekends I played in a small band off-base. The other members knew I wrote that, and they thought that was outrageous. They associated me with R&B and K-Doe's 1961 hit 'Mother-in-Law'. So I wrote songs like 'Java' for that band to play, kind of like, 'Well, take that.' And 'Whipped Cream' was one of those songs."

Just before Toussaint was discharged, Joe Banashak at New Orleans' Minit Records took the band into the studio to record the Latin-tinged instrumentals. (Toussaint had played on almost all the Minit hits before joining the Army in 1963.)

Toussaint later branched out to write the horn arrangements for the Band's "Rock of Ages" album, and in 1983, he worked with New York percussionist Kip Hanrahan's free-form group Conjure on "Music for the Texts of Ishmael Reed."

"When I write, I don't usually hear a plot without a melody," Toussaint said. "I might hear two people talking and that will inspire a story. But a little melody always comes with that. Always."