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Ernie K-Doe strikes a nerve with his 'Mother-in-Law'

By: Dave Hoekstra

The pleasure was worth the pain.

In March, 1961, a New Orleans gospel-soaked rhythm and blues singer named Ernie K-Doe recorded Allen Toussaint's goofy novelty song, "Mother-in-Law."

The then-irresistible musical hook was the call-and-response of K-Doe's suggestive lead vocals and Benny "Lipstick Traces" Spellman's properly intrusive bass vocals. But the lyrical hook remains timeless.

" 'Mother-in-Law' sure wasn't a hard song to sing," K-Doe admitted in a phone interview from New Orleans. "Because my mother-in-law was staying in my house. I was married 19 years, and it was 19 years of pure sorrow. When I sang, 'Satan should be her name,' I meant that. Or, 'She came from down below,' I meant that, too. Reality is one thing, and fake and jake is another thing. When I was tellin' about her, my mother-in-law was right there. She was lowdown. She'd get up at 6 in the morning and make my life miserable until 8:30 at night. So it was no problem, me singing about her."

You can bet the rent that K-Doe will sing "Mother-in-Law," backed by Toussaint (who played piano on the original record) and his band, at 9:30 p.m. June 11 at the Petrillo Music Shell in Grant Park at the Chicago Blues Festival. "Mother-in-Law" was the first national No. 1 hit for a New Orleans rhythm-and-blues artist. This will be K-Doe's first Chicago appearance since 1973, when he played at a private party.

K-Doe, born as Ernest Kador in 1936, remains one of the seminal characters on the New Orleans R&B scene.

He speaks in mixed gumbo metaphors, occasionally hosts a street-wise R&B program on New Orleans' WWOZ-FM, and, as is the case with any prodigal entertainer, stretches the truth. (K-Doe claims to have recorded with the Chicago-based Flamingos, a point that is highly debatable. Now, Toussaint had a New Orleans group called the Flamingoes that featured guitarist Snooks Eaglin, who also will join the Chicago Blues Festival lineup, performing at 7:30 p.m. June

11 at the Petrillo Music Shell).

K-Doe's live sets can get as excessive as his memories. In past New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival performances, I've seen K-Doe stretch "Mother-in-Law" out to a 20-minute epic worthy of Mickey Rooney's marriages,

punctuating the tune by proclaiming his own name over and over and over, while wearing iridescent suits and gold rings that burn like meteors. Such show-biz grandeur is actually a disservice to the rest of the showman's catalog, which includes the bouncy K-Doe original "Te-Ta-Te-Ta-Ta," the edgy "A Certain Girl," and the Southern dance hits, "Popeye Joe" and "Rub-Dub-Dub."

But it is "Mother-in-Law" that K-Doe will be associated with forever. Always the loving son-in-law, K-Doe even gave five copies of the record to his mother-in-law when it was released. "I didn't want her to run out," he said. "I told her she was the one I should have married. After all, she was trying to run my house. But she liked the record."

That's more than you can say for Mr. "American Bandstand," Dick Clark, who refused to play "Mother-in-Law" when it was first released on the grounds that it disrupted family harmony.

"As long as I've got some red beans and ham hocks, I don't worry about that anymore," K-Doe said, chortling. "Dick Clark made Chuck Berry, Chubby Checker and a whole lotta cats. But one thing about Ernie K-Doe - I cannot be moved. Dig where I'm coming from? You can't tell me what to do, you can't tell me what to sing. `Mother-in-Law' is the only record in the world that will never die.

"Because people are going to get married 'til the end of the world."

K-Doe's influences run from the lucid gospel phrasing of Archie Brown Lee (the lead singer of the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi and an influence on Ray Charles) to the kinetic stage presence of Sammy Davis Jr. Only K-Doe could come up with that combination.

"I got all my singing talent from Archie Brown Lee," he said. "He learned me how to drive. I mean, really sing. He taught me not to mess around, but just to sing from a power structure. They talk about Mahalia Jackson and I love her, but when Archie Brown Lee sang, everybody in the world had to feel it. He was nothing but (5 feet 4 inches and) 145 pounds. But that 145 pounds spoke up to 375 pounds."

K-Doe was 14 years old when he first saw Davis perform with his uncle and father at the Ritz Theater in New Orleans. "They were all tap-dancing onstage, and I said to myself, `Someday I want to be just like him.' When I was out in California a while back, I went and knocked on his (Sammy's) door. He wasn't at home. He was in Vegas or someplace. But I just wanted to shake his hand to let him know he's got somebody in the world that remembers him when he was a little bitty boy."

K-Doe spent nine years living with his mother at 63rd and Drexel on the South Side. He said he moved north when he was 12, but it's also been written that he moved to Chicago when he was 17. The young K-Doe hung with vocal groups such as the Moonglows and the Flamingos at South Side clubs such as Club Bagdad, and sang at United Records, but there's no record of him recording with the Flamingos. Anyway, by 1954, K-Doe's mother had moved back to New Orleans with her son, and Ernie was fronting his own Blue Diamonds vocal group in the Crescent City.

The effervescent singer is quietly scaling the comeback trail. He's included on a just-released compilation cassette called "New Orleans: A Musical Gumbo," which is produced by Ninth Ward trumpet player Milton "Half a Head" Batiste. The cassette features the Olympia Brass Band, and Oliver "Who Shot the La-La" Morgan and K-Doe singing "A Tribute to My Friend, Big Joe," a medley of Big Joe Turner hits. K-Doe met Turner "before paved streets" when they played the Club Casablanca in Baton Rouge, La. (The tape is available by sending \$11, which includes shipping, to Du Bat Music, 5335 St. Anthony Ave., New Orleans, La. 70122.)

Other key players who will appear under the Allen Toussaint umbrella in the "Goin' to the Bayou" set are New Orleans soul stirrers Clarence "Frogman" Henry and Robert Parker.

The Frogman broke out of New Orleans with his 1957 hit, "Ain't Got No Home." The sad saga of a homeless frog and girl was discovered by New Orleans disc jockey Poppa Stoppa (don't you love these names?), who had been playing "Troubles Troubles," the other side of the record. It was Poppa Stoppa who pinned the Frogman moniker on Henry with his introduction to the record, "Here's the frog song by the frog man."

Chicago's Leonard Chess heard "Ain't Got No Home" and flew Henry and Toussaint to Chicago to record "You Always Hurt the One You Love" and "On Bended Knees" with Chicago session musicians for Argo Records. That resulted in Henry's only other major hit, the tight swing of "But I Do," which was released in 1961.

In recent years, Henry's recordings have a declared Fats Domino tinge by way of florid arrangements and flowing strings. Henry has been known to do a Domino-esque reading of "Red Sails in the Sunset" and "I'm Gonna Be a Wheel Someday," and outside of that realm, he's covered Dobie Gray's "The In Crowd."

This isn't the bayou - it's strictly Bourbon Street.

In New Orleans, Parker is best known as the former tenor saxophonist for Professor Longhair and the bandleader at the defunct Club Tijuana (an early

stomping ground for K-Doe, Guitar Slim and Izzy Coo). Outside of New Orleans, Parker is best known for his 1966 hit, "Barefootin'." (The tune bounced back on the British charts in 1987.)

It was an unlikely hit for a session player, so while on tour promoting the hit, Parker used to pad his set with a lot of Stax-Volt material and play while barefoot.