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NEW ORLEANS -- The enduring Sam Moore used to be just another rhythm and blues minstrel playing his dues on East 43rd Street in early '60s Chicago.

He was pressed to find a hook.

That's how Moore became Ironing Board Sam, a one-man blues band playing until the early morning hours here at Bourbon Street After Hours, 617 Bourbon St. If you're stepping out for Mardi Gras, the Jazz Festival or the Bears return to the 1990 Super Bowl, Ironing Board Sam is on the must-see list.

Not necessarily must-hear.

The 46-year-old Moore plays hotel lounge melody on a Casio keyboard loyally perched on a wobbly ironing board decorated with twinkling Italian Christmas lights. A second Casio on his left-hand side is for the bass and drum sound. A metal harness keeps a microphone around Moore's neck while he sings songs such as "Boogie Ironing Board" and "Ironin-Em." Moore, who usually dresses in a threadbare gold jacket and a black French Quarter T-shirt, also plays such chestnuts as "Everyday I Have the Blues" and "Roll Over Beethoven."

"I got the Ironing Board name after I built my first keyboard about 10 years ago," Moore said while relaxing in the funky After Hours kitchen after a set during Super Bowl week. "The only place I had to put it was on the kitchen table. My dad kept telling me to get it off the table so one day I was passing a hardware store and I saw an ironing board. I thought that would be the best thing for my keyboard."

"The Ironing Board name really kicked in when I played Memphis in 1965. I had the ironing board done in red velvet and if the music is right, the people in Memphis feel they know you. So they all started calling me Ironing Board Sam."

The steam-pressed angle struck a chord and Ironing Board Sam began to draw big crowds, which quickly led to an appearance on a Nashville television station.

"That's really what put me on the road," Moore said.

Moore's roots are in Chicago, where he gigged at the defunct Pepper's Lounge, 43rd Street and Vincennes Avenue, and Club DeLisa just south of Pepper's. As Sam Moore, he recorded "Wipper Wopper" and "Non Support" for Chess Records.

"Playing in Chicago was good for my music because a lot of people were like me - they were from the South and they understood and accepted my music," Moore said.

The ironing board schtick isn't alone in Sam's bag of tricks. In 1977, he performed at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival submerged in an 8-foot tank of water.

"I had planned to rent me a helicopter and swing around the fairgrounds playing upside down," Moore confessed sheepishly. "I found out I couldn't do that. But I did find a hot-air balloon and I tried to play above Jackson Square that summer. But we couldn't get the balloon off the ground and I was disappointed because I had all the media there and everything.

"So I decided to concentrate on things on the ground. Somebody heard about all my problems and they said, 'Why don't you play underwater?' " Moore began constructing a Plexiglas pool, but during construction the first tank broke because the glue wasn't strong enough to hold the water.

"I had no idea that would happen - remember, all this was new to me," Moore said. "I finally got me a welder who steel-framed the tank so I got the support I needed."

Moore refused to perform with an oxygen tank. "I didn't want to cheat; I wanted to do it with the real nitty gritty," Moore said. "I made a helmet out of Plexiglas and I breathed the air that was captured when I went under the water. I was able to sing two songs. I did the Jimmy Reed song he starts singing 'You Got Me Runnin', 'I'm goin' up, I'm goin' down, I'm goin' up, down, up, down. . . .'

"You know, I used to practice underwater in my backyard," Moore admitted. "I began to enjoy it because very seldom you can get total quietness on earth."

Everybody's got a loud gimmick on noisy Bourbon Street, which is why Moore plays it cagey with an in-the-bag audience that usually resembles a traveling halfway house.

"I'll often go into a song and I won't finish it because sometimes on Bourbon Street you have to catch the crowd's attention," Moore said. "If they don't get the exciting part, they'll drift away.

"Every song has to have an exciting part."
Just as every performer has to have an exciting part.