

Soul For IRMA



Of the thousands of R&B singers who recorded in the 1950s,

few remain at the top of their game today. The competitive nature of a changing industry, new technologies, a fickle public, and the ravages of time all serve notice to the baby-boomer generation that, as the Reverend Gary Davis once sang, “Time Is Drawing Near.”

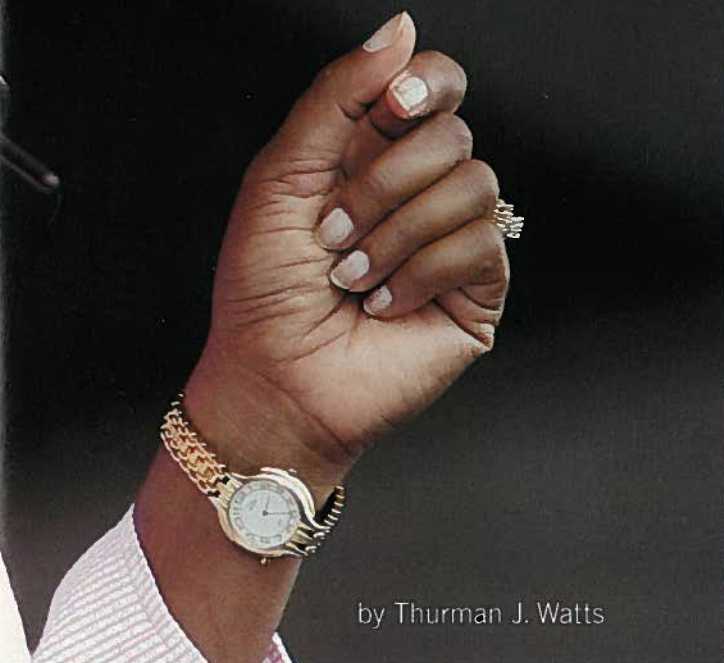
However, time continues to be on Irma Thomas’ side. She recorded her first single, “(You Can Have My Husband) But Don’t Mess With My Man,” in 1959, and the song peaked

at No. 22 on the R&B charts. Like her contemporary Bobby Womack, Thomas survived a Stones cover: “Time Is On My Side,” written by Jerry Ragovoy, was sung by Thomas long before the Stones recorded it. More recently, Thomas survived Hurricane Katrina. Her home did not, nor did the nightclub she owned with her husband, Emile Jackson.

The first thing you notice in conversation with the Soul Queen of New Orleans is that her expertise extends

Survivor

THOMAS, life goes on after the rain



by Thurman J. Watts

far beyond that of a typical R&B chanteuse. Like the storm Katrina, whose power made the whole world take note, Thomas is a powerful figure who speaks with authority on the culture of Louisiana, the politics of rebuilding New Orleans, and the making of her poignant, pulse-of-the-bayou album, *After the Rain*. Most of the material on the album was chosen before Katrina — an amazing coincidence, considering that much of its subject matter suggests rebirth and renewal.

Thomas is currently in the process of rebuilding her life in New Orleans, and her eye is focused on the future. *Blues Revue* spoke with Thomas in September 2006, a year after Katrina hit.

Your home was flooded. How is the rebuilding going?
We're still trying to get into it. We've only accomplished getting the wiring done and installing a new garage door. As we speak, we're actually waiting for the electricity to be turned on through city services. We know how to turn it on, but it wouldn't be legal. We're trying to get it done legally so that we can get the contractors to start doing the interior work. The contractors can't work with a generator.

The whole country was touched by the effects of Katrina, but Spike Lee's documentary, When the Levees Broke, really honed in on the devastation that occurred.
What he did is serving its purpose. So many were not getting the gist of what it's really like. Until you've actually walked the land, it's still not the same. But certainly, it's an eye-opener.

Aid to Louisiana has been slow and inadequate. Insurance companies seem to be hedging on honoring their commitments. There are differing opinions on how New Orleans will be rebuilt. Do you believe New Orleans will ever be back on par with what it was before?

I feel that it will be back. It may not be all the way, but it will be pretty darn close. You see, the folk that want to come home will come home. And even the ones that can't come home will eventually make it back. A large part of the hindrance has been the slow response of the agencies involved. The other side is that the people who made New Orleans what it is have been carried off to faraway places that they had never been to before. These folks had no idea where they were going. A large portion of these folks were homeowners, not on [rental assistance program] Section Eight or project dwellers. They just didn't have the financial ability to have insurance or the means to evacuate. They couldn't afford it. Some of these people had never been out of the city in their lives. They were retirees who had worked all their lives to own their property and were living out their remaining time on this earth, surviving on a pension. And there doesn't seem to be a sense of urgency to get these people back home where they belong.

Was anyone in your family displaced?
Yes. One family member is working and living in a trailer. Another is just about back in her home, with a bedroom and bathroom that are operational. It's coming along slowly.

What about the Lions Den, the club you and your husband operated? Any plans to bring it back to life?

We don't plan to bring it back at the present time. That's not the priority right now, for two reasons. First of all, we don't have anywhere to stay. Second, the people who worked in the Lions Den do not have places to live, either.

Your new album's stripped-down Delta sound is miles away from the New Orleans horns and funk your fans are accustomed to hearing.

That's exactly the point. We felt the sound everybody was used to had become old hat. We needed to shake them up and present a side of Irma they hadn't been able to get. So far, it seems to be doing its job.

Is there a single from After the Rain that's getting a lot of play?

Honestly, they can't seem to pick out any particular song above any of the others. That's what happens to most of my CDs. They kind of like the whole thing. And that's OK. It means I'm doing a good piece of work.

After Katrina, there was speculation that you, as well as Fats Domino, might be missing.

That's true. My band, the Professionals, and I were working out of town and were stranded together in Austin when Katrina hit.

Fats was scheduled to close the 2006 New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival.

Well, he showed up but didn't play. He was on the bill. He came, walked out on the stage, waved at the people, but did not play. They moved Lionel Richie to the stage, and he closed it out. Fats didn't feel like working, so he didn't work!

Other than rebuilding your house and working as much as possible, what's on tap in the near future?

Prior to Katrina, I had started writing my autobiography. So as soon as things settle down a bit, I plan to get back at it. It's a project I think needs to be done, not only for and from the local perspective, but for the youth and the people across the country who may not know of the struggles I've been through in my career.

You were born in Louisiana but moved to Los Angeles as a young mother.

I did. And it was because of a storm, [1969's] Hurricane Camille.

Did you perform while you lived in L.A.?

I did, but not as much as I would have liked to. I couldn't make a living there, so I moved up to the Bay Area. I was able to work with Marv & the Uptights, Chester Thompson before he went with Santana, the California Playboys, and the Dynamic Four. After the Bay Area stint, we moved back to New Orleans.

After you moved back, you opened the Lions Den, which became very popular.

Folks enjoyed it because it was so intimate. It was like I was entertaining in my living room.

Didn't you also handle the kitchen aspect?

There *was* no kitchen. I did the cooking at home and brought it to the club.

With all that water raging through your properties, you must have lost a lot of career memorabilia.

That's true, but a lot of memorabilia I had given to family, friends, and fans. If I have a need to replenish it, I will. At this time, I don't see the need. I'm too busy making *new* memorabilia. ■

WALKIN' THE BLUES

IN BLUES SHOES
by New Orleans artist
Melanie Hill Guion

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Selected Discography

Wish Someone Would Care (1966) Imperial 9266

Take a Look (1966) Imperial 9302

The New Rules (1986) Rounder 2046

Something Good: Muscle Shoals (1990, recorded in 1967)
Chess 93004

The Story of My Life (1997) Rounder 2149

Sing It! (1998, with Marcia Ball and Tracy Nelson)
Rounder 2152

After the Rain (2006) Rounder 2186

Blues From the Field

Q&A with Jimmy McCracklin

As the 21st century unfolds, few artists can claim careers spanning more than 50 years in the business of the blues and R&B. Jimmy McCracklin is one member of that rapidly diminishing group. Born near Fort Smith, Arkansas, before the Great Depression left its stamp on the blues genre, he was raised in St. Louis, not far from Miles Davis. Today McCracklin claims a catalog of material that's as authentic as urban blues can get.

As an aspiring pianist, McCracklin's main influence was the great Walter Davis, one of the most prolific performers to emerge from St. Louis' early blues scene. McCracklin dabbled in boxing before settling on a career as a performer after a tour with the Navy. After moving to the West Coast, his first recording, "Miss Mattie Left Me," was released on the Globe label in 1945. He recorded for a variety of companies, including a two-year stint with Modern Records.

His most creative period coincided with his association with Bay Area producer Bob Geddins. From those sessions McCracklin enjoyed his first major hit, "The Walk," released via Chess Records in 1958. It reached the Top 10, enabling him to become one of the first blues artists to appear on *American Bandstand*. He scored a Mercury Records hit with "Georgia Slop" in 1959 before returning two years later on Art-Tone Records with "I've Just Got To Know." McCracklin also wrote "Tramp" for Lowell Fulson. All told, BMI lists McCracklin's writing output at more than 250 songs, though McCracklin says the real number is closer to 1,000.

McCracklin is still recording and touring today, with plans to headline a major festival in Italy this summer. When he invited *Blues Revue* into his home, he showed us what he called "double proof" that he was the composer of B.B. King's hit "The Thrill Is Gone": a BMI printout

listing him as the writer of that song and hundreds of others, and a wrinkled envelope, postmarked 1948, mailed from Jimmy McCracklin to Jimmy McCracklin. The song's title is written, in the same handwriting, on the flap of the envelope. (Rick Darnell, a songwriter who currently lives in Virginia, also vehemently claims authorship of the song.)

You claim to have written "The Thrill Is Gone." Why, then, is the song not credited to you?

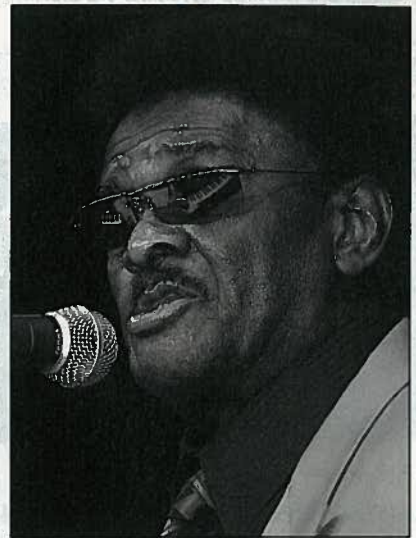
At that time, after so many years, if you didn't renew your ownership or copyright of a song, it went into the public domain and anyone could claim it. Once you lost it in the public domain, you'd have to hire an attorney. But your competition might be putting money in your lawyer's pocket, too! You could pay someone to lose your own song in court. Hell, I didn't even write "The Thrill Is Gone" for B.B. [King]. I wrote it for Roy Hawkins, who lived in Richmond at the time. I don't have to lie about it, man. I got a thousand songs out there.

Freddie King took my song "The Walk," changed the tempo, left out the words, and recorded an instrumental he called "Hideaway." I still got credit for it.

You recorded for Chess Records. How did they treat you?

Just like they did all black people. They made the system work to their advantage. They didn't have time for me.

I had to take "The Walk" to them four times. I was in Chicago working with Percy Mayfield. We were making about \$6 or \$7 dollars apiece per night. After the job with Percy was done, I decided to stay over and make a record. It cost me about \$9 to do it. I must have walked around to every record company in Chicago.



I went to Chess three times. They said they didn't want to listen to it. I just kept going back. The fourth time, Phil Chess said out of frustration that he would listen to it, told me to throw it on his desk. Three weeks later, I'm driving back home to California and I heard it blasting on the radio. I almost had to give it away to get them to accept it. [But] once they listened to it, they got on it overnight. That's the way "The Walk" got out there. That's the way things were. That tune's been covered [numerous] times.

You worked quite a bit with Lowell Fulson, who was also from the Bay Area.

Me and Lowell were like brothers. He was a hell of a blues singer, but he couldn't put the words together; he couldn't write songs. The good Lord just made it possible for me to put lyrics together with the right melody. He gifted me with the knack to present them in a manner that you would listen to. It's all about presenting it to the people so that they appreciate it.

I was out there with the best of them. Bobby Bland, B.B., Brook Benton, the Temptations, King Cole, Rosco Gordon, Fats Domino — I worked with them all. There's not many of us left. I'm still doin' it.

— T. Watts

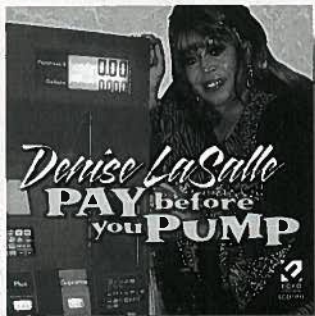
DENISE LASALLE
Pay Before You Pump
Ecko 1091

With more than 30 albums to her credit, Southern soul chanteuse Denise LaSalle believes in keeping quality product on the market. A hands-on artist, she co-produced her third disc for Ecko Records with guitarist/label founder John Ward and wrote or co-wrote seven of the tracks.

From the opening bars of the hook-ensconced title cut, LaSalle visits a lyrical landscape common in Southern soul: “no romance without finance” (“Pay Before You Pump,” “I Need a Working Man”); “you’ve been messin’ with my man, now you’ve got to pay” (“It’s Goin’ Down”); and the less typical “country girl stuck in the city and trying to get home” (“Mississippi Woman”). Recorded in Memphis, the album features guitar work by Michael Toles, Gerod Rayborn, and Ward. Al Wilder handles bass, and a rotating cast (Lester Snell, Gary Wolfe, James Jackson, and Bobby Hunter) shares keyboard duties. Willie Hall sits at the drum kit, and the Acme Horns (Jim Spake and Scott Thompson) benefit from Harrison Galloway’s punchy horn arrangements.

Born in Mississippi, LaSalle moved to the Windy City as a young woman, and the stamp of Chicago blues is undeniable on “It’s Goin’ Down” and “Mississippi Woman.” Thumbs up to Ecko for including a “clean” radio edit of the former tune and a Delta blues remix of the latter.

T. WATTS



MARVA WRIGHT

The Blues Queen of New Orleans Comes Home

by Thurman J. Watts



The first time

I call Marva Wright, it's one of those slightly eerie experiences where the phone doesn't ring. Her voice — congenial and interesting, but not indicative of the power it commands in performance — is just *there* on the other end of the line. We schedule an interview to discuss her career and new album, and when we speak again the following Monday, Wright announces that she's just become a great-grandmother. Her excitement is palpable.

Already a seasoned performer by the time she made her professional debut, Wright never aspired to sing for a living or craved the fame that comes with her

“Blues Queen of New Orleans” title. Before launching her career as a vocalist, Wright worked as a secretary for the New Orleans school district. She began singing at school assemblies and talent shows, and one thing led to another.

“I started singing with bands,” Wright says. “Then I auditioned on Bourbon Street as a blues singer when I only knew four blues songs. I was 38 when I started singing professionally. Prior to that, I sang in church, [but] I never thought about crossing over.”

As a child, Wright was surrounded by gospel music. Mahalia Jackson was a close friend of Wright's mother, but Marva knew her simply as “a friend of Mama's” and not as a world-famous performer. Wright began

Since returning to New Orleans, Wright has volunteered with a charity that serves the city's hungry and homeless. "Somebody helped me," she says, "so I want to help somebody else."

singing in church at age 9, and her mother performed as a soloist and pianist with a local gospel quartet. "It's said that the hardest audience to sing to is the church," Wright says. "If you can get by them, you can get by anybody. But to me it wasn't hard, 'cause I was singing for God. I still attend and sing in church when I can."

Like many artists with a gospel background, Wright has faced the conflict of secular-vs.-religious music in her own career. She loves the gospel sounds of the Clark Sisters and big-voiced Rance Allen, but she credits Aretha Franklin, Patti LaBelle, and Gladys Knight as her biggest influences and considers Koko Taylor her mentor.

"When people whisper about musicians or singers who sing and play in

church on Sunday and work in clubs other days, labeling them as 'singing for the devil,' I don't believe it's fair," Wright muses. "Music is music. Everyone has a type of music they like. I'm not hip-hop or country. I've sung all over the world,

and music is one language humans can relate to."

Wright's latest album, *After the Levees Broke*, was released this past May. The album's title and content evoke the destruction of New Orleans. Prior to



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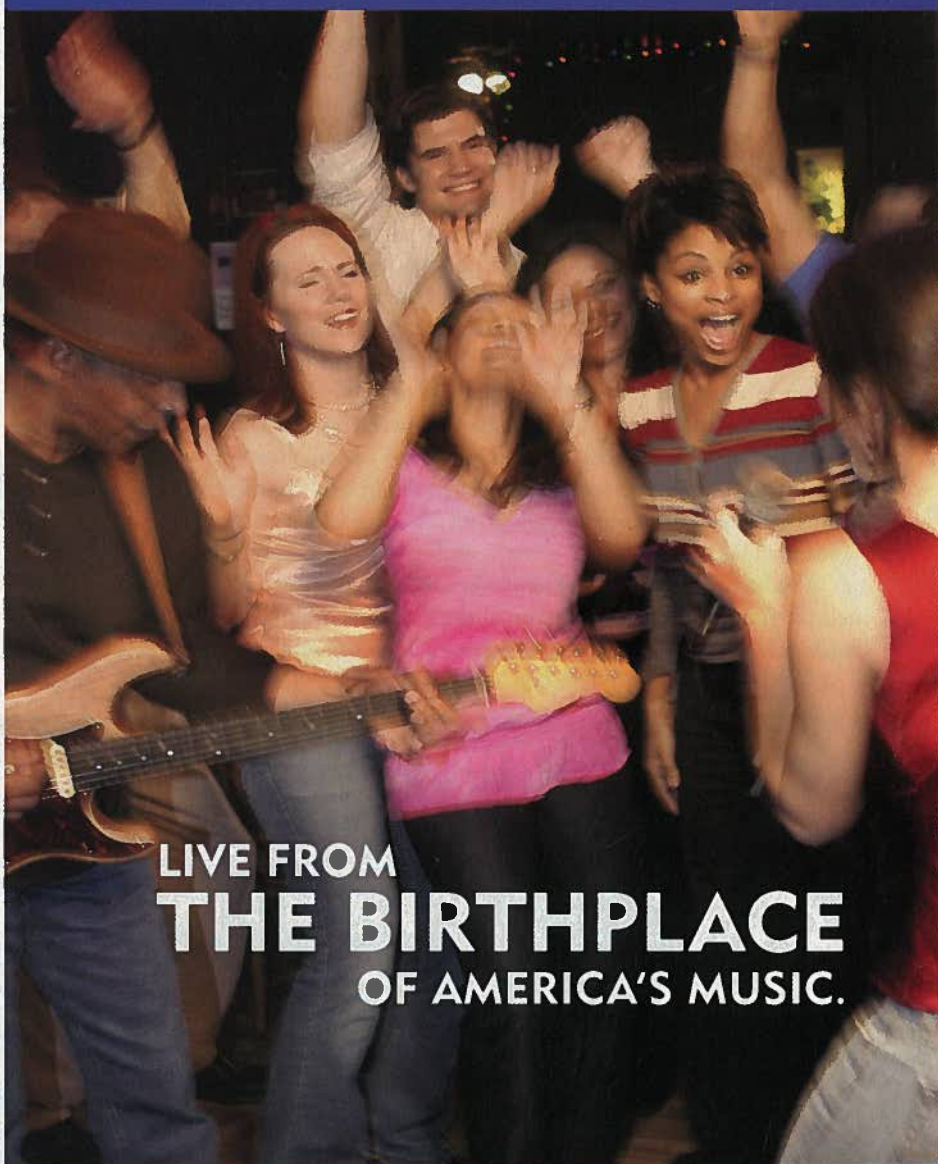
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Hurricane Katrina, several tracks had been cut for what was slated to be Wright's next release. Only "That's the Way It Is" survived to be included on *After the Levees Broke*. Many of the musicians on the album lost their homes to the floodwaters, but Peter Noble, chairman of the Australian label AIM Records, breathed new life into the project even as members of Wright's band remained scattered around the United States.

Processing the pain caused by Katrina has been difficult for Wright, who says she's still too emotionally tied to the experience to write about it. Instead, her bassist and band director, Benny Turner, captured Wright's feelings about the disaster in words and music. The album's first two tracks, "The Levee Is Breaking Down" and "Katrina Blues," cut to the chase of the experience. The disc opens with an image of Wright's daughter waking to the "awful sound of water all around/The man on the radio said the levees had broken down." The narration shifts subtly to Wright's own viewpoint as she recalls her son-in-law's insistence that the family leave town ("No time to pack/Just the clothes on your back"), weaving into the mix an image of a rescue helicopter passing by stranded victims.

"Katrina Blues" reads like a diary of the disaster's brutal aftermath: lack of provisions, people dropping dead, survivors herded together like cattle, the government's insufficient response, and, for survivors, the upheaval caused by the need to relocate. The disc's mood brightens with "God's Good Hands," a song of praise featuring Allen Toussaint's piano and backing vocals by the Greater Antioch Choir. The song also is included on the soundtrack to *Hurricane On the Bayou*, a 2007 IMAX film about Louisiana's wetlands in which Wright appeared.

Prior to Katrina, Wright, like many New Orleans residents, chose to ride out storms at home rather than evacuate. This time, Wright heeded her son-in-law's advice and left town the night before the hurricane struck. Believing they would return shortly



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after the storm passed, Wright's family loaded a pickup truck with supplies and left behind the rest of their worldly goods. Eleven months passed before they made it back home.

With help from her daughter and various blues societies, Wright and her husband began to carve out a new life in Randallstown, Maryland. The couple considered relocating there permanently, but a 2006 visit to New Orleans prompted them to move back to their beloved hometown. Since returning, Wright has volunteered with a charity that serves the Crescent City's hungry and homeless. "Somebody helped me," she says, "so I want to help somebody else."

Wright has performed recently in such far-flung locales as Germany and Brazil, joined sometimes by pianist Henry

Butler and the Mardi Gras Indian band the Wild Magnolias. When not traveling, Wright and her group appear regularly at the New Orleans Ritz-Carlton Hotel.

Wright and her gang of musicians are a large, multicultural family. Percussionist Jeffrey Alexander is one of the Crescent City's most in-demand drummers, while keyboardist Keiko Komaki and guitarist June Yamagishi are natives of Japan, the latter voted Guitar Player of the Year by New Orleans' *Offbeat* magazine. Turner served as musical director for his brother, bluesman Freddie King, and co-wrote the classic blues hit "Hideaway."

The players move fluidly between Wright's band and other projects, including the Wild Magnolias and the all-star local assemblage Papa Grows Funk. But

when the Blues Queen of New Orleans reigns over her royal court, the gumbo of funk and blues — all infused with the gospel overtones of Wright's childhood — is irresistible. ■

Selected Discography

Heartbreakin' Woman
(1991) Tipitina's 1402

Marvalous (1995) Mardis Gras 1026

Born With the Blues
(1996) Virgin 88120

Bluesiana Mama (1999) AIM 5008

Let Them Talk (2000) AIM 5010

After the Levees Broke
(2007) AIM 5015