

ALLEN TOUSSAINT



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1958–2015</i>	<i>Classic R&B</i>	<i>Java (1958)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Allen Toussaint*

Years: *1958*

George Starostin's Reviews

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THE WILD SOUND OF NEW ORLEANS

Album released:

June 1958

V A L U E

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More info:



Tracks: 1) Whirlaway; 2) Up The Creek; 3) Tim Tam; 4) Me And You; 5) Bono; 6) Java; 7) Happy Times; 8) Wham Tousan; 9) Nowhere To Go; 10) Nashua; 11) Po Boy Walk; 12) Pelican Parade.

REVIEW

It would not be a crime to assume that most people probably only come across the name «Allen Toussaint» in parentheses — as the author of such well-known and much-covered standards as ‘Fortune Teller’ and ‘I Like It Like That’ (and even then it is not always obvious, since some of those hits were at first officially credited to «Naomi Neville», so that the royalties could generously go to the man’s parents). A small group of people who take special interest in the cultural life of New Orleans after the rock revolution might also know Allen’s solo LPs, a small, but steady stream of which only began to emerge in the early 1970s. But I am pretty sure that only a *very* select few have ever heard the one and only solo record that he cut *before* the revolution, all the way back in 1958 — barely 20 years of age, beardless, smiling, suit-and-tied, and still going by his early artistic moniker of «Al Tousan».



Frankly speaking, this is a bit of a shame, because in this particular case the laudatory title goes beyond banal marketing strategy: **The Wild Sound Of New Orleans**, as applied specifically to this LP, does indeed translate to «the kind of

special sound to come from New Orleans which is possessed by a unique type of *real* wildness», rather than «this is the way they all sound in New Orleans, and we are calling it 'wild' because it goes much farther than *hip* or *groovy*, and there is no better music to come out of anywhere in this world than from New Orleans, anyway». In other words, emphasis here is on WILD rather than on NEW ORLEANS, and, admittedly, that is precisely how the title is spelled on the album cover.

At the time, «Tousan» was known primarily as a talented piano player, though he had already made his first steps in producing records for other artists — and, as the album vividly shows, in composing. Not thinking about himself as a singer, he took the decision to leave all of the compositions for his first LP, recorded for the RCA label, without vocals — instead, they were to showcase the instrumental skills of himself and his backing band (which, among others, included Alvin Tyler, one of New Orleans' most famous sax players who can frequently be heard on Fats Domino's records; and Charles "Hungry" Williams, a prolific session drummer who also recorded for Fats, as well as Charles Brown, Albert King, and tons of other lesser known people). And although, in the classic tradition of New Orleanian jazz and R&B, many of these compositions quickly begin to sound pretty samey, the important thing about them is that they are still closer in spirit to audacious and rebellious rock'n'roll than most of Allen's technical and spiritual predecessors, from Amos Milburn all the way up to Professor Longhair and even Fats Domino himself.

Starting with the very first track, aptly named 'Whirlaway', Toussaint and his band raise so much living hell on the fast numbers that it is a wonder how the allegedly flimsy walls of New Orleanian studios withstood all the waves of sonic pressure. It almost feels as if they are propelled by the sheer happiness of getting this chance to emerge from the shadow of Fats Domino as a frontman and develop their own grooves, instead of humbly supporting the Domino / Bartholomew pop melodies. But whatever it was that actually drove them forward, it is undeniable that 'Whirlaway', 'Tim Tam', and another half-dozen of these tunes present the fastest, craziest, most exuberant mix of R&B instrumental elements that could be heard coming from the American South around the late Fifties.

Although all of his band members get into the spirit of things with equal drive and defiance, Toussaint is undeniably situated at the very heart of the proceedings. At 20 years old, he was already an acknowledged competitor to Fats in terms of composing and playing — although it is usually thought that his chief inspiration was not so much the straightforwardly boogie-oriented Domino as the somewhat more laid-back and sophisticated Professor Longhair, from whom Allen had learnt some of his quirkier New Orleanian piano flourishes. However, Professor Longhair, as would befit a Professor, practiced more restraint and never let his hair down to the extent Toussaint did it (figuratively speaking, that is: after all,

the Professor was not called Longhair for nothing, whereas Toussaint's growth never went beyond short and well-trimmed curls).

And restraint is certainly not a word anybody would be tempted to use when talking about 'Whirlaway': Toussaint knows that the perfect way to handle a boogie number is to not let the listener hang loose for even one second. He has a speedy, breathless way of keeping the piano tense and running that probably does not resonate with the punkish fever of a Jerry Lee Lewis, but he also spends far less time banging his thumbs against the same two keys than Jerry does — a trick that might quickly get irritating if you did this twelve times in a row on an instrumental album. He does have his trademark tricks which crop up repeatedly, but this is more like a branding mechanism, so that you instantly recognize and attribute the sound, rather than a lack of playing ideas — and when he does begin to run out of ideas, he knows exactly where to cede the spotlight to the sax player for a few bars.

Not all of the album consists of fast boogie numbers, though. Some are relaxingly mid-tempo, including what is arguably the best-known composition here — 'Java', hilariously opening with a snippet of 'The ABC Song' and then quickly turning into one of the cheeriest, swaggiest sunny-day-walk-on-the-boardwalk anthems in the post-Scott Joplin era (there are multiple covers of this composition, but the spirit of the tune would perhaps be best conveyed in a brilliantly choreographed [Muppet Show](#) sketch). A few numbers even reluctantly agree to slow the tempo down to a crawl, like the blues shuffle 'Po' Boy Walk', with a stylistically outstanding «buzzing» electric guitar lead part for a change, or the half-country, half-gospel waltz 'Up The Creek', which ends up being the most soulful and anthemic of these numbers.

In fact, despite the similarity of arrangements and instrument mixing (responsible for the illusion of monotonousness), Toussaint runs through a pretty impressive set of styles: rock'n'roll ('Wham Tousan', 'Pelican Parade'), electric blues, country ('Nowhere To Go'), Ray Charles-style soul ('Happy Times'), top-hat vaudeville ('Me And You'), and straightforward Mardi Gras anthems that seem taken out of the Professor's textbook ('Bono'; 'Nashua', clearly derived from 'When The Saints Go Marching In').

There is even more diversity and even more curios to discover if you take into consideration the much later **Complete 'Tousan' Sessions** edition of the album (originally released in 1992 in Germany on the Bear Family label): I have not heard all the tracks from there, but the one I very vividly remember is 'Chico', a composition that wastes a bit more time than necessary on mariachi-style sax solos, but is distinguished with an awesomely unique «ringing doorbell» piano lick, the kind of which I do not think I have ever heard played — or, at least, played with such precision, clarity, and insistence —

by any other piano player on any other piano-based composition. Oh, and you will also have the chance to hear Allen play organ instead of piano on a couple of tracks, of which 'Sweetie Pie' is probably the catchiest and sweetest.

The conclusion is quite straightforward: **The Wild Sound Of New Orleans** is a wonderful record which, sadly, could not avoid falling through the cracks — as a «pop entertainment» album, it could never hope to be popular due to the lack of vocals, while for a «serious art» album, it was way too much oriented at the effect of pure body pleasure. It is possible that, with the New Orleanian music scene really blossoming back at the time, there have been other instrumental R&B albums similar in terms of mood and energy — and that I am only singling out this particular one because, in the end, its artist had the luck to immortalize himself with 'Fortune Teller' and 'Get Out Of My Life, Woman'. But this is not the kind of music, I think, of which you really need to own more than one complete LP, and one thing that I am practically sure of is that, at least as late as the late Fifties, no LP to come out of New Orleans could boast a wilder sound than this one.

