

“Fats” Domino Survived Hurricane Katrina and R&B Lives in PBS Specials

“I’m walkin’ to New Orleans. I’ve got no time for talkin’. I’ve got to keep on walkin’. New Orleans is my home...”
— Antoine “Fats” Domino, Imperial Records (1960)

By Richard G. Carter

In 1986, after more than three decades of turning out hit records, Antoine “Fats” Domino was among the first inductees into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. A vocal giant from the days of yore, the rotund Domino also was a boss-stride pianist with a bluesy, boogie-woogie style, unique singing accent, effervescent personality and camera-ready smile that endeared him to millions.

But for several days in September 2005, Fats’ friends and fans feared the worst. It appeared that we had lost this celebrated New Orleans native and long-time resident in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. And with the reopening of the Superdome for a nationally televised Monday-night football game on Sept. 25, 2006, his story is worth recalling.

At age 77, Fats had chosen to remain at

home with his family due to the ill health of his wife, Rosemary. As the devastating Katrina made landfall, his house in the heavily flooded Lower 9th Ward went under. On September 1, his agent said he had not heard from Fats since before the monster storm appeared.

Happily, CNN later that day reported that he had been rescued by a Coast Guard helicopter. Then Fats’ daughter—gospel singer Karen Domino White—identified him from a photo shown on television. Fats and his family were taken to a shelter in Baton Rouge and stayed in the apartment of JaMarcus Russell, the quarterback of Louisiana State University’s football team.

Fats returned to his waterlogged home to discover that it had been looted. Among missing items were 18 of his 21 Gold Records—each signifying a million



“Fats” Domino in 1973.

sales from his days as the best-selling black singer of the 1950s and ‘60s. And like the title of one of his biggest hits: “Ain’t That a Shame...”

Indeed, once Domino burst onto the black music scene in 1950 with “The Fat Man”—which gave him his nickname—“Goin’ Home,” “Every Night About This Time” and “Be My Guest,” he epitomized original black rhythm and blues, which evolved into rock ‘n’ roll and changed the world. His later success with the likes of “Blueberry Hill,” “Blue Monday,” “I’m Walkin’,” “Whole Lotta Lovin’;” “Yes It’s Me and I’m in Love Again” and “Walkin’ to New Orleans”—these were frosting on the cake.

After digesting TV reports of the bad and then good news about Fats’ fate in the hurricane, I breathed a sigh of relief. When I was a young reporter with the

Milwaukee Sentinel in 1965, the legendary singer gave me a memorable interview following his sold-out concert at the Eagles Club. As we sat side-by-side at the club’s bar, he sported his signature flat-top tight wavy hair style, a ring on every finger and he never stopped smiling.

And now, 40 years later, Fats’ close call in Hurricane Katrina reminded me of the music he helped popularize, which was the subject of two amazing late-1990s public television specials. These shows spotlighted the innovative, four- and five-part harmony of ‘50s and ‘60s vocal groups, as well as the role of black entrepreneurs.

Not to be confused with that era’s network rock ‘n’ roll TV series such as *American Bandstand*, *Hullabaloo* and *Shindig*—or the black-oriented *Soul Train*—the PBS specials were performance

documentaries called “Record Row: Cradle of Rhythm and Blues” and “Doo-Wop 50.”

I often show excerpts of both specials to my continuing-education classes at New York University. The adult students are enthralled, and they are amazed to learn that R&B’s golden era lasted only from 1953 to 1963. After that, many of the talented original artists fell by the wayside. But some of the survivors returned to glory on the PBS shows.

“Record Row,” broadcast in 1997, examined the ‘50s-’60s record company innovators who turned a 10-block section of South Michigan Ave. in Chicago into a microcosm of the most innovative American music this side of jazz.

Narrated by legendary R&B and jazz diva Etta James, the bittersweet “Record Row” documented the meteoric rise and fall of black- and white-owned R&B labels with names such as Chess, Vee-Jay, Brunswick and Chance. Along the way, song stylings of a host of fabulous artists were presented, including Ms. James, Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, the Moonglows, Spaniels, Dells, Jerry Butler, Curtis Mayfield, John Lee Hooker, Bo Diddley, Jimmy Reed, Major Lance and Howlin’ Wolf.

Aired in 1999, “Doo-Wop 50” honored the 50th anniversary of original black R&B. And it was the cat’s meow. A number of the surviving performers who ushered in the rock ‘n’ roll age gained new fans and recognition as a result.

“Doo-Wop 50” was hosted by Jerry Butler of the Impressions, whose sensational 1958 recording of “For Your Precious Love” introduced America to soul music. Millions of mature Americans who love original black R&B rejoiced at the chance to again see, and hear, the music of our youth. And younger people who

had heard the names of pioneering greats but never experienced the artistry, got the best kind of introduction imaginable.

In “Record Row,” a number of great performers were interviewed—along with visionary record-company moguls such as Marshall and Phil Chess (son and brother of the label’s founder Leonard Chess), Vee-Jay’s Ewart Abner, Dick Clark of *American Bandstand* and noted black musicologist/historian Portia Maultsby, of Indiana University.

“Record Row” also offered long-overdue insights into the disgusting rip-offs of young black artists back in the day by some record companies, and shed light on little-known or long-forgotten facts. This included the pivotal role of disk jockey Al Benson, of Chicago, in bringing urban blues and R&B to black people aching to hear their music on the radio.

In addition, viewers learned that Vee-Jay Records preceded Motown in the ‘50s as the first successful black-owned label, and was the first American company to record the Beatles and Four Seasons. Viewers also learned that bribing DJs to play certain records, a.k.a. payola, was an accepted way of doing business at the time.

Finally, the phenomena of “cover” records was discussed, whereby average white singers such as Pat Boone, the McGuire Sisters and the Crew Cuts made big bucks recording the work of superior black artists for white consumption.

Incredibly, some people still believe rock ‘n’ roll began with Elvis Presley and the Beatles. Such misinformation is mind-boggling. “Record Row” helped dispel these myths.

In “Doo-Wop 50”—a delightful evening of historic musical artistry performed live in Pittsburgh—PBS

tapped-into a priceless vein of Americana. Along the way, it doubtless attracted countless channel-surfing viewers who stopped, looked, listened and stayed.

The show opened with the Platters—led by diminutive bass man Herb Reed—doing their awesome version of “The Great Pretender.” Since I grew up hearing my late father sing bass in his church choir in Milwaukee, nothing could have been finer.

Although loving every aspect of the show, perhaps my favorite part was when Butler introduced the Marcells with bass man Fred Johnson doing their signature 1961 smash “Blue Moon.” Said Butler:

“Doo-Wop music has many great singers, but it was usually the bass man who kept the group in time. When singing on the street corners, if the bass man didn’t get it right, everybody else

was going to mess it up.”

To me, the best bass singer of all was the late Gerald Gregory of the Spaniels, whose booming first five notes on “Goodnight Sweetheart, Goodnight” (1954) introduced R&B to white America. Fittingly, the show ended with Butler’s moving introduction of lead singer-songwriter James (Pookie) Hudson, as the Spaniels performed their signature song.

In the 18 months since Hurricane Katrina, whenever I watch my tapes of these two specials, I think of Fats Domino. Indeed, without his dozens of R&B hits in the 1950s and ‘60s, the music may have died. But just as Fats survived the monster hurricane, original black R&B has survived five decades of changing music tastes. And it still sounds great.

Richard G. Carter is the author of “Goodnight Sweetheart, Goodnight: The Story of the Spaniels” (August Press-1995). He was a columnist and editorial writer with the *New York Daily News*, has appeared on *Larry King Live* and *The Phil Donahue Show* and co-hosted *Showdown* on CNBC with the late Morton Downey Jr. He was Vice President-Public Affairs with Group W Cable and in 1986 received the Marquette University By-Line Award for distinguished achievement in journalism.