

...and now, here's the fabulous fat man from New Orleans to close our show... Antoine 'Fats' Domino, singing 'So Long!'"
So spoke Alan Freed at the end of his show each night on New York radio station WINS, ten-ten on your dial.

FATS DOMINO

Billy Vera



Fats Domino, Imperial promo photo, mid 1950s. From the Billy Vera Collection.

How big was Fats Domino? Many years ago, in *Cashbox*, that bible of the record industry, back when it was still merely a cottage industry, I spotted a list of gold records, which were awarded to honour the sales of one million or more units. At the top of that list was Bing Crosby, with 28. Tying for second place were Elvis Presley and the Beatles, 22 each. Next – and I gasped upon seeing this name – was Fats Domino, with 18.

This meant that Fats had more hits than, not only any other 1950s rocker besides Elvis, but more than any black artist in history, up to that time. James Brown, of course, eventually surpassed that milestone.

For further perspective, of the others in the rock'n'roll triumvirate, Chuck Berry had 7 top ten pop hits, reaching that chart 27 times, and 12 top ten R&B hits, hitting that chart 23 times. Little Richard: 4 top tens out of 21 pop chart hits, 14 top ten R&B out of 23 chartings. Jerry Lee Lewis: a mere 3 pop top tenners out of 18 times on the list.

Fats once told me his label, Imperial, "was a three artist label," meaning sales of those three paid for the remaining bunch. Of those same three, Ricky Nelson went top ten pop 18 times out of 53 chart appearances. Slim Whitman, on the country charts, hit the top ten 10 times out of 37 chart appearances. He cracked the pop top ten once, with 'Indian Love Call,' memorialised years later, in the Jack Nicholson motion picture, 'Mars Attacks'.

So much for boring statistics. Of the big four, Domino, Richard, Chuck, and the Killer, only Fats was not mentally deranged. He was a pretty simple guy, no knives, razors or guns in his arsenal or outrageous egocentric demands. No tossing TVs out of hotel windows. He just went to work, sang and played his songs and went back home, where he lived in his old working class neighbourhood, the Lower Ninth Ward.

OK, he had a bit of a gambling problem, which resulted in his being forced to work Las Vegas for years to pay off his debts to the mob. And, like most New Orleanians, he drank a bit. But don't forget, Louisiana has the number one *per capita* incidence

of alcoholism in the United States. But all in all, of all the major rockers, he was the sane one, which I've always felt may have been why he hasn't been idolised the way the wackier ones have been by those who prefer their rockers to be 'rebels.' There's nothing rebellious about Fats for hormone-infused adolescents to emulate.

His sound is unique unto himself; he seems *sui generis*, despite a dialect that is not uncommon where he was raised. You'll hear no Baptist hollering in his singing; Fats, like most Louisiana Creoles, was raised Roman Catholic, so the Gregorian chant was the music he heard in church.

He spoke Creole French throughout most of his childhood and there's a gentleness in his vocal sound, similar to Nat Cole and Charles Brown. Even through the Ninth Ward Creole patois and mispronunciations, you can understand what he's saying. Like all the great stars, he makes you feel he is singing directly to you, rather than at you.

A music scholar can listen hard and pick up pieces of where Domino got this or that. He loved the boogies of the masters like Albert Ammons and Pete Johnson. There's a little Professor Longhair, a taste of Amos Milburn and some Champion Jack Dupree, whose 'Junker's Blues' was the blueprint for Fats's first hit, 'The Fat Man,' in 1949.

From his birth in New Orleans on 26th February 1928 to Antoine Caliste Domino and Marie-Donatille Gros, young Antoine Dominique Domino lived in the same neighbourhood until 2005, when Hurricane Katrina flooded him out.

Leaving school in fourth grade, he learned to play piano from his brother-in-law, jazz guitarist Harrison Verrett. By 1947, he had become a proficient boogie woogie player. With encouragement from the city's newly minted star, Paul Gayten, he began to make a small name for himself, enough to attract the attention of small time bandleader Billy Diamond, who hired him for his band, naming him Fats.

That same year, he married his one and only wife, Rosemary, whose name would figure in several song titles and who would bear him eight children.

By 1949 Domino was playing with a band of his own at the Hideaway Club, a downscale joint, and attracting a lot of attention from musicians and customers alike. Among his fans was disc jockey Vernon 'Dr. Daddy-O' Winslow, who plugged the club on the radio. From up the street at the Club Desire one night, bandleader Dave Bartholomew and Lew Chudd, owner of Imperial Records of Los Angeles, came in to see what the fuss was all about.

Imperial's early success was in the field of Mexican music. An Imperial artist named Lalo Guerrero became popular among LA's pachuko youth, with songs like 'Marijuana Boogie' and 'Chitas Patas Boogie,' a cover of



Fats Domino, 1957, Warner Brothers 'Jamboree' film promo photo. From the Billy Vera Collection.

Louis Prima's hit, 'Oh Babe,' combining boogies and paleo-R&B with the Mexican slang known as calo. Noting the rise of rhythm & blues, Chudd began to seek out talent in New Orleans, home of hit acts like Gayten and Roy Brown who, like Bartholomew, made records for DeLuxe Records.

Chudd hired Bartholomew to scout and record talent. They hit with Jewel King's '3 x 7 = 21'. Hearing Fats sing 'Junker's Blues' at the Hideaway sealed the deal and Chudd offered him a contract. After rewriting the lyric to eliminate the dope fiend references, the song became 'The Fat Man' and with Dave's band, Fats entered Cosimo Matassa's J&M Music Shop studio and made his first record.

Luckily for both Fats and Dave, Lew Chudd was a fair businessman, according to a woman whose job it was to write royalty checks, who told me her boss ordered her to pay artists to the penny and if there was an odd penny, to give it to the artist. This held true for the songwriting royalties as well, so their income as songwriters has been more than significant to this day.

'The Fat Man' reached number 2 on the R&B charts in 1950, starting off a string of hits that would continue for over a decade. The song reputedly sold over a million copies at a time when a typical number one hit would sell little more than a hundred thousand. 1952's 'Goin' Home' was his first number one and tunes like 'Goin' To The River' and 'Please Don't Leave Me' made him a star in black America. Even by New Orleans standards, his blues were more melodic than those of other singers; his melodies stuck in people's minds.

In 1952, after an argument with Chudd, Bartholomew began producing for other labels. For Aladdin, he made 'I'm Gone', a hit for two New Orleans teenagers called Shirley & Lee. Under his own name for King Records, he made a version of 'My Ding-a-Ling' that preceded that of Chuck Berry by two decades and, more importantly, for Specialty and with Fats playing piano, 'Lawdy Miss Clawdy' by Lloyd Price.

Specialty Records owner Art Rupe said his New Orleans distributor told him of black housekeepers purchasing two copies of the record, one for themselves and one for their employers' teenaged children, showing Rupe for the first time that there was a white teen market out there, just waiting for this kind of music with a danceable beat.

Not to be overlooked is the impact of his and Bartholomew's songwriting. Even prior to his rock'n'roll breakthrough to the mass public, his songs were being covered, notably, 'Goin' To The River' by Chuck Willis and 'All By Myself' by pop crooner Vaughn Monroe. Although his own records, like those of country star Hank Williams, were too rough around the edges for pop radio play, the songs were melodic enough for the ears of the mass public, especially when recorded in state-of-the-art studios by smoother-sounding vocalists. Still, Chudd was occasionally able to get Domino's versions onto certain pop stations, mainly in the South where his singing style was less alien than to the more 'sophisticated' ears in the Northeast.

Over time, Fats reorganised his band until it was considered by most to be the hottest in the country, with its line-up of saxophones and tight rhythm. It was said that only Sonny Thompson's band could compete in live performance.

By 1955, after half a decade as a headline rhythm and blues act, something was changing. The next generation of teens, the 'war babies,' born just before and during World War II, were gravitating toward a happy music they could dance to.



Fats Domino, Imperial promo photo, mid 1950s. From the Billy Vera Collection.



Label shots from the Billy Vera Collection and the B&R Archive

In July, Elvis Presley hit the country charts with 'Baby Let's Play House'. In August, Chuck Berry charted with 'Maybellene' and Little Richard did the same in November with 'Tutti Frutti'. But before these three, Fats Domino crossed over in May, becoming the first star of the new idiom with 'Ain't It A Shame'.

By July, a handsome white singer from Jacksonville, Florida named Pat Boone topped the pop charts with his mellow approach to the song. Yet Fats' version also made the pop top ten, a strong indication that something was in the wind, something authentic that appealed to the raging hormones of these war babies.

While his next two records, 'All By Myself' and 'Poor Me', topped the R&B charts, they failed to cross over to pop. 'Bo Weevil' did at number 35, grabbing a hit cover version by Teresa Brewer.

Then in the spring of 1956, as rock'n'roll was starting to alter the popular music landscape, Fats had his first two-sided smash, the self-penned 'I'm In Love Again' (number 3 pop, number 1 R&B), the Fontane Sisters' version only reaching number 38, revealing that the kids were beginning to buy the record, rather than the song.



Fats Domino, Hammersmith Odeon, 20th April 1981. Photo: Paul Harris.

The record's flip side marked Domino's first attempt at doing a song from the Great American Songbook, 'My Blue Heaven', a number 1 hit in 1927 by both Gene Austin and Paul Whiteman. This was the same tactic taken by Louis Armstrong in 1929 when he began recording pop material like 'Ain't Misbehavin'' and 'Memories Of You'. In both cases the audiences of each artist were broadened considerably.

This method would reach its zenith later that year with 'Blueberry Hill', which stayed at number one for eleven solid weeks, selling several million copies, remaining the biggest record of his career. In December, the third in his 'blue' trilogy, 'Blue Monday', originally recorded by Imperial act, Smiley Lewis, also hit number 1 on the rhythm and blues charts.

Lest we think that Fats was consistently in the top ten, there were the occasional misses, even with good records like 'What's The Reason I'm Not Pleasing You' and 'What Will I Tell My Heart', as well as dogs like 'The Rooster Song'.

But he returned to form with one written by Dave and himself, 'I'm Walkin'' (pop number 4, R&B number 1). With his beautiful smile and unique look, Fats was a natural for the movies as well as the small screen. He appeared in 'Shake, Rattle & Rock' and with Jayne Mansfield in 'The Girl Can't Help It'. He was scheduled to sing the title song of the latter film, but Specialty's Art Rupe convinced the producers that Little Richard would be the better choice.

Television beckoned, Dick Clark's 'American Bandstand' and 'The Ed Sullivan Show'. My mother, who was a background singer with Perry Como, got me Fats' autograph when the Fat Man appeared on Como's show. I was a huge fan. The first time I ever went to a record store with my own money at twelve years old, I bought 'Blueberry Hill' that day.

Rock'n'roll fans were a rambunctious bunch and brawls and even riots often broke out at shows and dances. Juvenile delinquents with switchblade knives, chains, and zip guns went wild, giving the music a bad name. But, as rock'n'roll climbed up the socioeconomic ladder, it became less dangerous.

The biggest 'danger', in the eyes of adults, was that the music caused white, black and Hispanic kids to gather together in theaters and at dances, mixing the races in a way that made the grownups nervous.

Yet, as with his New Orleans homeboy, Armstrong, Fats was beloved by all, many of his records appealing to older lovers of popular music in the same way Satchmo's did.

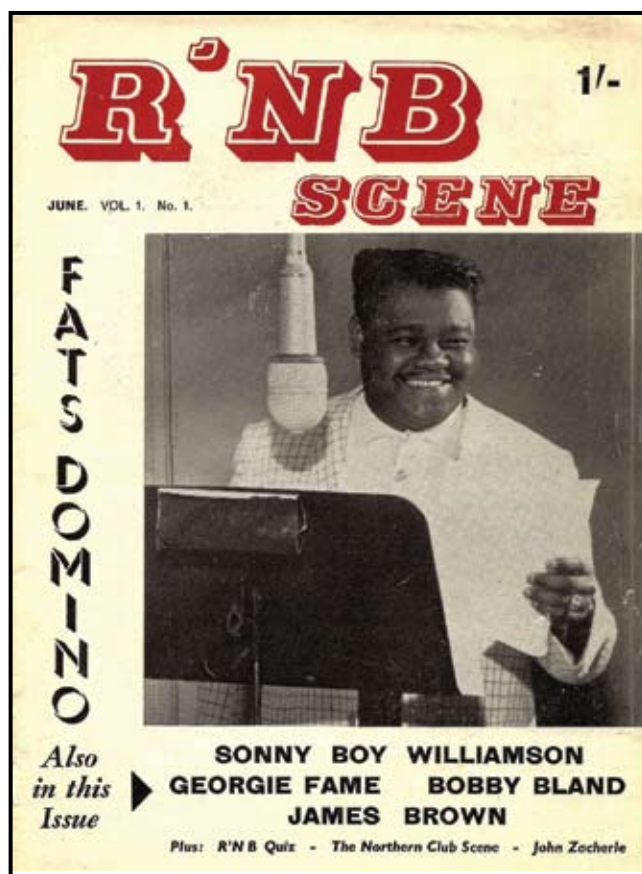
More Fats classics, like 'Whole Lotta Loving', 'I'm Ready', 'Be My Guest', 'My Girl Josephine', 'Let The Four Winds Blow' and his tribute to his hometown, 'Walking To New Orleans', came, one after another, cementing his name in the history books into the early '60s, when soul music became the sound of the day. The public no longer was looking for a simple song sung simply and sincerely, with a good beat. He still made the pop charts, but his black audience abandoned him.

Lew Chudd saw the writing on the wall in 1963. Sales were slowing down for his two top acts, Ricky and Fats, so he sold the company. Ricky (now Rick) Nelson, signed with Decca for a huge advance, and ABC-Paramount, hoping to duplicate their success with Ray Charles and Lloyd Price, contracted Fats.

Seeing Ray's success doing country songs, the company assigned Felton Jarvis to produce and Bill Justis to arrange Fats in Nashville, which was a mistake, as they failed to either capture the artist's essence or take him in a newer, commercial direction. Six of the singles charted, but only made the lower reaches of the best seller list. A brief association with Mercury resulted in a fairly decent live album and a couple of singles that sold no better than the label did with Chuck Berry. One single for Dave Bartholomew's Broadmoor label reeked of desperation.

After the Beatles' public recognition of Fats as an influence, producer Richard Perry convinced Reprise to let him have a shot at reviving the fat man's career in 1968. The result was a very good album, 'Fats Is Back', off of which came a tune Paul McCartney wrote in homage to Fats, 'Lady Madonna', which scraped the bottom of the pop charts.

One of the great thrills of my life was when Fats covered Chip Taylor's and my song, 'Make Me Belong To You', previously a hit for Barbara Lewis. It was released both on the Reprise album and as a single. A few years later, when I was introduced to the great man at a 1973 oldies show we were both appearing on, he sang it for me.



Courtesy Byron Foulger.

And that was about it for Fats and the charts, other than one last time at the middle of the country charts with 'Whiskey Heaven', which he sang in the Clint Eastwood film, 'Any Which Way You Can', in 1980.

In the subsequent years, he was inducted into the Rock'n'Roll Hall of Fame and received any number of awards and honours, including, when I was on the board of directors of the Rhythm & Blues Foundation, when we honoured him.

In 2005 tragedy was averted when Fats and his family were rescued during Hurricane Katrina by the Coast Guard. His home was flooded and his belongings ruined. His house was repaired and he bought a second residence in the suburbs. Capitol Records, which now owned his Imperial masters, replaced his gold records.

Although his and Bartholomew's songs have been recorded by countless artists, from rock to country to punk and traditional pop performers, it's hard to call an artist as unique as Fats Domino, an influence in the strict sense. Other than a few swamp pop singers, like Joe Barry, Rod Bernard, Bobby Charles or Jimmy Clanton, or Crescent City locals like Frogman Henry, not that many mainstream acts can claim him as a direct influence. And yet, as much as anyone you can name, Fats Domino is a founding father of this music that has lasted more than sixty years.

Antoine 'Fats' Domino died on 24th October 2017