

Antoine "Fats" Domino, 1928-2017: Michael's Rock and Roll Posse

Most folks who follow the history of rock and roll consider Fats Domino's 1949 single "The Fat Man" to be the first rock and roll song. To place this in perspective, the record was issued two years before I was born, and had sold over a million copies by 1951. He released "Ain't That a Shame" in 1955, "Blueberry Hill" in 1956 and before the decade was out, he sang "When My Dreamboat Comes Home," "I'm Walkin,'" "Valley of Tears," "It's You I Love,' "Whole Lotta Loving," "I Want to Walk You Home," and "Be My Guest," as well as hundreds more singles and albums. He toured and performed all the years until 1996, and the sporadically after Hurricane Katrina, when he was airlifted off the roof of his New Orleans home. He died this week at 89, leaving Little Richard as the last original progenitor of rock and roll, by way of New Orleans honkytonk piano music and rhythm and blues.

In my mind, I have rehearsed the obituaries of Fats, Little Richard, and Chuck Berry for many years, and this is a sad event. It would take too much time in the semester to list all his accomplishments and honors, so I will honor him by recounting the one time I saw him play. In the late 1970's, when I was on the staff of a research institute at Howard University, word spread like wildfire that Fats was in the house, visiting a friend at the Van Ness campus of Howard. Of course, I

broke my neck to see him, and was able to wangle a ticket for a performance that night at a small DC nightclub, a performance that was, for some reason, flying under the radar, unannounced. Well, it made no difference, as hundreds of his fans showed up. Inasmuch as I had a ticket, I was allowed into a firetrap of a club along 14th Street, and held my breath due to the smoke. He played for less than an hour, with little patter, and ran through all his 1950's vintage songs. Even with the weeknight din and the choking cigarette smoke, it was among the most memorable concerts of my over 650 events. I had muscle memory on almost all the hits, and remember him being perched on the piano stool about to fall off, just like he had appeared when I was a boy, on the Ed Sullivan Show. Even though he was in his early fifties, he had a smooth and round and youthful face, and I was only about 20 feet from him.

I never saw him play again in person, although I saw several feature and documentary films in which he appeared, and he played such venues and the larger ones for another twenty years. His hometown is on the academic conference circuit, and I sought him out every time I was in the vicinity, but never lucked upon him again.

The outpouring of grief following his death was impressive, and many people who had heard about his burro-from-the-Grand-Canyon aerial rescue was recalled by most. My own way of mourning is by communicating my impressions

with member of my Posse, so is muted, but this was a profound loss to all of us who love the genre of music to which he gave birth. After recent hurricanes and storm damage, it seems strangely appropriate that he died soon after Hurricane Harvey.

Of course, I have been playing all the old hits, not one of which ever hit No. 1 on the pop or rock charts, but that metric somehow seems unimportant. Elvis, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and other giants all sat in the same smoke as I had, breathed it as they listened to his primordial rolling piano, and were influenced by the Fat Man.

I have seen many articles and old archival pieces, and will read and savor them with his greatest hits playing. I suggest the following, as a small smattering. You can all go to YouTube and other sources, and find his work around the clock.

<https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/fats-domino-the-man-who-sang-rock-before-haley> (*Record Mirror*, 12 January 1963)

<https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/interview-fats-domino-november-9-1978-palumbos-restaurant-philadelphia-pa-2> (*unpublished*, 9 November 1978)

<https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/fats-domino-> (*Vintage Rock*,
Spring 2013)

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/postscript/the-inescapable-fats-domino> (*New
Yorker*, 2017)

<https://nyti.ms/2h9venP> (*NY Times*, 2017)

[http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/fats-domino-12-essential-songs-
w510144?utm_source=email](http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/fats-domino-12-essential-songs-w510144?utm_source=email) (*Rolling Stone*, 2017)

Fame is fleeting, but Fats' life was anything but.