

Irma Thomas

It is difficult to believe that 2009 marked the 50th anniversary of Irma Thomas's first recording session. She remains one of America's most distinctive and classic singers, a treasure from the golden age of soul music who remains as compelling and powerful as ever. As Don McLeese wrote in his review of her Grammy®-winning 2006 album, *After the Rain*, "Most singers who have been recording as long as Thomas resort to tricks, mannerisms, and show-off displays, but she remains the anti-diva, a stylist of exquisite understatement whose every note rings true and hits home."

Irma first achieved prominence with a string of 1960s hits such as "Time Is On My Side," (later covered by the Rolling Stones), "It's Raining" and "Wish Someone Would Care." She toured extensively across the South with her band, The Toronados. Yet, her life has not been without its share of hardship and challenge. Pregnant at age 15, she was forced by her father into what she calls a "shotgun marriage." After the devastating effects of Hurricane Camille in 1969, when she was a single mother with four children to support, she moved her family to Los Angeles and worked for a time at a Montgomery Ward store, recording and performing only intermittently.

Upon returning to Louisiana in the 1970s, she slowly rebuilt her reputation as The Soul Queen of New Orleans, signing with Rounder in 1986. In 2005, while she was working in Austin, Texas, Hurricane Katrina flooded her home and destroyed all her possessions, along with her nightclub, The Lion's Den. Now, she and her husband, Emile Jackson, have rebuilt their home (she may have been one of the few who had flood insurance!). In the wake of the tragedy and loss that Katrina brought, her career has enjoyed an unprecedented upswing.

After The Rain, recorded in rural Maurice, Louisiana only weeks after Katrina, won Irma her first Grammy® (as well as a Blues Music Award for Soul-Blues Album of the Year and many other accolades). Last year's *Simply Grand* won a Grammy® nomination, as well as another Soul-Blues Album of the year award. Irma had previously garnered Grammy® nominations for her live album, *Simply the Best!*, and her collaboration with Marcia Ball and Tracy Nelson, *Sing It!*, both on Rounder. Many career highlights have followed her Grammy® triumph, including her appearance with Stevie Wonder at the 2008 New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and her recent appearance on ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. In 2009, she was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame.

There are many other bright sides to Irma's story. After she graduated from Delgado College in 2001 at the age of 61, the school initiated the Irma Thomas Wise Women Center. "We provide counseling to young women, and the occasional young man, who may be unsure of the possibilities of furthering their educations," she explained. "We provide encouragement, and I share my own struggles."

Rounder Records celebrates this remarkable milestone in Irma Thomas's career with the release of *The Soul Queen of New Orleans: 50th Anniversary Celebration*, which features 3 new songs, 9 highlights from her Rounder catalog, and 3 tracks recorded as a guest for special projects on other labels.

For the first time since 1990's live album, Irma and producer Scott Billington chose to record with her working band, The Professionals, a group of New Orleans R&B veterans (who might have a lesson or two for younger neo-soul musicians to learn!). The three new tracks include the uptempo "Got To Bring it With You" (co-written by Fabulous Thunderbirds frontman Kim Wilson), and the newly-written but ever so classic soul ballad, "Let It Be Me." Irma and her longtime keyboard player Warner Williams co-wrote a new blues, "Your Ship Has Sailed." These songs showcase Irma in her classic element, with no click tracks, auto-tuning or other studio tricks. Nobody does it better.

Other highlights include her joyful interpretation of Dan Penn's "I'm Your Puppet" (from her Rounder album *My Heart's in Memphis*), and her deep reading of the Tom Jans song "Loving Arms," originally released on the *I Believe To My Soul* collection on the Hear Music label. A more obscure track is "There Must Be a Better World Somewhere," recorded as part of a tribute album to the great songwriter Doc Pomus on Rhino Records.

This album also marks the 25th year that Irma and Rounder VP of A&R have worked together, an artist/producer partnership that must be something of an industry record. Says Scott Billington, "It's been a great privilege to work with Irma as we imagine each new recording, and to help her find the right songs. I think we've discovered quite a few good ones over the years, and it's always a thrill to hear her transform each song."

Irma summed up her career in a conversation with New Orleans writer Jeff Hannusch, "I really haven't thought a lot about being in show business that long because I'm having so much fun right now. Recently, I've gotten a lot of acclaim and it's all humbling. The Grammy® award was especially prestigious, but I'm truly honored and humbled by them all. I might slow up a bit in the future, but I don't ever foresee retirement. I know 50 years is a long time, but when you're doing something you really love, you don't think about the years."

The Blind Boys of Alabama

The Blind Boys of Alabama are recognized worldwide as living legends of gospel music. Celebrated by The National Endowment for the Arts and the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences with Lifetime Achievement Awards, inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame, and winners of five Grammy® Awards, they have attained the highest levels of achievement in a career that spans over 70 years and shows no signs of diminishing.

Longevity and major awards aside, The Blind Boys have earned praise for their remarkable interpretations of everything from traditional gospel favorites to contemporary spiritual material by acclaimed songwriters such as Curtis Mayfield, Ben Harper, Eric Clapton, Prince and Tom Waits. Their performances have been experienced by millions on *The Tonight Show*, *Late Night with David Letterman*, the Grammy® Awards telecast, *60 Minutes*, and on their own holiday PBS Special. The Blind Boys' live shows are roof-raising musical events that appeal to audiences of all cultures, as evidenced by an international itinerary that has taken them to virtually every continent.

The Blind Boys of Alabama met at the Alabama Institute for the Negro Blind in 1939, and left there to 'turn pro' in 1944. Their recorded output, reaching back to 1948 with their hit "I Can See Everybody's Mother But Mine" on the Veejay label, is widely recognized as being influential for many gospel, R&B and rock 'n' roll artists. The group toiled for almost 40 years almost exclusively on the black gospel circuit, playing in churches, auditoriums, and even stadiums across the country.

The Blind Boys had their own chance to "crossover" to popular music in the 1950's, along with their gospel friend and contemporary Sam Cooke, but stayed true to their calling. In the 1960's, they joined the Civil Rights movement, performing at benefits for Dr. Martin Luther King. They toiled in the vineyards all through the 1970's as the world of popular music began to pass them by. But in 1983, their career reached a turning point with their crucial role in the smash hit and Obie Award-winning play "The Gospel at Colonus," which brought the Blind Boys timeless sound to an enthusiastic new audience. In the 1990's they received two Grammy nominations and performed at the White House.

In recent years the Blind Boys' musical brethren have paid homage to their legacy and their continued relevance by asking them to contribute and collaborate on new projects. The Blind Boys have appeared on recordings with Bonnie Raitt, Ben Harper, k.d. lang, Lou Reed, Peter Gabriel, Susan Tedeschi, Solomon Burke, and many others. The Blind Boys of Alabama have profoundly influenced an entire generation (or two) of gospel, soul, R&B and rock musicians and are still blazing trails after all these years.

With as much momentum as the Blind Boys have gathered in the last several years, there is no chance of slowing them down. As long as they are called to, they will continue to create uplifting music for their fans and inspire new generations of musicians.

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