

Allen Toussaint, Brecon Jazz Festival, review

By Martin Chilton

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Allen Toussaint was standing looking at the trees after his stunning concert at the Brecon Jazz Festival.

"This is such a beautiful part of the world. I've already composed two songs while I have been in Brecon," he said.

Wales should be honoured and will be in for a lyrical treat because New Orleans-born Toussaint is one of the greatest living songwriters.

The 73-year-old showed off some of his vast and awesome back catalogue in a concert that earned two standing ovations as the headline act of the 2011 festival.

He's a world class act in so many ways. As a writer, a singer, arranger and pianist - and for a naturally quiet and reserved man he is a born showman and droll wisecracker.

Brecon knew it was in for a good night when he turned up on stage in a dazzling red and gold sparkling suit that matched the Mardi Gras mask perched on his Steinway grand piano. There were asides galore in an extended 100-minute set. He opened by turning to the seats to his right saying: "I'd like to pay special tribute to a group of wonderful people who are going to see the back of my head all night."

He glided through a medley of early hits that included *A Certain Girl/Fortune Teller/Play Something Sweet (Brickyard Blues)/Working In The Coalmine* before doing a fine version of *Sneakin' Sally Through The Alley*.

Toussaint's songs have been recorded by artists for the past 40 years including Lee Dorsey, The Rolling Stones, The Neville Brothers, Frankie Miller, Robert Palmer, Lowell George, Otis Redding, Dr John, Irma Thomas and Elvis Costello - and hundreds more.

Toussaint was keen to pay tribute to the performers who have made his songs so well known. *Fortune Teller* was covered by the Rolling Stones and Toussaint joked: "I was so

glad when the Stones recorded my song - I knew they would know how to roll it all the way to the bank."

He did an instrumental from his recent album *Bright Mississippi* - produced by Joe Henry - and a vibrant *Everything I Do Now (Gonna Be Funky)*. "I still call them albums. If there are any Britney Spears fans here who buy CDs, then I'm sorry."

One of the more improvisational elements of the concert was an extended instrumental, with playful classical, blues, jazz and show tunes thrown in - even a bit of *Roll Out The Barrel* - sometimes in the mock style of a cocktail pianist but all with the rolling New Orleans piano style he excels at. There was a serious point to it. Toussaint talked about what had happened to him post-Katrina, where he had been forced to leave New Orleans. "Hurricane Katrina forced me out of my comfort zone. I had to go out on the road and do concerts - I even had to do interviews. Before that I had spent most of my life in studios waiting for the red light to come on. Now I'm taking New Orleans with me wherever I go."

The finale of the set was a touching version of *All Of These Things*, which he had written for Aaron Neville, followed by a boisterous version of *Here Come The Girls*, which went back into the charts in 2007 - 37 years after Ernie K Doe recorded it - when Boots used it as a Christmas commercial. "I thought that song was laid up for dead," Toussaint joked. "Thank God for adverts."

He was given two standing ovations - coming on to do an encore of *Tipitina* - before handing over his Mardi Gras mask (in gold and red colours to match his outfit) to a lady in the audience.

Toussaint's act had also included an unexpected song in tribute to Brecon. Although he had joked "I have no idea where I am" he turned himself into perhaps the most charismatic walking advertising board Brecon and the Welsh tourist board could have wished for.

*"I'm blessed as a guest of the best,
and greatest green I've ever seen
when you get me day dreaming
with a smile on my face
I reckon, I'm in Brecon."*

Given that this is the man who wrote the beautiful song *Southern Nights* - in tribute to the times he had spent in the American south with his family looking at the moonlight dancing on the leaves of the trees - this was high praise. He gave a wonderful monologue about his boyhood memories of those times.

After the show, I asked him about his first trip to the Brecon Jazz Festival.

"As we drove up from Heathrow, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It's just so beautiful. I have a lot more verses to the song I ad-libbed. I've already been inspired to write a couple of songs while I've been here. I can't get over what it's like here. I can't believe you could get angry here."

Toussaint, who normally performs with a quintet that includes his son, says he is a compulsive scribbler, constantly jotting notes down on scraps of paper. He talked about New Orleans jazz post-Katrina, Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet and Ben Webster and Dave Bartholomew ("he's still performing at the age of 90"), and the benefits of the HBO series *Treme*, whose wonderful soundtrack features Toussaint.

He was also fulsome in his praise of fellow songwriter Randy Newman. "What a great songwriter. Such an intellect and he makes complicated songs so simple - and who else would think about writing a jokey song about the young Stalin?"

And what about giving away the Mardi Gras mask at the concert?

"I only give away one now. I used to love wandering in the crowd and giving away masks. I thought well if I was in the audience, I would want a mask but my manager limits it to one now - he says it detracts from the music."

Nothing detracts from music as good as Toussaint's. Brecon was treated to a world-class performer and showman. And now they will have songs to prove it.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/brecon-jazz-festival/8700681/Allen-Toussaint-Brecon-Jazz-Festival-review.html>