

“Tipitina”--Professor Longhair (1953)

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Essay by Per Oldaeus (guest post)*



Professor Longhair

During a couple of unusually warm, early autumn days in 1975, Professor Longhair played a series of gigs in Stockholm, the Swedish capital. It was the very first time “Fess” (his nickname) appeared in Scandinavia. He was still relatively unknown in Europe, hence, the first shows were sparsely attended. The concert hall, a pub and restaurant, boasted a striking view of Stockholm's oldest district and harbor. During the concerts, a newly released Atlantic compilation with older Fess wax was for sale. One of the 13 tracks on the album was a previously unreleased, second take of the song “Tipitina.”

Years prior, the founders of the Atlantic record company, Ahmet Ertegun and Herb Abramson, had to search for Professor Longhair in New Orleans in 1949 for a record deal. They took a ferry across the Mississippi River to Algiers, where they jumped in a taxi driven by a racist white cab driver. Finally ending up at some kind of nightclub, or rather a shed, situated, possibly in Gretna, Louisiana, in a room packed with dancing black guys, Fess played all alone. He accentuated the rhythm with his right foot on a bass drum, placed close to the piano pedals. Caucasians was denied entry. To be admitted, Ertegun came up with an emergency lie—“We work for ‘Life’ magazine.”

Fess was 35 years old in November 1953 when “Tipitina” was cut by the Atlantic record company of NYC--a couple of months after the end of the Korean War. It was the very first recording of the song that would become one of his most iconic items. Henry Roeland Byrd, Fess' christening name, arrived without any song material at the Cosimo Matassa, J&M Studio. It was small and quite primitive, situated on the ground floor in a building in the African American part of the French Quarter. A record store with entrance to North Rampart Street, was also located in the building. Mac (“Dr. John”) Rebennack and Ahmet Ertegun are said to have helped to improve the song draft that would become “Tipitina.” Smiley Lewis' popular song “Tee-Nah-Nah,” waxed in 1950, in the same studio, served as an inspiration. The 78 rpm disc with “Tipitina” was billed as: “Professor Longhair & His Blues Scholars, with the song composed by Byrd-Matassa.” In a newspaper interview, Fess once had read about an exploding volcano called “Tipitina,” or something similar, hence giving the song its title. Yet, this story is unconfirmed.

The song is an eight-bar chord change blues progression, the lyrics are a pasted together, phonetic concoction of words:

*Tipitina tra la la la
Whoa la la la-ah tra la la
Tipitina, oola malla walla dalla
Tra ma tra la la
Hey Loberta, oh Loberta
Girl you hear me calling you*

In March 1954, “Tipitina” climbed to number two on the local R&B charts. During a visit to a dance gig where Fess played the song, Mac Rebennack made the following observation: “You’d see some people dancing slow to it, you’d see some people dancing to a straight meter to it, you’d see some people dancing to a double time meter to it ‘cause you could feel all three rhythms all the time.” Crescent City blues pianists had a penchant for the eight-bar blues form. Fess’ old friend, Champion Jack Dupree and his “Junker’s Blues,” waxed in 1941, is a well-known example. Fats Domino cut a remake of this eight-bar blues, “The Fat Man,” which became his first hit.

Fess was a so-called “street wise” person without any knowledge of music theory. In his personal and very powerful piano playing, “the New Orleans parade thing” is often prominent. (It’s a rhythmic pattern played by the city’s many brass band.)

The great pianist and composer, “Fess disciple” and so forth, Allen Toussaint (1938-2015), paid attention to Fess’ unusual vocal efforts, his octave jumps on one whirl, an original form of yodeling, and of course there is the matter of his unique piano playing.

For Rebennack, the first take of “Tipitina” was superior to the second take, released in 1972 on the Atlantic LP “Professor Longhair: New Orleans Piano.” (Today, the first take is widely available on various CD editions.) The musicians who played on 1953 session were Lee Allen, tenor saxophone; Alvin “Red” Tyler, baritone saxophone; Fess, piano and vocals; Frank Fields, upright bass; and Earl Palmer, a future drum legend. They all belonged to the city’s “studio clique,” and they were educated and very skilled musicians. Palmer’s intricate drumming contributes a lot to the track. No cymbals are heard, only bass drum and snare drum, with snares off. The drum skins of that time were made of animal skins, resulting in a soft and organic drum sound. (Cosimo Matassa stated that it was much harder to record drums with plastic skins.)

In 2014, a fascinating solo version of “Tipitina” suddenly became available on the record market. The origin of this demo track from the late 1950s, early 1960s, is New Orleans’ RON & RIC label. A small record company, responsible for some of Fess’ most memorable recordings, waxed it in 1959, it was produced by Mac Rebennack.

Per Oldaeus, born in 1946, is a Swedish drummer and researcher, mainly on various New Orleans musicians. It’s a city he first visited in 1966. But Oldaeus’ taste in music covers a large spectrum of mainly black music.

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