

Rufus Thomas: Here's What It Was

By Dan McCue

Born and raised (and still residing in Memphis, Tennessee, where he's regarded as one of the founding fathers of the city's rhythm and blues scene, Rufus Thomas' career extends back nearly as far as the start of the rock and roll era itself.

He launched his recording career in the 1950 with a song called "Bear Cat," an answer to Big Mama Thornton's "Hound Dog," a song later dramatically reworked by Elvis Presley.

Thomas' record was the first moneymaking release for Sun Records, the label that would not only serve as Presley's launching pad, but be the early recording home of Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, and Roy Orbison as well.

Ten years later, he would pull off the same feat at the newly formed Stax Records, after he convinced the label to cut a duet by him and his teenaged daughter, Carla. The song was "Cause I Love You," and in 1960, it was a certified smash.

While Stax continued to churn out hits through the rest of the 1960s with a stable of acts that included Otis Redding, Eddie Floyd, and Sam and Dave, among others, Thomas pursued his own muse, creating a niche with a string of grooving dance tunes – "The Funky Chicken" and "Do The Push Pull," among them – and a gift for showmanship that included his performing in hot pants and a cap.

His act is widely credited with having a profound effect on at least one British teenager, Mick Jagger, whose Rolling Stones covered Thomas' "Walking The Dog" on their stateside debut.

Since appearing on HBO as a part of the Atlantic Records' 40th Anniversary special, Rufus Thomas has embarked on an international tour, Thomas has embarked on an international tour with the reconstituted Blues Brothers band, continued his ever-growing string of one night shows throughout the southeast, and released his first album in years, *That Woman is Poison*, a traditional blues release that he recorded in Florida in 1988.

This encounter finds Thomas in his usual energetic form, a rhythm and blues legend and showman, even when sitting still for a conversation.

You've done so many things, it's hard to know what to ask you first, but I suppose I'll start with the Atlantic Records anniversary show, which featured a much anticipated reunion of Led Zeppelin. You directly preceded them onstage. What was that like?

Well, you see, here's what it was: I didn't even know it was going to happen. The people running the show told me I might have a chance to go on, but I didn't have any idea that I was really going to make it; I was just waiting around in my costume, just in case...

Do you still wear the costumes, the hot pants and the cape?

Oh absolutely. That's for eternity...

So you were hanging around back stage in your cap and hot pants...

Now, what happened was, I was backstage in the dressing room area talking with Ruth Brown and my daughter Carla and that girls that signs with Peabo Bryson and this guy comes up to me and says, 'Rufus, you're on.' Just like that.

It was only later that I found out they had set up for Zeppelin and just slipped me in right ahead of them, but even if I had known, it wouldn't have bothered me. Nobody excites Rufus Thomas, not Led Zeppelin, not Michael Jackson, any name that you can call doesn't bother me because wherever I am, wherever they put me on a show, in front or behind anybody living, I will get my share of the audience. And I did. I made Playboy and People magazine, and I didn't need but just that one song ("Walking The Dog)."

A similar situation happened to me one time in Houston. There were a number of acts on the same bill and the promoter came to me and said, 'I'm sorry, but the show is running long. We only have time for you to do one song.' I said, I don't need but one and I did "breakdown." I just jumped on that audience in the time I had and we went together.

Tell me about That Woman is Poison. How did the album come about?

Well, I had been wanting to do a blues album for some time. All I needed was a push. What actually happened was a bass player I knew also knew Bob Greenlee of King Snake Records, and he had told Greenlee about me. At the time, I was doing all the other songs, the novelty and dance numbers, live, but Greenlee found out that I also sing the blues and he gave me a call and that was it. You see, the blues was my foundation. I was doing blues long before I did all the other records.

The band on the record is terrific...

Well, I have to confess, it's not my band. They were all musicians who were already working together down in Florida when I arrived to do the record. Bob Greenlee got them together. Bob, incidentally, is quite a musician himself; he plays bass. In fact, he's playing bass on "The Walk". He's a super bass player. Easy. You'll notice how easy. The bass line on there is driving and yet it's not a hard bass line> It's a super line, and actually, it's not new – I had used it once back in the 1950s. The blues are always the same.

Did you have all the material for this album written before the sessions?

Some of them. "Night Working Blues," that one was written in the early 1940s, and "Big Fine Hunk of Woman," was written in the 1950s. And "Blues in the Basement," that song probably goes back about 10 years.

So, how do you go about writing songs? When you sit down to write, what do you do?

Well, first, I've never been someone who actually sits down to write a song. What happens, generally speaking, is this: if I'm out riding along in a car or on a light to someplace and an idea comes to me, I write the idea down as soon as possible, or else I lose it; then, when I get where I'm going, I have someone do the melody around the idea. That's why it was so convenient for me at Stax, I'd get an idea and I'd go right down to the studio and we'd put it on tape.

Is it the same way with blues?

Oh, the blues just come natural. It's even easier than what I just described.

So how did you start doing the dance records way back when?

The dances? Well, if the dances themselves hadn't come along, I never would have done it; I didn't create the dances, but I did create the songs.

Was it a case of seeing something new on a dance floor somewhere and then writing something to it, so to speak?

No. I tell you, nothing is planned. The way "walking The Dog" came about was I was working in a club and we were doing a song. We had a nice little rhythm going and I had just opened up my mouth and started to sing, but I couldn't think of but three dogs, a bird dog, a hound dog and a bull dog. So I said, "Just any kind of dog, just do the dog." (laughs) That's how that came about.

"The Funky Chicken" came about in a similar fashion. I had been trying to write a song because the dance had come along, but I just couldn't figure out what to use to rhyme with chicken. "How can you get a song out of this?" I asked myself. "How do you do it?"

And I was working in a club in Covington, Tennessee and it just came. I was doing something with a beat and it just came out, "Put your left arm up and your right arm too, let me tell you what to do. You flap your arms and your feet start kickin' then you know you're doing the Funky Chicken."

Two of three versus came just like that and that was it. A number of the other songs, like "Push and Pull" and "Breakdown" were written in the studio, on potato sack paper, brown paper.

Does Gospel figure among your influences?

Not quite, but I am a lover. I'm not a lover of contemporary gospel, but I am of the basis gospel; groups like the Soul Stirrers, the Five Blind Boys, all along that route. That's where I am. Those are my roots. Because if there hadn't been gospel, there wouldn't be no blues. Gospel was it, where it all came from, although they run kind of parallel today.

Back when I was growing up, gospel is what you sang to help get you say from the blues if you happened to have them one day.

I heard somewhere that besides music, as a child you also were exposed to theatre. How did that come about?

That goes back to my earliest days on stage, back to Booker T. Washington High School, under the direction of Matt D. Williams. We did plays and musicals – what we called our "ballets." And I was a tap dancer. I was also the one who would teach the chorus line the high kicks and all that stuff. I've done it all.

Was there any point where you thought you might be an actor?

I just wanted to be an entertainer. That was my aspiration. I set out to be the world's greatest... and I'm very close to it. I think, anyway (laughs).

But before you became known as a stage personality, you were a disc jockey, weren't you?

Yes, I was, and I think that my radio career stems directly from the things I was doing on stage in high school. I was already a personality before radio and that's how I got the job.

And was it your work as a disc jockey that first led to your association with Sun Records?

Uh, yeah. Well, see, I was told about Sun... there were a lot of blacks around [Sun Records founder] Sam Phillips at the time and I just went down there to check it out. I was the first person to make money for Sam Phillips on Sun, with "Bear Cat," and then after Elvis and all of them came along, Sam dropped all of the Black artists. I mean, just like, "Pow," and he never looked back and I feel like he should have. It would've been nice for him to carry blacks along with Elvis and all, because all they were doing was black music anyway; that was Elvis' beginning and Jerry Lee Lewis – he only played what Little Richard played before him. Little Richard, to me, is the founder of rock and roll.

But Sam got these people and he dropped all the blacks, which I thought was... not very good. In fact, I thought it was downright rotten. Now Stax was a different story, because there was no color line at Stax; if there had been, it never would have been as great as it was. You have Steve Cropper and Duck Dunn, Otis Redding, Sam and Dave, and all these people were great musicians, black or white. You had great singers, great entertainers and all these combined to make Stax one of the greatest record companies ever. Together is what I'm saying, not separate. Together they made it.

Was it your idea that Carla start singing or did she take it up on her own?

She started signing with a group called the teen town Singers under the guidance of A.C. Williams, who was a disc jockey at WDIA; that's where she got her basic training.

What gave you the idea of recording a duet with her?

Well, I was writing anyway and I had just thought it would be a good idea to try it. We used to sing together all the time at home anyway, so we just did it. The song was "Cause I Love You: and it was the very first record to make money for Stax, so I've had that good fortune twice, first at Sun, then at Stax.

The Memphis music scene has changed an awful lot in the time since you began your career. Is there any thing that you regret about that?

There are a lot of studios here now, but there aren't any labels, so if you really want to have a career, you've got to go somewhere else. Even with my track record, I had to go outside of Memphis to get my blues album done. In the end though, I'm happy for myself, because in spite of the fact that I had to go elsewhere, from what I can hear, I've made a good album.

Do you ever give any thought to retiring?

I'm not ready to retire, but I would like to retire from one-nighters. Two or three nights a week would be just fine by the funkiest man alive (laughs).