



The Oregonian

New Orleans soul queen will close festival

Friday, June 30, 2006

KEVIN ALLMAN
The Oregonian

"Irma." In Louisiana, the name is like "Aretha" -- everyone knows who you're talking about.

Irma Thomas, the Soul Queen of New Orleans. Her recording career began at the age of 19 in 1960, when Thomas, twice divorced with four children, released the sassy "You Can Have My Husband (But Please Don't Mess With My Man)." Other national hits followed, including "It's Raining," "Wish Someone Would Care" and "Time is On My Side" (later covered by the Rolling Stones).

By 1970, Thomas' style of music had fallen off the pop charts and she was working in a department store to support her family.

But she persevered, and by 1980, Thomas was singing full-time again and touring. She received her first Grammy nomination in 1989, became a headliner at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, graduated from college at 60, and opened her own club, The Lion's Den, where she would perform (and occasionally cook) for anyone who came in. The club and her home were both destroyed last year in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

In her 46-year career, Thomas has recorded everything from R&B barnburners to pure gospel. However, her new CD, "After the Rain," is something different: A few instruments, mostly acoustic, and a spare arrangement that sets off Thomas' rich voice like a jewel box. There's not an explicit word about Katrina, but songs such as "Stone Survivor" and "Shelter From the Rain" are lullabies of comfort and joy.

Thomas closes the Waterfront Blues Festival on Tuesday, an engagement she's anticipating. "I was scheduled to come up there to do a benefit right after Katrina," she says. "And then Rita reared her ugly head, and I couldn't get a flight."

Your new album is very spare, just your voice and a few instruments. Was this something you've always wanted to do?

Not that I haven't sung this way before, but this album is a big difference from what I've recorded, and delightfully so. It came out better than I expected! You know, we haven't had a major hit record in years, so you don't get a lot of hitmakers knocking down your door; you have to go searching for songs.

People are calling "After the Rain" a "comeback" . . .

(Laughing) I never left! I just haven't done a whole album in six years. I had a few songs on other records, but we just hadn't come up with anything worthy of recording, and we didn't want to do just another R&B record. R&B has so many horns, and Scott (producer Scott Billington) thought my vocal ability just got lost among the horns. I'm really happy with the result.

When do you think you'll be able to move back home?

In all reasonable, sensible thinking, I won't get back into my home before the end of the year. There's a young man who's helping us with the wiring right now, but I'm finding it difficult to pay these electricians

and folk because they are gouging. I don't know how people are paying rent in New Orleans now.

My faith and my belief tells me that God doesn't like ugly and very little pretty, and they are going to have to answer someday. You know, before the storm, they wanted an arm and a leg. Now they want the rest of the torso!

Any chance you'll reopen the Lion's Den?

No, no, no, no. No! I think at this point in life, it's time to concentrate on being an entertainer. My career is blossoming, and it would be too much of a headache.

You've said, "I came up at a time when black folks didn't have time to be depressed." How did Katrina stack up next to the other challenges in your life?

It was just another hill to climb. I've lived through other hurricanes -- Betsy, Camille -- in fact, I had just left a gig on the (Mississippi) Gulf Coast when Camille hit. We went back to New Orleans, and the hotel where we would have stayed was no longer there the next day.

I don't have time to be dwelling on what happened. We were in Austin when Katrina hit -- even seeing it on TV, you see it and you're still not believing it. After the storm, we made it to the outskirts of Baton Rouge, and we've been here ever since. If crying a tear or two is being depressed, well, then, I was depressed for a minute, but I moved on. You have to.

You dropped out of high school, but you graduated from college a few years ago. Why did you want to go back?

It was a personal accomplishment I had wanted to do all my life. I had been to graduations and seen happy, serene expressions on people's faces, and I wanted to see what that felt like. I don't know if I'm the first person who took 15 years to do it, though! (Laughs) I'd like to take some specialty classes . . . I can handle e-mail and attachments, but I'd like to learn how to do my own Web page, and I'm torn between learning to paint and interior decorating.

Well, they could use some decorators in New Orleans right now.

Yes, but I'm a little old to take up carpentry!

Irma Thomas will perform at the Waterfront Blues Festival at 8:45 p.m. Tuesday.

©2006 The Oregonian