ALLEN TOUSSAINT: A ROCK AND BLUES AMBASSADOR FOR POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS

One of the most charismatic characters at the heart of Hurricane on the Bayou is also one of New Orleans’ most beloved musical legends: Allen Toussaint, the Louisiana native who has been making hit records for 40 years.

Renowned as a singer, pianist, arranger and producer whose work spans Rock, Rhythm & Blues, Pop, Country and Jazz, Toussaint was inducted into the Rock’n Roll Hall of Fame in 1998, taking his place in the pantheon of American culture. His most famous songs include the classic “Working in a Coal Mine” and the Dr. John hit “Right Place, Wrong Time.” After losing his home and recording studio to Katrina, Toussaint moved temporarily to New York, but from there he has been a tireless ambassador for the rebuilding of New Orleans. Toussaint is about to release a much-anticipated album in collaboration with Elvis Costello.

Q: With so many important things going on in your life right now, what made you decide to take the time to tell your story in Hurricane on the Bayou?

A: Right now I feel anything that helps bring attention to New Orleans is worth doing and when my presence was requested, I was thrilled. When I heard about the film’s story, I was interested because it seems to cover a lot of territory—from music to the wetlands to the rebuilding of the city. It’s also a chance for people to get a closer look at what happened in New Orleans and to see what we’ve been up against. It would be great if everyone in the country could come down and take a tour but that’s impossible so this is a way of bringing people closer to it.

It’s one thing to see it in magazines and newspapers – but it’s a whole other thing to experience it in action.

Q: You’ve lived in New Orleans all your life. What do you think makes it such a magical place and so vital to the USA?

A: It’s home for me of course and that alone makes it so very, very important. But I think part of what makes it so special is this mix between Old World charm and the excitement of the new. It’s a place that operates at its own pace — and I love that about...
The preservation of the wetlands and the problems of coastal erosion are something that we’ve talked about for a long time in New Orleans. But now, it has all really been magnified because after Katrina we know how bad things really are. Now that we’ve seen what can happen, we need to at least prepare for what we know is possible in the future. There should be a process of living and learning after what we’ve been through.

Q: Can you share a little bit about your personal experience during Katrina?

It was catastrophic, I must say. I stayed until the very last possible minute. I mean I’ve been through so many hurricanes, I’m used to them, and even when I evacuated, I thought I would be returning shortly to remove the boards off the windows.

But then I realized it wasn’t going to be that way this time. By the time I arrived in New York, I had already resolved that all of the important things in my house might be gone forever, and sure enough, when I came back, most of the meaningful stuff was gone. Yet, I was also so glad that I was safe and that I had a place to be.

Q: Do you think Katrina will have an influence on the music of New Orleans?

For all seasons there are songs, whether it’s the seasons of the weather, the seasons of holiday or the seasons of war and peace. Music accompanies everything that happens around us but it also rides on after these events disappear. The one thing Katrina has really influenced is that there are all kinds of benefits and recordings going on now. But in the long run, the music will still be what it is and transcend all of that.

Q: How important is the environment of Louisiana to the culture of New Orleans?

The environment has influenced the music of New Orleans in both obvious ways and not so obvious ways. Even without anything about it being in the lyrics of a song, there’s just a feeling to living in this area that’s reflected in how the music goes. There are so many things you see everyday in New Orleans that have an influence: the sound of the boats on the river, the birds in the sky, the pace of life. Even if you don’t know it’s there when you’re writing, it’s deep in our spines.

Q: You’ve become such an outgoing ambassador for your home city. Do you believe people will come together to rebuild a safer, but still vibrant New Orleans?

Yes I do. I think the city will be fine. I think it will take quite a bit of time, but one day soon we will be as good as or even better than before. That being said, there’s definitely a lot that needs to be done by the powers that be. I just hope we’ve really learned that we need to do our best to fix some of these situations now that we know how bad things can get. Right now, I’m really looking forward to the Jazz Festival, because it will be another great chance to show that we are on the way back.