Allen Toussaint – Toussaint (1971)



1 From A Whisper To A Scream 3:27 2 Chokin' Kind 3:23 3 Sweet Touch Of Love 3:20 4 What Is Success 3:34 5 Working In The Coal Mine 3:13 6 Everything I Do Gonna' Be Funky 3:12 7 Pickles 4:27 8 Louie 3:04 9 Either 2:52 10 Cast Your Fate To The Wind 3:19 11 Number Nine 3:29 Allen Toussaint – piano, vocals, producer, arranger

By the time Allen Toussaint recorded this 1971 LP he was already a New Orleans R&B legend, first as a pianist, then as an arranger and soon thereafter as a songwriter and producer. Under both his own name and his nom de plume "Naomi Neville," Toussaint spun off a string of hits that turned the rhythms of New Orleans into R&B icons, including Ernie K. Doe's "Mother in Law," Benny Spellman's "Fortune Teller," and Lee Dorsey's "Ya Ya" and "Working in the Coal Mine." His songs would be recorded and re-recorded, branching out to hits by Herb Alpert ("Whipped Cream") and the oft-covered "Get Out of My Life Woman" (which found its way into the diverse hands of Solomon Burke, Iron Butterfly, Freddy Fender, The Leaves, Mountain and dozens more!).

Toussaint had recorded an album of instrumentals in 1958, but the intimate nature of this 1971 release makes it feel like an artist's debut. Toussaint offered up eight originals (including re-workings of several songs previously given to others) and re-imagined covers of Harlan Howard's "The Chokin' Kind" and Vince Guaraldi's "Cast Your Fate to the Wind." The latter two, a country song and a West Coast jazz instrumental, might have been out of place if not for Toussaint's brilliance as both an arranger and pianist. The former, originally recorded by Waylon Jennings in 1967 and given an R&B treatment by Joe Simon in 1969, was extrapolated into funky southern soul that's barely recognizable as the original; Toussaint realigned the lyrical emphasis and buried the trademark title hook in the chorus, arcing the song to a terrific riffing end. Guaraldi's "Cast Your Fate to the Wind" was taken at a slower, more loping tempo and given deliciously bluesy chordings on Toussaint's piano.

Recorded in Los Angeles (much like Dr. John's "Gumbo," the following year), Toussaint surrounded himself with players from New Orleans (including Dr. John on guitar and organ), and together they laid down terrific funk-inspired soul. The instrumentals layered brassy horn charts on funky bottom ends, bringing to mind both the Meters and the jazz grooves of the Crusaders. Toussaint double-tracked himself for the lead-off track's pleading lyric of lost love, playing it desperately cool against the hot backing vocals of Merry Clayton and Venetta Fields. "Sweet Touch of Love" offers the sort of mid-tempo Southern soul plied by Joe South with a snappy horn chart and superb percussion.

"What is Success," is punchy and sly, mapping out the arrangement that Bonnie Raitt would use a few years later, and Lee Dorsey's "Working in the Coal Mine" plays up its New Orleans origins with a thickened second-line rhythm. Finally, the swampy arrangement of "Everything I Do Gonna Be Funky" distinguishes itself from Lee Dorsey's sparer rendition, and even farther from the bass, organ and horns of jazzman Lou Donaldson's 1967 take. The CD's two bonus instrumentals include the Ramsey Lewis-styled "Number Nine" (which sounds like Young-Holt Unlimited recorded at Muscle Shoals), and the lengthy "Poor Folks," which segues back and forth between romantic piano interludes and syncopated funk workouts.

Toussaint waxed several more fine albums in the '70s before taking a hiatus as a front-line artist. Though not technically his debut, this is clearly his true start as a solo artist, providing a good helping of both his vocals and piano playing. Varese's CD crisply reproduces the album's original ten tracks and adds a pair of bonus instrumentals. A pricier reissue (titled "What Is Success: The Scepter & Bell Recordings") on the UK Ace label adds a trio of earlier singles that are worth hearing. Either way, this is an album worth owning. 4-1/2 stars, if allowed fractional ratings. --- hyperbolium, amazon.com

Kent Soul has done an exceptional job in remastering and reissuing Allen Toussaint's classic sophomore long-player -- which was known simply as Allen Toussaint -- and the "bonus" selection, a vocal-less blues-meets-funk titled "Number Nine." When these songs first surfaced circa 1970, Toussaint (piano/vocals) had become a decade-long veteran of the New Orleans' Crescent City soul movement. Under his own name as well as the pseudonym of Naomi Neville, he was a composer, producer, and even a recording session musician. He left a trail of influential R&B titles that would resound back across the pond in the form of cover versions by the likes of the Rolling Stones ("Pain in My Heart"), the Yardbirds ("A Certain Girl"), and the Who ("Fortune Teller"), along with countless others. Toussaint's uncanny musical malleability resulted in a diverse yet solid second solo outing. He is supported by Mac Rebennack

(organ/guitar) (aka Dr. John), Terry Kellman (guitar), Eddie Hohner (bass), Freddie Staehle (drums), John Boudreaux (drums), Clyde Kerr (trumpet), Earl Turbinton (alto sax), and none other than Merry Clayton (backing vocals) and Venetta Fields -- perhaps the most in demand studio voices of the rock & roll era. The dramatic "From a Whisper to a Scream" perfectly captures the synergy existing between Toussaint's ultra cool delivery and the understated yet piercing lyrical indictment. Other highlights include the pop-oriented, upbeat, and classy "Sweet Touch of Love," the author's interpretation of "Everything I Do Gonh Be Funky" and "Working in the Coalmine." The latter pair were likewise formerly charting sides Toussaint had inked for vocalist Lee Dorsey. Looking forward to the ensuing years, Toussaint garnered sizable clout for providing Bonnie Raitt with "What Is Success." The instrumentals "Either" and "Louie" foreshadow the type of stylish no-nonsense soul that informed his collaborations with the Meters. "Pickles" on the other hand is comparatively jazzier and doused in the revelry of Mardi Gras, complete with a catchy call-and-response. Finally, Toussaint's masterful touch and craftsman-like imprint is evident on the uplifting take of Vince Guaraldi's "Cast Your Fate to the Wind" as he explores alternate textures that lead the melody to some memorable places. While his mid-'70s platters for Warner Brothers may have provided him with additional exposure, this is a sonic touchstone worth repeated examinations. ---Lindsay Planer, Rovi

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