

Rhythm & Blues

(PUT 297 Liner Notes)

The term “rhythm and blues” (also known as R&B) first appeared in the late 1940s. Always an eclectic genre, rhythm and blues initially encompassed such then-modern sounds as boogie-woogie piano à la Albert Ammons, the swinging big-band suavité of Cab Calloway and the jump-blues of Louis Jordan and others. Such sophistication evolved from rough-hewn roots in early blues and gospel music. But there are also distinct differences between such African-American musical styles and rhythm and blues’ pop music sensibility. The blues draws on a rich body of common lyrics known as “floating verses,” which pop up in many different songs. R&B, by contrast, has typically consisted of newly conceived songs that are written with commercial success in mind.

The fuzzy definition of rhythm and blues was further blurred in the ‘50s when Fats Domino explained, “What they call rock ‘n’ roll is rhythm and blues and I’ve been playing it for 15 years in New Orleans.” Such ambiguity continues today as the term “R&B” has become mostly associated with rap and hip-hop.

Terminology aside, though, rhythm and blues’ primary purpose never varies: to make people dance. Exquisitely sultry or furiously fast, suffused with New Orleans’ unhurried pace or pulsing with New York’s adrenalin, sung by retro-revivalists or first generation originators, the songs on this compilation fulfill that mission quite effectively.



1. Lavelle White **I've Never Found a Man to Love**

Lavelle White launched her career in Houston in the late ‘50s. A peer of such blues/R&B luminaries as Bobby “Blue” Bland, Junior Parker, Albert Collins and Big Mama Thornton, White’s local renown led to national tours on R&B package shows with the leading stars of the day. In 1959, White began recording for the Houston-based Duke Records, one of the nation’s first and most successful black-owned labels. White’s Duke 45s included “Stop These Teardrops” and “Why Young Men Go Wild.”

By the late 1970s, White had moved to Chicago and become a featured performer at the Kingston Mines, a popular blues club on the city’s north side. A decade later she returned to Texas to find respect as an elder states-woman on the burgeoning Austin blues scene. There she recorded three albums – *Miss Lavelle*, *Into The Mystic* and *It Haven't Been Easy* – accompanied by the A-team of musicians associated with the city’s leading blues club, Antone’s. White’s track here, “I’ve Never Found a Man to Love,” was previously popularized by both Esther Phillips and Al Green. It’s an ideal showcase for this soulful, venerable singer.

2. James Hunter **'Til Your Fool Comes Home**

Rhythm and blues has touched listeners around the world since its inception and perhaps nowhere more so, outside of America, than in England. Most of the “British Invasion” groups of the ‘60s, including The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, launched their careers as R&B cover bands before progressing to original material. England’s latest rhythm and blues connoisseur is guitarist, vocalist and songwriter James Hunter.

After years of performing in the clubs of London’s Soho, Hunter’s talent was recognized by Van Morrison, who sang on Hunter’s debut album *Believe What I Say*. Hunter’s original songs, impassioned singing and raw guitar work reveal a thorough absorption of the classic rhythm and blues idiom. This accomplishment was recently recognized by Allen Toussaint, the renaissance man of New Orleans R&B, who played on Hunter’s 2008 follow up *The Hard Way*, which features Hunter’s original song “‘Til Your Fool Comes Home.”

3. Cracked Ice **Sweet Feeling**

Culled from New York’s finest professional studio and TV musicians, Cracked Ice expertly performs a wide range of rhythm and blues, rock, pop and more. Their collective credits as accompanists include work with James Brown, Wilson Pickett, Hall & Oates, Sam Moore and Solomon Burke, not to mention some of the biggest names in rock.

Led by saxophonist Crispin Cioe, Cracked Ice’s spirited rendition of Candi Staton’s “Sweet Feeling” features the powerful vocals of Susan Didrichsen and an inspired guitar solo by John Putnam.

4. The Quantic Soul Orchestra *featuring Kabir* **Who Knows**

With a lilting groove that combines a classic blues shuffle with hints of reggae and Latin jazz, The Quantic Soul Orchestra’s “Who Knows,” reveals some important, if lesser-known, facets of rhythm and blues’ hybrid nature. The interaction of R&B with Afro-Caribbean music dates back decades to the early jazz of Jellyroll Morton, the *rumba*-blues piano work of Professor Longhair and even such faddish songs as The Drifters’ “Save the Last Dance for Me.”

The Quantic Soul Orchestra is but one of many projects created by the prolific British multi-instrumentalist and vocalist Will Holland (pictured above). Once a student of mathematics, Holland chose the name Quantic – a math term that means “a rational, homogeneous integral function of two or more variables” – to underscore the eclectic nature of his work. “Who Knows” features renowned Panamanian soul singer Kabir on vocals.

5. The Emotions

My Honey and Me

Best known for the 1977 hit “Best of My Love,” the Chicago-based “sister act” The Emotions emerged from a family-based gospel group on the city’s south side. As young girls, the Hutchison sisters maintained a full performance schedule and once sang for gospel diva Mahalia Jackson. A secular performance at the Regal Theater, Chicago’s leading rhythm and blues venue, earned the sisters a contract with Stax Records in 1969. At Stax, The Emotions worked with such cutting-edge figures as Isaac Hayes and David Porter, who produced several hits for them. The group’s Stax tenure also yielded “My Honey and Me,” the lesser-known track that appears here.

With the demise of Stax, The Emotions began working with another great Memphis producer, Maurice White of Earth, Wind & Fire. This successful partnership resulted in the hits “Best of My Love” followed by “Don’t Ask My Neighbors.” The Emotions remained active for another five years, then took some time off following the death of their father and mentor Joe Hutchison, Sr. Returning to activity in the ‘90s, the group produced an autobiographical musical entitled *Bigger Than Bubblegum*

6. Sam Moore, Keb’ Mo’ and Angie Stone

Wang Dang Doodle

It takes some nerve to cover a song that has long been defined by two well-known renditions. “Wang Dang Doodle,” written by the great Chicago-blues songwriter, producer and bassist Willie Dixon, will always be associated with Howlin’ Wolf and Koko Taylor. But the iconic stature of this number didn’t deter Sam Moore, Angie Stone and Keb’ Mo’ from putting their own fresh stamp on it.

Sam Moore is no stranger to iconic stature himself, thanks to his inspired performances in the soul-music duo Sam & Dave. Their hits – including “Soul Man” and “Hold On I’m Coming” – helped define the ‘60s sound of Memphis-based Stax Records. While Dave Prater has passed on, Moore is still singing in peak form. Angie Stone followed the old-school path to rhythm and blues by starting out singing in church. Leaving her native South Carolina, Stone ventured into secular music in the rap groups The Sequence and Vertical Hold. Her solo career, starting with the album *Black Diamond* in 1999, has balanced a contemporary feel with a retro sensibility. Los Angeles born-and-bred Kevin Moore, better known as Keb’ Mo’, is a leader in the resurgent blues revival movement.

7. Catherine Russell

Put Me Down Easy

Catherine Russell’s singing draws on nearly a century of music history. The daughter of famed traditional jazz pianist Luis Russell and accomplished multi-instrumentalist Carline Ray, Catherine Russell has distilled the estimable legacies of many classic blues and R&B singers into her own distinctive style. Russell’s career path has been comparably diverse. Graduating with honors from the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, she went on to perform and record with a wide range of artists, from David Bowie and Paul Simon to Rosanne Cash and Al Green.

Russell has recorded two acclaimed solo albums, *Cat* and *Sentimental Streak*, while also serving as an Associate Professor of Voice at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. Her contribution here, the plaintive “Put Me Down Easy,” written by Sam Cooke and first recorded by his brother L.C., reveals yet another facet of Russell’s considerable talent.

8. Ruthie Foster

’Cuz I’m Here

Ruthie Foster’s original music combines all the power of rhythm and blues and gospel with the articulate introspection of a first-rate singer-songwriter. Raised in the small town of Gause, Texas, Foster grew up performing gospel with her family and absorbing the regional sounds of blues and country. While attending college in Waco, Foster began playing a circuit of blues bars and biker joints around central Texas. Next, she joined the Navy, yet kept performing in a funk cover-band called Pride that played at recruitment centers.

Moving to New York, Foster worked the city’s vibrant singer-songwriter scene. But full self-realization came when she also incorporated the gospel roots of her childhood. “’Cuz I’m Here,” epitomizes Foster’s dual stature as a vulnerable, confessional storyteller and a rhythm and blues diva.

9. Snooks Eaglin

A Mother’s Love

Guitarist and singer Snooks Eaglin passed away in 2009 after a celebrated career as one of New Orleans’ leading rhythm and blues artists. His unorthodox technique astounded many fellow guitarists and his stage patter was equally surprising. If an audience wasn’t sufficiently responsive, he was apt to chide them by yelling, “Make some noise, dammit, this ain’t no funeral parlor!”

Eaglin formed his first band, The Flamingos, at age 14 along with rhythm and blues *wunderkind* Allen Toussaint. Proud to be described as “a human jukebox,” Eaglin’s seemingly limitless repertoire included a half-century’s worth of rhythm and blues, rock, blues, jazz and pop standards, TV show theme songs, country tunes and much more. When performing, he chose songs seemingly at random and would expect his unsuspecting band members to fall right in. Eaglin was best known for his raucous renditions of numbers by such New Orleans musicians as Eddie Bo, Smiley Lewis, Fats Domino, Ernie K-Doe and Earl King, whose song “A Mother’s Love” appears here. Eaglin worked with all these greats over the years and he played their material with loving, first-hand experience.

10. Sharon Jones and The Dap Kings

100 Days, 100 Nights

While Sharon Jones’ retro rhythm and blues sound has a 1950s feel, that’s actually the decade in which she was born. A native of Georgia, Jones first sang in church, like many other rhythm and blues singers. But her Southern roots music experiences were limited to summer visits once her family moved to Brooklyn. In her late teens, she began to sing secular music in nightclubs and supported herself by working day jobs including as an armored car security guard.

Jones' career took off following a 1996 session as a back-up vocalist for the Southern soul singer Lee Fields. Increasing studio work led to a 1999 tour in England where British enthusiasts coronated Jones as "The Queen of Funk." But her reign really kicked in with the 2006 album *100 Days, 100 Nights*. Backed by an exceptionally tight band, The Dap Kings, Jones has emerged as a major recording and touring artist who may soon require a security guard all her own.

11. Rockie Charles

Before I Find the Right Girl for Me

For decades, guitarist, singer and songwriter Rockie Charles played an obscure circuit of New Orleans clubs while making his main living as a tugboat captain on the adjacent Mississippi River. When on solid ground, Charles accompanied stars including Earl King and led his own band, The Gauges. Charles' first record, released in 1967, was a 45 entitled "Mr. Rickashay." The B-side, somewhat ironically for a man with his particular day job, was "Sinking Like a Ship."

The late '60s found Charles living in Nashville and backing up such greats as O.V. Wright and Percy Sledge. After returning to New Orleans, Charles formed his own record label, Soulgate, and released songs including "The President of Soul," which soon became Charles' musical nickname. In the mid-90s, Charles placed a newspaper ad stating that a tugboat captain was also available to work as a rhythm and blues entertainer. Carlo Ditta, a local record label owner, was intrigued and produced Charles' quirky album *Born For You*. "Before I Find the Right Girl for Me" comes from that landmark project.

12. Irma Thomas *with* Henry Butler

River Is Waiting

Known as "The Soul Queen of New Orleans," Irma Thomas has been touring and recording for half a century. Her late '50s and early '60s hits, all considered gems of Crescent City rhythm and blues, include "Ruler of My Heart" and "It's Raining." By the late '60s, Thomas' career had slowed down, although she remained a perennial favorite in New Orleans. She re-emerged during a mid-'80s resurgence of interest in Louisiana music. In 2006, she won a Grammy award for her album *After The Rain*.

Thomas' voice has aged like fine wine, now slightly deeper and richer than in decades past. She is a remarkably expressive and affecting singer who focuses on conveying her lyrics with graceful, straightforward phrasing, as heard here on the inspirational John Fogerty composition "River Is Waiting." This track comes from Thomas' 2008 album *Simply Grand*, which pairs her with a series of prominent pianists including Dr. John, Randy Newman and Norah Jones. Her accompanist here is Henry Butler, an eclectic New Orleans keyboard master who is equally at home playing rhythm and blues and avant-garde jazz.