

## IRMA THOMAS

### SINGER

It is difficult to believe that 2009 marked the 50th anniversary of Irma Thomas's first recording session. She remains one of America's most distinctive and classic singers, a treasure from the golden age of soul music who remains as compelling and powerful as ever. As Don McLeese wrote in his review of her Grammy®-winning 2006 album, *After the Rain*, "Most singers who have been recording as long as Thomas resort to tricks, mannerisms, and show-off displays, but she remains the anti-diva, a stylist of exquisite understatement whose every note rings true and hits home."

Irma first achieved prominence with a string of 1960s hits such as "Time Is On My Side," (later covered by the Rolling Stones), "It's Raining" and "Wish Someone Would Care." She toured extensively across the South with her band, The Toronados. Yet, her life has not been without its share of hardship and challenge. Pregnant at age 15, she was forced by her father into what she calls a "shotgun marriage." After the devastating effects of Hurricane Camille in 1969, when she was a single mother with four children to support, she moved her family to Los Angeles and worked for a time at a Montgomery Ward store, recording and performing only intermittently.

Upon returning to Louisiana in the 1970s, she slowly rebuilt her reputation as The Soul Queen of New Orleans, signing with Rounder in 1986. In 2005, while she was working in Austin, Texas, Hurricane Katrina flooded her home and destroyed all her possessions, along with her nightclub, The Lion's Den. Now, she and her husband, Emile Jackson, have rebuilt their home (she may have been one of the few who had flood insurance!). In the wake of the tragedy and loss that Katrina brought, her career has enjoyed an unprecedented upswing.

After *The Rain*, recorded in rural Maurice, Louisiana only weeks after Katrina, won Irma her first Grammy® (as well as a Blues Music Award for Soul-Blues Album of the Year and many other accolades). Last year's *Simply Grand* won a Grammy® nomination, as well as another Soul-Blues Album of the year award. Irma had previously garnered Grammy® nominations for her live album, *Simply the Best!*, and her collaboration with Marcia Ball and Tracy Nelson, *Sing It!*, both on Rounder. Many career highlights have followed her Grammy® triumph, including her appearance with Stevie Wonder at the 2008 New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and her recent appearance on ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. In 2009, she was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame.

There are many other bright sides to Irma's story. After she graduated from Delgado College in 2001 at the age of 61, the school initiated the Irma Thomas Wise Women Center. "We provide counseling to young women, and the occasional young man, who may be unsure of the possibilities of furthering their educations," she explained. "We provide encouragement, and I share my own struggles."

Rounder Records celebrates this remarkable milestone in Irma Thomas's career with the release of *The Soul Queen of New Orleans: 50th Anniversary Celebration*, which features 3 new songs, 9 highlights from her Rounder catalog, and 3 tracks recorded as a guest for special projects on other labels.

For the first time since 1990's live album, Irma and producer Scott Billington chose to record with her working band, The Professionals, a group of New Orleans R&B veterans (who might have a lesson or two for younger neo-soul musicians to learn!). The three new tracks include the uptempo "Got To Bring it With You" (co-written by Fabulous Thunderbirds frontman Kim Wilson), and the newly-written but ever so classic soul ballad, "Let It Be Me." Irma and her longtime keyboard player Warner Williams co-wrote a new blues, "Your Ship Has Sailed." These songs showcase Irma in her classic element, with no click tracks, auto-tuning or other studio tricks. Nobody does it better.

Other highlights include her joyful interpretation of Dan Penn's "I'm Your Puppet" (from her Rounder album *My Heart's in Memphis*), and her deep reading of the Tom Jans song "Loving Arms," originally released on the *I Believe To My Soul* collection on the Hear Music label. A more obscure track is "There Must Be a Better World Somewhere," recorded as part of a tribute album to the great songwriter Doc Pomus on Rhino Records.

This album also marks the 25th year that Irma and Rounder VP of A&R have worked together, an artist/producer partnership that must be something of an industry record. Says Scott Billington, "It's been a great privilege to work with Irma as we imagine each new recording, and to help her find the right songs. I think we've discovered quite a few good ones over the years, and it's always a thrill to hear her transform each song."

Irma summed up her career in a conversation with New Orleans writer Jeff Hannusch, "I really haven't thought a lot about being in show business that long because I'm having so much fun right now. Recently, I've gotten a lot of acclaim and it's all humbling. The Grammy® award was especially prestigious, but I'm truly honored and humbled by them all. I might slow up a bit in the future, but I don't ever foresee retirement. I know 50 years is a long time, but when you're doing something you really love, you don't think about the years."

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