

Irma Thomas: The Lady Got Soul!

THE HEART AND SOUL OF NEW ORLEANS -- She was a young girl on her first job, as a waitress at a music club. She didn't mind working the tables, but when the band started playing, she just had to sing.

It got her fired from the job -- and it launched the career of one of the greatest female vocalists the city has ever had the privilege to know, Miss Irma Thomas, the Soul Queen of New Orleans -- a career that has now culminated in her reigning as Queen of the Krewe du Vieux's "Souled Down the River" parade.

"The small clubs, the intimate settings, that's the kind of place where a young musician can try out his licks, see if he's got what it takes," recalls Queen Irma fondly. "But they really don't exist now. Instead you've got the casinos, and the mega-krewes, and they hire a lot of outside talent."

Irma and her husband Emile do run their own very intimate club, the Lion's Den on Gravier Street just off N. Broad, where the lucky few can catch Irma's act on the occasional weekend. She will also perform at the Krewe du Vieux Doo on February 7, along with parade Grand Duchess Marcia Ball. These two distinguished ladies, in concert with Tracy Nelson, have just released a new album, "Sing It".

But like so many other great New Orleans performers, many of her finest moments have come on stages and in places far, far from home.

"I remember the first time I went to England," she recalls with a laugh (Queen Irma does most things with a laugh). "I didn't think they even knew who I was, but when I got off the plane, there was this huge banner saying 'Welcome to England, Irma Thomas'".

She also has fond memories of her visit to the stage of the legendary Apollo Theater, back in 1964, where she was thrilled simply that nobody threw any tomatoes at her. Talk about a tough crowd!

A more poignant memory is a local one: the day her father died, she had a gig at the Saenger theater, to be filmed by CBS television and during which she was crowned official Soul Queen of New Orleans by then-mayor Sidney Barthelemy. Despite the trials and tribulations of the day, Queen Irma gave a knock-out performance (although the rumor is that Sidney slept through it completely).

Our loquacious queen is a person who speaks her mind -- "If I'm thinking it, it comes out" -- although over the years, she has learned the art of "diplomatically cussing people out". Fueled in part by her admitted addiction to all things sugary, she is non-stop energy, as evidenced by her hot-hot-hot live shows.

Like all true New Orleanians, Queen Irma laments the passing of so many local traditions and enterprises. "Krauss carried generations of styles, they had what the people needed," she observes sadly. "Now, outsiders come in, they say they like what New Orleans has, but then they change everything to fit their own ideas. They leave the facades, but they change what's inside."

But at least for one night, she's happy to be a part of a real New Orleans party. "Come on out to the parade and have fun," our Soul Queen commands her loyal subjects, "and remember you're in New Orleans, the friendliest city in the world!"

The rest of New Orleans may get sold -- but Queen Irma, she got soul.

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NOTE: Conditions of Sale: all items as is (what's thousands of blighted housing units between friends?). Payable in Mardi Gras beads, crawfish heads or beer. Buyer assumes all liability, 'cause we're outta here!