



True View
TRAFFIC & WEATHER
Baton Rouge Temperature: 83°

TRAFFIC CENTER LOCAL RADAR

ENTERTAINMENT

Johnny Rivers' career turned into gold

Johnny Rivers

WHEN: Saturday, April 28 (3:30 p.m.)
WHERE: New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival (Acura Stage)



ADVOCATE FILE PHOTOS

Johnny Rivers

By **JOHN WIRT**

Music critic

Published: Apr 27, 2007

Former Baton Rougean Johnny Ramistella was in the right place at the right time to be shaped by the genuine sound of the American South. Like millions of 1950s teens, the future pop star heard blues and rhythm-and-blues on the radio and saw the performers on local stages.

Before Johnny Ramistella became Johnny Rivers and recorded 29 pop hits in the '60s and '70s, he saw Fats Domino thrill a concert in a Ryan Airport hanger and Memphis boy Elvis Presley perform his recording debut at Baton Rouge High School.

Rivers recalled Domino opening his airport show with his new hit, "My Blue Heaven."

"I worked my way up to the bandstand," Rivers said from his long-time home, southern California. "He sat down at a little upright piano and hit a chord and went, 'When whippoorwill call, dant-dant-dant, dant-dant-dant!'"

"The place went nuts. I went, 'Wow, this guy is too cool.' And then he went into 'Going to the River' and 'Rose Mary' and 'Please Don't Leave Me' and all that stuff. I collected all of those records. Fats was my main guy back then, one of my biggest inspirations, more so probably than Chuck Berry.

"I was at the age where I was just like a sponge, especially being a teenager starting to play music. I heard all that great R&B and blues around and all my peers were listening to that stuff, too. You couldn't help but hear that stuff around Baton Rouge."

A crowd at Baton Rouge High School for a mostly country show starring Minnie Pearl and Little Jimmy Dickens reacted less enthusiastically to Presley.

"In the middle of the show Minnie Pearl introduces this new kid," Rivers said. "They called him the Hillbilly Cat. And Elvis comes walking out in a pink suit with Scotty (Moore) and Bill (Black). He didn't even have a drummer. He played two songs, 'That's All Right' and 'Blue Moon of Kentucky.' I said to my buddy, 'That's that guy who did the record that's on the radio!' People around us were laughing at him. All that raw sexual energy up there on stage, people didn't know what to make of it."

Rivers got a second look at Presley behind the school auditorium.

"They were loading up. He had like a '55 Coupe de Ville with a trailer behind it. He was standing around talking to some of the country acts. I remember looking up at this guy with greasy hair and pimples all over his face. He was bouncing around, he couldn't stand still. I'm thinking this is the coolest guy I've ever seen."

Rivers used money he'd earned delivering The State-Times newspaper to buy his first guitar. He learned quickly and entered the weekly Saturday morning talent show at the Paramount Theatre.

"I won that contest about four or five times in a row," he said. "Then they told my folks not to bring me back."

The 14-year-old Rivers formed his own band, Johnny and the Spades, in 1957. That same year, he recorded his first record, "Hey Little Girl," at Cosimo Matassa's studio in New Orleans. It was a regional hit, moving into local charts alongside hits by the young singer's music heroes.

A local newspaper story about Rivers brought him to the attention of the Louisiana Hayride in Shreveport. It was there that he met James Burton, a young Shreveport guitarist who was working with teen idol Ricky Nelson.

Rivers had written a song called "I'll Make Believe." Everyone he played it for said it would be a great tune for Nelson. After his Hayride performance, Rivers rushed home to Baton Rouge to record a demo of the song.

"I mailed the tape to James Burton and never thought I'd hear anything else from it," Rivers recalled. "About six weeks later the phone rings and my mother says, 'Johnny, some guy says he's calling from Hollywood.' I thought it was the guys in my band playing a joke."

But it was Burton.

ADVERTISEMENTS

[CLICK HERE TO ADVERTISE](#)

BEACHES OF SOUTH WALTON VACATION RENTALS

OR SELECT ONE OF OUR OTHER DESTINATIONS BELOW

PERDIDO KEY DESTIN
NAVARRE BEACH BEACHES OF SOUTH WALTON
FT. WALTON BEACH PANAMA CITY BEACH

BEACHES OF SOUTH WALTON, FL RESORTQUEST.

ADVERTISEMENTS

[CLICK HERE TO ADVERTISE](#)

BATON ROUGE LITTLE THEATER

ACTIV 2 - FOR MEN

29 DAY EXERCISE STUDY
Caucasians Aged 20 - 40
Compensation \$1200 - \$2000
Call today! 763-3000

PENNINGTON BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH CENTER

YOUR SUMMER is just a click away.

Kaiser REALTY, INC.
Gulf Shores & Orange Beach Vacation Rentals

The Baton Rouge Christian Classical School

NOW ENROLLING
Pre-Kindergarten - 8th grade

UNPLANNED PREGNANCY?

Adoption & Parenting Services
CATHOLIC COMMUNITY SERVICES
(225) 336-8708

Make Your Mom a card Contest

2 WBRZ

Related Entertainment Links

[Official BR Travel and Tourism site](#)