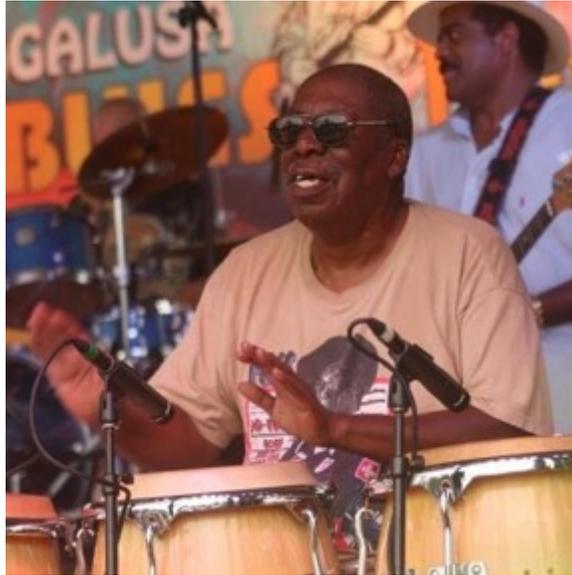


Appreciating Alfred "Uganda" Roberts



Alfred "Uganda" Roberts at Professor Longhair's *Festival* in Bogalusa, LA on September 29, 2012

'One of the Big Easy's music icons,' Geraldine Wycoff of the *Louisiana Weekly* wrote about Alfred "Uganda" Roberts in December 2011. And she's right!

Alfred "Uganda" Roberts is a tremendous resource for New Orleans music. His playing experience reaches from the 1950s to 2012 and his musical knowledge extends across the Caribbean and into Africa.

Born April 8, 1943 and raised in the Treme neighborhood of New Orleans, Alfred Roberts first played percussion with boyhood friends at the *La Havana Club* on St. Bernard. He began to sit in with professionals at age 15. He accompanied drummers Smokey Johnson and James Black at *Holly's* on Basin Street and played there with George Davis (guitar), Chuck Beatty (upright bass) and Porgy Jones (trumpet). In the 1950s and 1960s he absorbed more of African and Caribbean rhythms through all-night jam-sessions with in-port sailors and other traveling musicians. (1) His name of "Uganda" came out of his taking up rhythms from a visiting percussionist--"You sound like you're that cat from Uganda." On his own, the artist experimented with unique uses of both the bongo and conga drums. He played drums while dipping them into the water of Lake Pontchartrain. He made a living as "Jamaican Joe" at *Chris Owen's* on Bourbon Street. He continued to be hired by Allen Toussaint to join house musicians Zigaboo Modeliste, Art Neville, Leo Nocentelli, and George Porter (later the *Meters*) at *SeaSaint Studio*.

Alfred "Uganda" Roberts was introduced to his most famous collaborator, Henry Roland Byrd, Professor Longhair, a player 25 years his senior, at the second *New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival* by *Festival* co-founder Quint Davis.

Professor Longhair had had a series of genre-broadening hits circa 1950-53 with *Atlantic*, *Mercury*, *Federal*, and Louisiana-based labels ("Mardi Gras In New Orleans", "Bald Head" "She Walks Right In", "Tipitina"). By 1970, however, he'd fallen away from a musical career and into gambling debts. He was working as a janitor in a record-shop. He still had a reservoir of music in him. The Bogalusa, Louisiana native had found his own style as a keyboardist by deliberately playing on a piano with missing keys. His

humor and independent character is illustrated by the name of his 1949 band, the *Shuffling Hungarians*. He, like the percussionist "Uganda" a generation or two younger than him, had picked up a melange of rhythms and changes through his mixing with many cultures. (2)

(For more about Professor Longhair, please see John Sinclair's very knowledgeable and evocative review of the *Rhino* label's 1993 box-set Fess.) (3)

The years from 1973 to 1980 were good times for Professor Longhair and Uganda Roberts. They toured often. They released three albums, Rock and Roll Gumbo, Live On The Queen Mary, and (a duo) Live In London. Opportunities shone on them through Rock stars who'd been nurtured by New Orleans' 1940s and 1950s music--the *Rolling Stones*, Paul McCartney, home-boy Dr. John, ... Roberts recalled the span of playing with Longhair as 'a beautiful friendship.' He told Geraldine Wyckoff of the *Louisiana Weekly* in December 2011: "We had a lot of the same rhythm structures in our genes." (4)

How important and supportive Uganda Roberts' drumming is to Professor Longhair's playing during the Professor's 1970s revival can be taken in through two youtube videos. First, their rendition of "Big Chief" with the *Meters* at Montreux in 1973 . Tight and energetic as can be! 11 stars out of 10!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhYyFnFPhBg&feature=related>

The --Soundstage-- playing of "Tipitina" with the same group a year afterward also shows Uganda's congas driving and centering momentum and leaving changes open for his fellow musicians.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBSN7WOPkQo>

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_%22Uganda%22_Roberts
2. <http://www.answers.com/topic/professor-longhair>
3. <http://www.johnsinclair.us/writings/51-reviews/790-fess-the-professor-longhair-anthology.html>
4. <http://www.louisianaweekly.com/spotlighting-two-of-the-big-easy's-music-icons/>