

# Blues, Punk Can Sometimes Mix

BY MICHAEL SNYDER

**A**T HIS MOST recent Bay Area performance, New Orleans rhythm-and-blues singer Lee Dorsey was greeted with a torrent of spittle from the audience. But Dorsey simply smiled, stepped back and sang. He knew he was dodging a punk equivalent of frenzied applause.

The year was 1980, the venue was the Warfield Theater in San Francisco, and Dorsey was opening for the British punk-rock band, the Clash, at the invitation of lead vocalist Joe Strummer. "I had never witnessed anything like that in my entire career," said the 58-year-old Dorsey, laughing. "I was a little upset at first. I thought 'Whoa — what's going on here?' But those

DEVO record," admitted the gravel-voiced Dorsey during a telephone interview, "but that song, 'Coal Mine,' is going to be around for a long while." Dorsey was calling from Natchez, Miss., where he was preparing to headline a Mardi Gras ball with his backup band, Skor. "We've got a heckuva thing going on here tonight," he chuckled. "It's going to be early morning before we're done."

When he's not touring or playing club dates in the New Orleans area, Dorsey is hanging out at his son's body and fender shop in New Orleans' 7th Ward. It used to be Dorsey's shop, but he's no longer bending fenders full-time. "I just hold the door open for my son. He named it Ya-Ya Body and Fender Repair. It was called Lee Dorsey &



Lee Dorsey: Stand back for punk-style 'applause'

guy in the Clash told me that if the kids dug you, they'd spit on you. There I am in my \$200 suit with spit on it, and the Clash are telling me 'They love you.' And sure enough, they spit all over the Clash, too."

Today, such viscous displays of affection are as passe as punk, but Dorsey maintains his legendary status as one of the finest and funkier singers to emerge from the New Orleans music scene. His reputation was built on a string of five Top 40 hits — "Ya-Ya," "Do-Re-Mi," "Ride Your Pony," "Working in a Coal Mine," and "Holy Cow" — that kept the buoyant Crescent City sound on American radio during the '60s. In the past few years, his patronage by new wavers like the Clash and DEVO — the latter having recorded a robotic version of "Working in a Coal Mine" — made Dorsey fashionable again. "I never did hear that

Lee Dorsey will be headlining a Blue Monday dance party tomorrow night at Wolfgang's.

Son, but the place belongs to Lee Dorsey Jr. now," said the divorced singer, who fathered four boys and seven girls while he was married. "I didn't have too much off-time," he added, revealing that he also sired "seven or so" children out of wedlock.

"I can't stand the exhaust and paint fumes anymore, but I still have a love for garage work. I don't mind the large jobs like straightening a bent frame or replacing a quarter panel. Because I know how long those repairs will take, they don't eat into my music business."

In 1936, at age 10, Dorsey emigrated with his family from his native New Orleans to Portland, Ore. A veteran of World War II, Dorsey was an undefeated prizefighter in the featherweight and lightweight divisions of Oregon, until he simply grew tired of "beating on people." In 1955, he returned to New Orleans with no intention of becoming a singer, but fate intervened. At this

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## LEE DORSEY

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point in his life, his music takes precedence, but he was originally discovered in 1957 when a talent scout heard him singing as he worked under a car. "I always liked tinkering on cars," Dorsey said, "so I got me a job at a body shop owned by Ernie the Whip, a New Orleans deejay. I loved to sing while I worked, and one day, this guy heard me singing away and asked me if I wanted to make a record."

That first recording, "Rock Pretty Baby," sold enough in the New Orleans area to warrant a second try. "Lottie-Mo," the follow-up, was successful enough to gain national distribution and an appearance by Dorsey on "American Bandstand." It also marked the beginning of his relationship with the great New Orleans songwriter, arranger and producer, Allen Toussaint, who authored most of Dorsey's subsequent material. "I got \$50 a pop for recording each of those early records," said Dorsey, "and Allen told me not to make any more

records for that little." So Dorsey went back to his garage and tools.

In 1961, Marshall Sehorn and Bobby Robinson of Fire/Fury Records came across a copy of "Lottie Mo," and they were impressed enough to sign Dorsey to a real recording contract. Scrambling for original material, Robinson and Dorsey took a children's street chant and turned it into "Ya-Ya," a Top 10 hit that earned them a gold record. Dorsey assembled a band and hit the road, working with seminal rhythm-and-blues musicians

like T-Bone Walker, Big Joe Turner and — for 61 consecutive one-nighters — James Brown. "You make a lot of money playing live, but you're spending, too," Dorsey said. "It wasn't easy when the club owners were waiting to rip you off. You had to watch the door while you were up on stage."

Throughout the '60s and '70s, from the gritty, rollicking "Ya-Ya" and "Coal Mine" to the slicker and more urbane "Yes We Can" and 1978's "Night People," Dorsey toiled in the studio with Toussaint and

worked the club circuit. He recorded with the Meters, Toussaint's favorite session musicians and perhaps the quintessential New Orleans rhythm-and-blues group, and though he never attained the heights of his early success, he never despaired. If times were lean, he could go back to the garage. "I don't know if I'm a better body and fender man or singer," he said.

He's toured England 10 times, a hero to the British, so it's logical for the Clash to have expressed an interest in bringing him to their audience. Joe Strummer even wrote the liner notes to a U.K. compilation of vintage Dorsey tracks. "I'm collecting royalties on 'Coal Mine' and 'Ya-Ya' from around the world," said Dorsey. "The checks aren't big, but that's OK, because I've got some new projects going."

"Allen and I recorded a country-and-western album I want to put out, and we're supposed to go back into the studio to do a rap record. You know, the kids who bought my first records are older now. As time goes by, you need something for the youngsters of today. If they're still spitting, I'll just get out of the way."



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