



Texas Hall Of Musical Excellence (H.O.M.E.)

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This month we induct our 69th member, Joe Tex

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Joe Tex – the First Rapper

Joe Tex belongs, in the mind of most Texans, to either Baytown, where his music career began, or Navasota, where it ended. Writers attempting to trace the roots of rap invariably wind up with Joe Tex, who liked to slow the tempo in the middle of a song and begin speaking or "rapping" a verse that told the story before repeating the refrain and ending the song. He was the first person to use the term "rap" to describe his style of music – which wouldn't officially be described as a genre until the 1980s.

Joe Tex was a southern soul singer who spent ten years looking for his place - writing and recording everything from rock 'n roll to crying blues. Finally, with a blend of gospel and country, he gained fame as a down-home storyteller - the "master rapper" of the sixties. His motivation for entering show biz was to make enough money to buy homes for the two women he admired most - his mother and his grandmother. He started singing as a child and sang in the school chorus and, on weekends, with pop and gospel groups. In 1954, at the age of eighteen, he entered a hometown talent contest in Beaumont and won first prize - a two-week trip to New York City. He turned up at the Apollo Theater on amateur night and again walked off with top honors. He was given an extended four-week booking, which led to offers from rival nightspots. Soon he was performing in clubs all over the New York area. In 1956, while singing at the Celebrity Club on Long Island, Joe was discovered by a scout from King Records. His audition song, "Davy You Upset My Home," became his first single release. It flopped, as did five other singles he cut for the company.

He moved to the Ace label in 1957, and over the next four years, issued another half dozen discs. Somehow, though, tunes like "Little Baby Face Thing," "Yum Yum Yum," and "Charlie Brown Got Expelled" failed to catch on with the public.

Then, in 1961, Joe signed with Dial Records, a new firm headed by Buddy Killen, based in Nashville. Buddy was sure he could help Joe find a successful formula, even though it would end up taking awhile to develop.

Joe had been a long-time admirer of country music, especially tunes that were essentially morality narratives. With Buddy's help, he discovered that such material, delivered in a black "preacher" style, was both effective and ear-catching. Joe began to write a series of folksy little sermons: some on the state of the world, but mostly on about relationships between men and women. For inspiration, he drew on true-life experiences - his own, or those of people he met. To have hits, he reasoned, people must be able to identify.

Late in 1964, Joe pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket with four lines scribbled on it. From that, he and Killen created "Hold What You've Got," which became a gold record in January 1965. It was the first of two dozen such songs Tex would place on the charts over the rest of the decade. They included "I Want To," and in 1966, "A Sweet Woman Like You" and "S.Y.S.L.J.F.M. (The Letter Song)." In 1967, there was "Show Me," followed by "Skinny Legs and All" (a million-seller in 1968) and "Men Are Gettin' Scarce."

Before recording these tunes, Joe used to intentionally make himself hoarse. He felt that he sounded better that way, and also more authentic, as he really did start to rasp while on long concert tours. The concept worked well for four years, but he began to run out of steam in 1969. Motown started getting all of the audience for "black music", and Joe wasn't part of Motown. The songs were just as good, they just weren't selling.

Then, in 1972, Joe made an impressive comeback with the biggest single of his career. There had always been a sly, cunning, almost smug sound to his releases, but nothing like the raving self-confidence of "I Gotcha." Issued late that January, it made a slow climb to number two. The single was certified gold on March 22 and stayed on the charts for 21 weeks.

Soon after, Joe stunned the music world by announcing his retirement. He was to become a Muslim minister and assume the name of Joseph X (later, Yusuf Hazziez). He spent most of his time on his farm in Navasota and was known as a devoted Houston Oilers fan (he even recorded a tribute to running back Earl Campbell entitled "Do the Earl Campbell").

So Joe Tex left Dial Records and instead of touring for big bucks at the top of his popularity, he went on a speaking tour on behalf of his new religion. It didn't last long. Once home in Texas, he got his band together and tried recording again for Mercury. Four singles were made, but none of them sold well.

Much has been made of the bitter feud between Joe Tex and fellow soul singer James Brown. Joe and Brown were labelmates in the 1950s, and Tex wrote one of Brown's earliest hits. But that didn't make them friends. The "Godfather of soul" (as Brown later became known) swiped nearly his entire act from Joe Tex. James Brown's stage moves were all copied from Joe Tex, and Joe was NOT happy about it. But it would get worse. Soon the Godfather would swipe something more personal: Tex's wife. When Joe's wife Bea Ford was invited to join the James Brown Revue as a singer – and Brown got his hooks into her - Tex recorded "You Keep Her" to let Brown and Bea know how he felt about it. Even after this indignity Joe and James Brown sometimes performed at the same events until one time when Joe Tex hilariously mocked Brown's famous act by throwing a blanket over his shoulders and singing "Please, please, please – get me out of this cape!" This infuriated Brown (who was always a hothead). So the Godfather of soul got in his caddy and went prowling the streets of New York City looking for the insulting Texan.

He found Joe Tex relaxing with friends in a crowded midtown nightclub, where he unceremoniously yanked out a .32 pistol and fired several wild shots at him. As each shot was fired, Tex kept a count, saying "that's one!... that's two!" When the gun was empty, Tex is supposed to have said, "Those high heels is making you shoot too high Jimmy!" Luckily, Brown had started shooting before he got close enough to aim his gun, and all five of his shots missed Joe, but he did manage to graze a couple of bystanders. He reportedly tossed \$100 bills at them and apologized before heading out the door and leaving town. For the next two years, James Brown had to stay out of New York, due to warrants arising from the incident.

In 1977, Joe Tex made a big comeback. Disco had arrived, and theoretically, that put Joe out to pasture. But his sense of humor saved the day, and he cashed in on a dance craze that swept the nation in 1977 called "the bump". Joe wrote and recorded a record called "Ain't Gonna Bump No More (With No Big Fat Woman)." It reached #12 on the pop charts and #7 on the R&B charts, earning Joe millions of dollars.

Joe Tex later became a television script writer and in 1981, he joined the Soul Clan reunion, which included Wilson Pickett, Don Covay, Solomon Burke, and Ben E. King. Not long after, on August 12, 1982, Joe died of a heart attack on his farm at age 49. Among the pallbearers at his funeral were Killen, Pickett, King, Covay, and Percy Mayfield. (GATOR)