

What Is New Orleans Producer Carlo Ditta Talkin' About?

By [George de Stefano](#)
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A "keeper of the flame of funk", Carlo Ditta, releases his first album.
Photo courtesy of Andy Levin



CARLO DITTA
WHAT I'M TALKIN ABOUT

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When it comes to New Orleans music, Carlo Ditta might not be a household name. But the 59-year-old producer, songwriter, and guitarist has been a vital figure on the Crescent City scene for decades.

As New Orleans' leading music publication, *Offbeat Magazine*, observed, "It's hard to overestimate the importance of Carlo Ditta in keeping the best of the New Orleans music scene alive the last 30 years ... as producer, songwriter, and guitarist and also as founder and head of Orleans Records."

Impressed? So was Jerry Wexler, the legendary Atlantic Records producer who coined the term "rhythm and blues". Wexler called Ditta "a true acolyte of the church of second line and a keeper of the flame of funk."

Rickie Lee Jones is another admirer. In the notes for her new album *The Other Side of Desire*, recorded in New Orleans (where she now lives), Jones thanks Ditta for "endless stories and accent." (He is an ace storyteller, and his accent sounds like southern Louisiana mixed with Brooklyn Italian.) Ditta had been a fan since Jones had her 1979 breakthrough hit, "Chuck E.'s in Love". They recently became friends, with Jones inviting him to her 60th birthday party – he enlisted a brass band to perform at the event – and Ditta hosting Jones at his recording studio, where he fed her "pasta with teaneck clam sauce."

[At Orleans Records](#), which he co-founded in the early '80s, Ditta concentrates on what he calls "New Orleans-inspired sounds of blues, gospel, jazz, R&B, soul, funk and folk." He has produced "a series of fine recordings by overlooked or under-recorded artists whose works are now recognized as important and colorful strains of the rich musical fabric of New Orleans," according to John Sinclair, the poet and cultural radical. Sinclair notes that Ditta's roster is full of "one-of-a-kind characters" – sadly, many of them deceased – jazz guitarist and banjoist Danny Barker and his wife, the blues singer Blu Lu Barker; blues guitarists Little Freddie King, Guitar Slim, Jr., and Robert Lowery; the blues and gospel singer Mighty Sam McClain (who died in June), singer and guitarist Coco Robicheaux (Dr. John name-checks Robicheaux on "I Walk on Gilded Splinters"), the Original Pinstripe Brass Band, and the R&B singer Roland Stone.

It was Ditta's production of Stone's 1996 album, *Remember Me*, that earned Wexler's praise. The late critic Robert Palmer, in a Rolling Stone review, called it "one of the most stylish, soulful and grittily convincing New Orleans R&B albums in years." Ditta also produced *Victory Mixture*, which New York rocker Willy De Ville cut in New Orleans, backed by such eminences as Allen Toussaint, Earl King, Meters guitarist Leo Nocentelli, and Dr. John. The album, a best-seller in Europe, is considered a highpoint in the career of the troubled artist, who died in 2009.

But Carlo Ditta was never only a producer of other artists. He is a working musician who often plays in New Orleans and its environs, as well as in New York, other US cities, and Europe. As a recording artist, he has put out several singles over the years. But it was only early this year that he released his first album, *What I'm Talkin' About*. The record's ten tracks are a mix of original compositions and covers. *Offbeat* called the album "a revelation, a strangely wonderful set that, at its best, melds John Prine's wit to Tom Waits' mouth and rocks the swamp while doing so."

"I felt like I should be out there with a record, and I decided it was time to put this together," Ditta says.

The album, however, was years in the making. “I actually started recording after [Hurricane] Katrina and finished last year. I cut some of tracks during sessions within a year or so after Katrina. It took that long to make, from the basic tracks to the overdubs.”

What I’m Talkin’ About is very much a homemade work; Ditta produced the album and recorded it in his studio, and his evocative black and white photos appear on the front and back covers and inside the CD jacket. Some tracks particularly have personal meaning for him, like his cover of “I’m Leaving You”, which New Orleans native son Louis Prima recorded late in his career. The song was a favorite of his late father, Carlo Ditta, Sr. “My dad had that record,” Ditta says. “He always used to sing it.”

“I’m Leaving You” also was a favorite of some less-than-upstanding local characters. “Wiseguys and wannabe wiseguys loved that song,” Ditta laughs. “It was their theme.”

One of the record’s best tracks, “Pretty Acres”, is a tribute to Prima; the title comes from the golf course that Prima had built in Covington, a town on the west bank of the Mississippi River where Ditta now lives. “Louis Prima’s Pretty Acres Golf Course, it was called,” Ditta says. “When I was getting divorced from my first wife, I got an apartment in a building that was on the back nine of the old golf course.” He says the idea for the song came to him after a conversation with Prima’s daughter Lena.

Ditta remakes Jimmy Cliff’s “Many Rivers to Cross”, his vocal a husky, New Orleans *sprechstimme* that’s as affecting in its own way as Cliff’s. Released in 1969, the song became a hit three years later when it was featured in the film starring the Jamaican singer, *The Harder They Come*.

Ditta says, however, that it wasn’t Cliff who inspired his version but instead a local artist, **Deacon John**, who had a minor hit with it on the independent Bell-Amy label. “I heard it when I was in high school before *The Harder They Come* came out. When Deacon would play our dances, he’d sing it, and local people associated it with him. When I was in college, I realized where the song came from. But it’s a New Orleans song for me.”

Another highlight is “Tell it Like it Is”, a national hit in 1966 for Aaron Neville. Ditta, on guitar and backed by Steve Allen’s baritone sax, renders it in a hushed, conversational style. On the bluesy “Try a Little Love”, a Ditta original, he seconds his Lou Reed-in-Louisiana vocal with another “voice” – Vic Larocca’s marvelous slide guitar, sinuous and seductive.

The album’s title track could prove divisive for some listeners – politically correct, it’s not. Backed by flute and sax and a funk rhythm, Ditta makes *sotto voce* come-ons to an “ugly girl”. “You’re lookin’ good baby / just like a little ugly girl should”. He was smart enough to mix in some self-deprecating humor – “What? You say I’m ugly? / Sometimes ugly is good / Good and ugly / Talk to me now / What, you wanna slap me?”

“I was a little nervous about the ugly girl thing,” Ditta admits. “But I got brave enough to release it.” Ditta says that when he played the track for his two daughters, “at first they didn’t like it.” One, however, changed her mind. “She said it’s cool,” he laughs. “She gave her approval.”

Ditta has dedicated *What I’m Talkin’ About* to **Cosimo Matassa**, the studio owner and engineer who from the late ‘40s to the mid-‘60s recorded many of New Orleans’ – and America’s – greatest R&B and rock ‘n roll artists: Little Richard, Ray Charles, Professor Longhair, Fats Domino, Lloyd Price,

Irma Thomas, Lee Dorsey, Aaron Neville, Dr. John, and many others. Matassa, known to his friends as “Cos,” died last year at age 88, a few months before Ditta finished his album.

When they were teenagers, Ditta and his friends “were all little freaky hippie kids, glitter kids, T-Rex kids, whatever. We wanted to be mods and shit.” But during what he calls the “resurgence” of New Orleans R&B in the ‘70s, he and his peers “went into rediscovering our NOLA roots. It was like a renaissance.”

That led him to Matassa, whose studio put out “all the great records we loved.” “We’d get these records and we realized they were all recorded by one dude, and he was Italian, which was even better,” he says.

Ditta, like Matassa, is of Sicilian origin. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, immigrants mainly from western Sicily poured into New Orleans. Their presence was so great in the French Quarter that the district came to be known informally as “Little Palermo”. There, and in nearby neighborhoods like Treme, they lived alongside blacks. Matassa once remarked, “We didn’t have black neighbors or white neighbors; they were just neighbors. We were integrated – we just didn’t know it.”

(Sicilians experienced discrimination – [even lynching](#) – in New Orleans; white nativists considered them violent, dangerous, and racially inferior to northern Europeans. But Sicilians were not subject to the Jim Crow laws that oppressed the African American community. They had more opportunities, and eventually they were able to move from poor, congested city neighborhoods to suburbs like Metairie, Gretna, and Covington.)

By the ‘70s, Matassa had left the music business, returning to his family’s grocery store in the French Quarter. Despite all the hits that he had recorded, he estimated that he lost more than \$200k over the years. Several independent record labels that had recorded at Matassa’s studios went bankrupt and couldn’t pay for their sessions, and New Orleans banks refused him loans. The IRS eventually confiscated his studio for nonpayment of taxes. Bruce Boyd Raeburn, the jazz scholar who directs the Hogan Archive at Tulane University, observes, “Cosimo never got the backing he needed locally to capitalize on the hits he produced, so they had to be licensed elsewhere for distribution, which meant the big money also went elsewhere. Local bankers were not about to invest in collaborations between Sicilians and blacks.”

“We’d talk and talk at Cos’ grocery store, and we became great friends,” Ditta says. “I’d pick his brains and try to find out how he did this or that in the studio. He understood all the idiosyncrasies and manias of artists, some of which I probably have myself. He was empathetic as well as understanding.”

Matassa “also understood that New Orleans banks would never support his business. It’d probably be easier for the weed industry to become legit than the cottage industry of music in New Orleans. A lot of label owners here were gamblers,” he adds. “Most of them busted out, so they don’t own their labels any more. So maybe by talking to Cos I figured out how to hold on longer. Maybe he taught me something in that regard.”

What I’m Talkin’ About is “my New Orleans record,” he says. “Who else could I dedicate it to? I could not think of anyone else but Cos, who influenced me to be the record guy I am.”

Ditta says his plans for Orleans Records include “making it relevant in both digital and vintage media.” “CDs are dying, but they still are promo items that you need to have. Vinyl is making a small comeback. It’s not like you’re gonna get rich from it, but you have to have it. Then there’s

digital media. You have to take what you know and evolve with that to create a new media company, which involves video a lot.”

“I’m trying to do that, and get new talent. I’m basing the label not so much on working, touring acts but on writers and their original songs. I’m more of a publishing company record label. I have a couple of acts I am working with, one a woman from La Rose, Louisiana who’s a very Americana, folksy artist – Abby Gray. She writes Cajun swamp, bluesy material. She’s one of our developing artists. We have a few others we’re working with.”

Orleans also will release a recording of a 1976 Chicago concert by New Orleans piano legend Professor Longhair.

Besides overseeing his label, Ditta has been touring US and European cities with John Sinclair, he and his trio providing bluesy, rocking sonic frames for the radical poet’s verse. Their friendship began when Sinclair wrote liner notes for an Orleans Records compilation album. Sinclair, the onetime manager of the proto-punk band the MC5 and a political prisoner (he was sentenced to ten years on marijuana charges in 1969, but was released two years later) and Ditta, the blues-loving Sicilian-American from New Orleans, proved to be kindred spirits.

“We became best friends,” Ditta says. “He liked my music – and my hippie approach to making it.”

The music scene in New Orleans, though rich, has had its vicissitudes. Hurricane Katrina, Ditta says, was a terrible setback. Besides the physical destruction, the city lost musicians who departed and never returned. But Ditta believes things have improved.

“The music scene is pretty vibrant right now,” he says. “Frenchmen Street [in the Marigny section of town] has really grown into a music corridor, with good clubs. I even think there’s a resurgence in New Orleans rhythm and blues.”

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