

Rufus Thomas, by Karin McKie, 12.01

When I heard that Mr. Funky Chicken himself, Rufus Thomas, passed away recently, I was swept away with a memory of this musician.

I lived in glorious Amsterdam in 1996, performing in a sketch comedy/improvisation show called Boom Chicago. Across the gracht or (canal) from our theater was the rock club Milky Way, and our friendship with the bouncers afforded the cast entry to the many musical acts touring the Netherlands.

After our show one sultry summer night, my pals Rob and Jason tugged me across the bridge to see the legendary Rufus Thomas. The dance floor was unusually uncrowded, so we were able to sidle right up to the edge of the stage. He fronted a great, huge band of musicians and singers, and was clad in vibrant orange shorts and silver hi-top boots. My American homesickness was quenched with this good old American party performance.

We were all moving and grooving to our favorite songs, when the bass started thumping strains of his signature tune 'The Funky Chicken.' Rufus began a brilliant patter setting up the song, inviting all the lovely ladies in the house to join him. A few men started to hop up on the edge of the five foot stage, but he playfully shooed them away, saying this one was for girls only. As a few other women and I crawled up, the band started adding the beat hard and heavy. Rufus, who was close to his 80's at the time, flirted and cooed to us, as he began to sing the instructions of the song . . . 'put your right hand out, your left one too . . . ' We Chiquitas were starting to work it and shake our money makers, when Rufus reminded us that this was a Funky Chicken contest, and 'she who had the most funk' only would remain. He put us through our paces, and we shagged and strutted, cackled and crowed. The band and dancers hit a fevered crescendo of *poultry in motion*, and as Rufus sashayed and wriggled through our ranks, he began tapping others on the shoulders, saying that although they were fine, they needed to sit down now.

Lost in the groove, I finally looked up to see that this hen stood alone. Rufus looked at me said, 'Girl. You're not there yet. You gotta really . . . do the Funky Chicken!' We went crazy together, singing and dancing and flirting up the verse and down the backbeat. I lost all sense of time and place.

Rufus declared me the Funky Chicken champion and squired me to the corner of the stage. I gave him a huge kiss right on the smacker, and jumped down.

I lost my job after 9/11....and on all the resumes I'm sending out....the accomplishment I'm most proud of is that of 'E.U. Funky Chicken Champion.' Farewell, Rufus - I hope you're all dancing and eating drumsticks in heaven these days.