



"Tick Tock Tick Tock – It's Tommy Tucker Time"

by Opal Louis Nations

During the winter of 1963-64, over an eleven-week period, Tucker's infectious little toe-tapping dance floor ditty, "Hi-heel Sneakers," climbed steadily up the R & B charts, stopping just short of breaking the Top Ten. Had this blues-shaded song cracked the summit's short list, Tucker's fortunes would possibly have taken him into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Since then, "Hi-heel Sneakers" has been covered by everyone who is anyone, (one-hundred-and-fifty plus versions at last count), most notably Tom Jones, Elvis Presley, Sammy Davis Jr., Cleo Lane, José Feliciano, and the idiosyncratic Rahsaan Roland Kirk with whom Tucker spent his early career out in the hinterlands.

For all this, Tucker ended up a forgotten man. At the time of his death back on January 22, 1982, Tan magazine in its February issue of that year confused Tucker with his then prominent namesake, Los Angeles bailbondsman and former owner of the famous Playroom Club whose mugshot was published in place of the pianist/singer/songwriter from Springfield, Ohio.

Likewise, Joel Whitburn in his Top R&B Singles 1942-88 book has Tucker confused with the rockabilly teen idol namesake from Memphis who recorded "Miller's Cave" for Hi Records in the early 1960s and died disillusioned in a fire at his home in 1985.

The real Tommy Tucker was born Robert Higginbotham in Springfield, Ohio on March 5, 1933. His father, Leroy, played piano in country honky tonks, his mother, Mary Woods, hailed from Chattanooga, Tennessee. Tucker's grandmother was deeply religious and blind most of her life. Tucker was the sixth of nine surviving children (one died in labor.) Mary and Leroy were poor folks and segregated by income rather than race.

Tucker grew up in a period when Chattanooga's landmark Liberty Theater was closed to African Americans. Tucker's earliest recollection concerns one T. Higgins, the neighborhood barber who possessed a loud voice and penchant for boogie woogie piano. T. Higgins had a son, Ted, whom he taught to play, and Ted passed his skills along to Tucker who remembered being able to chord out a song by age seven. He also recalled taking piano lessons from his grandmother. Tucker's first indoctrination into the blues came two years later.

A friend, Paul Linson, introduced Tucker to Russell Peyton (or Payton?) Payton was described by his friends as a frustrated ballplayer. He was also president of the Erie Railroad. Peyton owned a considerable jazz record collection--78s lined the walls of his den. It was Peyton who gave Tucker his first beat-up, upright piano with keys missing. "Hell, I went for years before I played a good piano that was in tune," stated Tucker.

In addition, Tucker studied clarinet for eight years, put up a good show on the organ, bass, and drums, and fell in love with the tenor sax for a spell, then tried trumpet but was told his lips were not thick enough to play the instrument, not realizing that he had become the butt of a childish prank. Tucker was introduced through Peyton's enormous record collection to the music of Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Dinah Washington, Big Maceo, and all the early exponents of the emerging Chicago blues scene. Beside phonograph records, and owning a phonograph, the family could not afford the luxury of acquiring a radio. Tucker took in the sounds of the local taverns, or more aptly bootlegging joints. Each dive rented the mandatory juke box. Tucker caught the sounds and drunken vocal strains of heavy-fingered piano players at house-rent parties.

Tucker attended Mansfield High, where he gained quite a name for himself as a fast running halfback on the football team. During a game, the second line on the touch began chanting an off-color rhyme, "Tommy Tucker's a real mother." The nickname stuck and Tommy out of pride adopted it. Tucker tells of a real Mansfield halfback from the not so distant past by the same name who used to play on the team, and it was his awesome reputation that was passed down to him. What Tucker lacked in weight (he stood only a little over five-eight), he made up for in strength, fighting his way up to Golden Gloves contender by age seventeen.

Tucker also won a scholarship to attend the Snyder Conservatory of Music in Columbus for one year. His mother also tickled the keys and could play a passable version of Cow Cow Davenport's 1928 Vocalion recording of "Cow Cow Boogie." During Tucker's pre-teen years, Peyton taught him how to play blues and boogie piano by lending him records. Tucker would take a record home, learn the piano part, and return it for another. The lend-outs helped Tucker become proficient enough to qualify later on for a place in the Springfield High Band where he ended up playing clarinet.

By the late 1940s, Tucker was through with school and had joined his uncle's band as pianist. The Bobby Wood Orchestra featured Wood (tenor sax), Clarence Lavell (trumpet), Tom Clayburn (drums), Johnny Martin (bass), and of course Tucker on the eighty-eights. They played clubs in and around Ohio's major urban areas as well as behind touring artists who passed through. Such luminaries included Roosevelt Sykes, Amos Milburn, Billie Holliday, Big Maybelle, and Savannah Churchill. Working as a pickup outfit, the Bobby Wood Orchestra would appear between sets for other artists. Amos Milburn was particularly impressed by a song they had composed and

were performing entitled "Oh Babe." The orchestra performed this as part of a warm-up act. Milburn called Eddie Mesner of Aladdin Records to see if he could not sign the group and record the song. However, legend has it that when Tucker later sang the song over the phone to Mesner, Mesner told him that he had heard the Five Keys sing it somewhere. The Five Keys had toured with the Bobby Wood Orchestra and had stolen it from under their noses. Right then, Mesner was gung ho over having the Five Keys record it.

The Five Keys' version of "Oh Babe" was released the Christmas of 1953 with "My Saddest Hour" on the top side. By 1955, the demand for vocal group music was at its zenith. The Bobby Wood Orchestra was forced to adapt to enable them to find good paying gigs and, more importantly, to strengthen survival against stiff competition. The orchestra split apart and became a doo-wop quartet overnight. Tucker and childhood pal James Crosby sang tenor leads with Dave Johnson (tenor) and Clarence Lavell (bass). Yonnie Peoples joined later when the group recorded. For live engagements, the quartet billed themselves as the Cavaliers. On occasion, they were backed by the then unknown Roland Kirk Trio with Kirk (tenor sax), Melvin Rhine (organ), and Wilbur "Slim" Jackson (drums). The Cavaliers enjoyed the distinction of having played the Lyric Theatre in Indianapolis accompanied by Wes and Monk Montgomery.

Some time during the spring of 1955, having signed a deal with ARC Records, the Cavaliers entered Syd Nathan's King label Cincinnati studios, ready and eager to record three songs: "Give Me Time," "Sallie Mae" and a tune remembered variously as "Castles In The Sky" or "Ivory Tower" (any resemblance to hit songs of the same names is not known to this writer.) For some reason, perhaps because the Cavaliers did not want to get themselves confused with the Cavaliers on Decca or Atlas labels, the group opted to change their name to the Dusters.

"Sallie Mae" (lead by Tucker) was a powerfully driven jump song composed of voodoo-like calls and responses, plaintive refrain, and a finger-snapping Midnighters-like tempo--a fine record in every respect which, had ARC greased the prerequisite palms, would have broken the national charts. "Give Me Time," lead by Crosby, was most definitely a Clovers clone of Rudy Toombs' "In The Morning Time." The Clovers cut this for Atlantic in April 1954. Nevertheless, "Give Me Time" worked very well with its tight accompaniment and every voice in synch.

Jeff Kreiter in his group collectors record guide posted a release date of June 1956, which would mean that the Cavaliers/Dusters waited well over a year before the ARC release. Some eight months prior, the group, perhaps out of impatience, opted to try and find a record company willing to get product onto the market fast. Touring brought the group to East St. Louis where they hitched up with The Ike Turner Band. During their sojourn in the city they met up with a guy named Hudson, owner and proprietor of Hudson Records.

After the audition, Hudson took the group to the King Studios in Cincinnati where they had cut previously for ARC. The group, now billed as the Belvaderes, with Crosby and Lavell sharing leads and Tucker shifting more to piano accompaniment and writing arrangements, cut two (as far as is known) songs, "Don't Leave Me To Cry" and "I Love You (Baby)."

The misspelling of the word Belvedere was probably intentional as it set the group apart from all those who could spell. "Don't Leave Me To Cry" was a standard, made-to-formula, mournful ballad with wailing lead and sparse accompaniment.

Crosby did a fine job, and the group were tight and well prepared. "I Love You," the jump side, stayed within the genre of the time, except for the break where the instruments entered into the realm of jazz. It was a pleasing, balanced record which, due to lack of promotion, got lost in the shuffle.

Vocal group competition was fierce during 1955-56. By 1957, as Phil Groia states in his book They All Sang On The Corner, harmony was the thing. Tucker, wanting to explore other musical forms, hooked up with Roland Kirk and became his pianist. Tucker met Kirk when he showed up on his doorstep one summer afternoon in 1951. Having noticed that Kirk was without sight, Tucker asked how he managed to find his address. Kirk explained he had taken a cab. Tucker's sister had met with Kirk the night before and was impressed by his technical gymnastics. She had praised her brother's piano dexterity, and Kirk, out of curiosity or perhaps a liking for Tucker's sister, dropped by. Kirk invited Tucker to catch his gig at Springfield's Guy Hotel. The latter was much impressed. So began a close friendship and a joining of forces.

During 1956 Tucker met Welton Dean "Cousin Sugar" Young from Memphis. Tucker described Young as the best guitar picker in the country. Dean, born in 1937 in Ripley, Tennessee, had moved to Dayton where he met Tucker before heading for the Big Apple where he etched both solo recordings and one vocal group waxing for Josie with the Kingtoppers, entitled "You Were Waiting For Me." In 1958 Young teamed up with Brenda Lee Jones-Melson, and the pair became known as Dean & Jean of "Tra la la Suzy" fame on Rust Records (1963.)

To backtrack a bit, Brenda Lee Jones-Melson began her career around 1950 when aged twelve she cut one record for a local Dayton label, probably under a pseudonym. At fourteen she sang in various bands in clubs and on the road. She was said to have gigged and written songs with Roland Kirk. By sixteen she was in New York writing songs for famed Broadway veteran Eubie Blake, a friend of her manager. In 1956 Melson signed with Apollo Records and under the name Brenda Lee enjoyed one release that spring, "I Ain't Gonna Give Nobody None" / "If I Ever Get Rich Again." Billboard's New R&B Releases for the week of March 31 gave the record three stars which did not help sales much. Returning to Dayton in 1957, she renewed an old friendship with Tucker.

After leaving Kirk's band, Tucker formed a combo of his own with himself on piano and vocals, Buddy Bell (tenor sax), Nelson Powers (guitar), Dick Myers (bass,) and Charlie Johnson (drums). This group played the Frolic Nite Club in downtown Springfield for two-and-a-half years. The joint was patronized by a mainly white clientele.

Toward the close of the 1950s Tucker formed another band with himself on piano, Welton Dean Young (guitar), Brenda Lee Jones-Melson (bass), and Bo Tolliver (drums). The foursome also featured two colorful guitar players, "Little" Henry Woodall and "Big" Henry Skipper. Both Henrys became the central focus of the group, and when each quit to get married, the band folded.

Some time during 1960, after breaking up with his wife, Tucker with Dean Young and Brenda Lee Jones-Melson moved to Newark, New Jersey. Not liking Newark that much, Tucker moved on to East Orange where he bought a home. Upon his arrival in New Jersey, Tucker worked as a sideman in numerous groups including those of Pop Rollins, Lonnie Youngblood, Tommy Welbourne, and Joey Morant. It was during a New York recording session with one of the above groups that Tucker got his lucky

break. After the musicians had split for lunch, Tucker remained in the studio and was messing around with some material he had written. The music caught the ears of Titus Turner and Derek Martin who, much impressed, called Atlantic Records. Tucker's manager, Johnny Smith, then met up with Jerry Wexler, co-owner and A&R man at Atlantic Records, and the pair set up a recording date for January 22, 1961.

Personnel included Hal Mitchell (trumpet), Buddy Bell (tenor sax), veteran Paul "Hucklebuck" Williams (baritone sax), Billy Butler (guitar), and Lee Osley (drums). Six songs were run through, and out of these four were recorded, "Wha Aha" and "When The Deal Goes Down," -- both rejected, and "My Girl (I Really Love Her)" and "Rock And Roll Machine" put out on Atco 6208 as by Tee Tucker the fall of 1961.

"Rock And Roll Machine" was one of those irresistible dance records that just will not quit. Its infectious machine gun-like piano riff and wailing vocal backgrounds made it a sure-fire dance classic. But classic it never became, lost in a slew of inane dance craze records of the time. "Rock And Roll Machine" never dented the charts, although it did end up on one of Atlantic's Various Artists R&B anthologies, Greatest Twist Hits, (Atlantic LP 8058) around the same time the single hit the stores.

Meanwhile, to boost his income, Tucker tried writing tailor-made material for other artists including the late blues crooner/guitarist Jimmy Reed from Dunleith, Mississippi who recorded his "In The Morning" on Vee Jay LP 1050. Tucker claimed to have written "Hi-heel Sneakers" in New Brunswick during the summer of 1963. The lyrics were scribbled down on the back of one of his ex-wife's alimony checks. (Incidentally, "Alimony" was the title of a song recorded by Tucker in 1965.)

The story of how the tune came about told of a girl groupie who made a regular habit of buying food and drink for him. "She had a great body but was real ugly," remarked Tucker. She was one of many up from the South studying at the Douglas College for Women. Tucker stated that the girls, although decked out in the height of fashion, looked overdressed. Tight red dresses, high canvas pumps (like boxers wear), wig hats, and clumsily applied make-up made the college gals seem easy targets for Tucker's derisive behavior.

Having written the number in the back of his car, Tucker put it over as a novelty to a mainly male audience who were presumably amused by its graphic detail. Tucker took the song on a round of song publishers. Herb Abramson ended up publishing it because Titus Turner had told Tucker that Abramson would pay him fifty percent if he sold it to him.

Abramson and his wife Miriam were co-founders of Atlantic Records along with Ahmet Ertegun and Dr. Sabit. Abramson worked with the company from 1947 to 1959 with a break between when he served in the army. In 1951, with the aid of Emery Cook, he helped design and build the first Atlantic Recording Studios at 234 West 56th Street. In late 1959, Abramson went independent and took his own Festival and Triumph labels with him.

In 1961 Atlantic moved out of the West 56th Street premises. Abramson took over and renamed them The A-1 Sound Studios. Many old Atlantic artists plus recording stars from other record companies continued to record at Atlantic's former studios as they preferred the sound and feel of the old place.

Although Herb Abramson became Tucker's manager, a stormy relationship grew which ended in a bitter parting of the ways. Richard Higginbotham, Tucker's son, relates that Abramson taped many of Tucker's songs and did nothing with them.

Tucker felt Abramson could have done more to promote his records and always resented the fact that Atlantic could have signed him, but did not. Abramson cut a demo of "Hi-heel Sneakers" at his A-1 Studio on 46th Street. After touting it around, Abramson leased the demo to Chess which acquired the rights in September 1963 and issued the demo without embellishment shortly thereafter. Tucker sang lead and played piano and organ, Welton Dean "Cousin Sugar" Young (guitar,) Brenda Lee Jones-Melson (bass), and Johnny Williams (drums). Rumor has it that "Hi-heel Sneakers" was originally tailored for Jimmy Reed as Tucker had garnered previous deals with Reed for earlier songs and was trying to push his luck.

"Hi-heel Sneakers" became a monstrous hit. By August 2, 1964 it had peaked the Billboard R&B chart at number eleven after only eleven weeks. We can only speculate as to why it did not hit number one. Neither Welton Dean "Cousin Sugar" Young nor Brenda Lee Jones-Melson could tour with the band as they were recording under contract as Dean & Jean for Rust Records. Tucker never had needle problems, and, apart from being a womanizer (Richard Higginbotham tells of making the acquaintance of at least three half sisters), his only sin was his drinking problem which he carried pretty well.

"High-heel Sneakers" with its simple blues chording, its chugging bass and laid-back Reed-like vocals spilled over the shores of the United States and into Europe where every lack-luster, two-bit band whipped the soul out of it. Tucker then signed with Joe Glazier and Universal Attractions through whom he toured widely.

Tucker's second Checker session came five months later, in New York, on February 26, 1964. Personnel included Eddie Williams and Solomon Hall (tenor saxes), Paul "Hucklebuck" Williams (baritone), Timmy Oliver (guitar), James Smith (bass), Shep Shepherd (drums) with Tucker on lead vocal, piano, and organ. The result was "Long Tall Shorty," a tough medium jump in the "Hi-heel Sneakers" vein. The band cooked, and Tucker's voice was strong and gritty. The song broke into the R&B charts in mid-May and stayed at number ninety-six for two weeks. The reverse, "Mo' Shorty," an instrumental, was omitted from Tucker's first album. It was quite clearly an effort to cash in on the winning "sneakers" formula.

A month later, on May 18, Tucker once again entered the portals of Abramson's A-1 Studios, this time with an eleven-piece orchestra and plans to cut nine tunes for a rush release album entitled Hi-Heel Sneakers And Long Tall Shorty. Musicians included Eddie Williams and Hal Mitchell (trumpets), Soloman Hall (tenor sax), Paul "Hucklebuck" Williams (baritone), Welton Dean "Cousin Sugar" Young and Mickey "Guitar" Baker (guitars), Jimmy Oliver (rhythm guitar), Brenda Lee Jones-Melson and James Smith (bass), and Johnny Williams and Shep Shepherd (drums). Exceptional numbers included beautiful jazz-inflected versions of "Trouble In Mind" and "Come Rain Or Come Shine" where Tucker mimicked an almost-perfect vocal likeness to idol Ray Charles, a stinging guitar rendition of Rufus Thomas's "Walking The Dog," and down-in-the-alley readings of Charles Brown's "Hard Luck Blues" and Joe Medlin's "Suffering With The Blues." The release and subsequent sales of the album kept Tucker working throughout 1964.

Tucker always opened his show with an m.c. who rushed from the wings to center stage shouting "Tick tock, tick tock, it's Tommy Tucker time!"

On Tucker's next New York session of April 24, 1965 he had returned to his old small combo format which, in the long view, always worked better for him. With Tucker

on piano and organ, Young or Jimmy Oliver on guitar, Jones-Melson, bass, and Benny Jones, drums, the quartet cut the excellent "Alimony," by far Tucker's finest record with its slashing guitar figures, funky bass runs, and strong vocal interpretation. Collectors too often dismiss "Alimony" for "yet another Sneakers clone," which it resembles but certainly surpasses. It was surely one of the better shamefully neglected R&B records of 1965.

The reverse, "All About Melanie," an instrumental, showcased Tucker's prowess on piano which worked in gear with the juicy guitar licks and tricky bass runs.

Tucker's fame in the United States thinned as devotees of his records increased on the European market. In November 1964 the British London American label issued two Tucker songs not previously released in the States. These were from many recorded by Herb Abramson at A-1 Studios, rejected songs, shelved and forgotten. No one is sure how the British record company came to be in possession of the masters, but their release certainly bolstered Tucker's overseas reputation.

On the mystery 45 coupling were "Oh What A Feeling" and "Wine Bottles" (London American HLU 9932). Session musicians were Young (guitar), J. J. Jackson (piano), Albert Winston (bass), and Sidney Barnes (drums). After a tour with Ray Charles and Dionne Warwick and an appearance on "Shindig" Tucker left the States on his first tour of Europe. It was to run for thirty-nine days. In Britain, where he was not allowed to play piano as promoters thought his style too sophisticated, he was billed along with the Animals, Carl Perkins, the Nashville Teens, and Elkie Brooks. Meanwhile, Tucker's younger brother and sister, Donald and Donna, took a stab at the music scene and formed a group called "the Satin Dolls."

Almost as soon as Tucker had returned stateside he was whisked into Abramson's A-1 Studios to record "Chewing Gum," a funky, danceable piece of throwaway nonsense coupled with a solid blues-based gem, "All My Life I've Been A Fool." Again we hear a solid organ, a stunning guitar (Young), and impassioned, gutsy vocals. The rendering was in every way as poignant as anything the more successful Little Milton put out on the same label during this period. It was a shame this fine blues recording fell away down the tubes of oblivion. For Tucker's final Checker session in 1966, he traveled from New York to Chicago in a brand new blue Cadillac.

Monk Higgins, Cash McCall, and Willie Dixon had organized a gilt-edged blues recording session which included themselves, Tucker, and Shakey Horton on harmonica. The band committed to wax four songs. The first, "Sitting Home Alone," was yet another funky, generic "Sneakers" clone. "I'm Shorty," its flipside, sounded like a Muddy Waters album-filler with occasional harmonica and piano fills breaking the ongoing tedium. You could swear Waters sang on "I'm Shorty" in place of Tucker.

"Real True Love (I Ain't Had None Lately)" was another funky fluff piece of little singular merit, and the reverse, "A whole lots of fun" offered little beyond physical exercise. The song's clever lyrics and solid rhythm workout probably hit the much requested lists the live DJs received at Boogaloo dance parties. Checker was now complaining about Tucker's choice of material. The Chess Brothers wanted straight blues but Tucker, the good all-round musician, preferred to move with the tide of the times and to explore other musical forms.

After this last session, disputes with Checker remained unsettled, and by the close of 1966 the two parted company. In disillusionment, Tucker quit show biz and went back to school. After acquiring his equivalency diploma from New Jersey High,

Tucker first enrolled at the Vale School of Real Estate, then assigned himself to various New York University departments and colleges. He later became a real estate salesman in Essex County.

Somewhere around 1968, Tucker cut a jazz-oriented demo entitled "Harpsy chording," jazz improvisations for harpsichord, but the demo never went public. In 1972, BMI awarded Tucker a citation for the most recorded song over the previous two-year period. The song of course was "Hi-heel Sneakers." The show business world heard little from Tucker until he cropped up in 1973 as pianist accompanying blues singer/guitarist and mouth-harp player Louisiana Red, a.k.a. Iverson Minter, from Vicksburg, Mississippi. Tucker's playing on Red's Atco album session, Louisiana Red sings the blues (Atco S033-389) did not bolster the bluesman's sales, and he was dropped by the label shortly thereafter.

The project was another Herb Abramson endeavor out of A-1 Sound. On December 4, 1974, Tucker once again visited the A-1 Sound Studios, this time to cut tracks with a bluesy soul dynamic. The session was headed by the Pazant Brothers who played brass and reeds, otherwise known as the Beaufort Express. Attendant personnel included Tucker who sang and wrote all the arrangements, Greg Fitz (organ), Gene Johnson (piano and electric piano), Scott Allen (guitar,) Atlas Fisher (bass), Johnny Williams (drums), and Duke Anderson (co-arranger and notation man). The session spawned three compositions, "My Babe," "Satisfying Feeling," and "Is That The Way God Planned It?" -- a sort of answer record to the Billy Preston hit, an artist Tucker much admired at the time. None of the three songs ever saw release.

Tucker's Spring 1975 European tour took him to Amsterdam where he appeared at Vondel Park. Musical support came from the Pazant Brothers Band, the same band that backed Tucker on the December 4, 1974 session. Tucker's rendition of the Preston answer record, "Is That The Way God Planned It," left the crowd breathless. It was reported that at his engagement at London's Club 100, The Tommy Tucker Trio took the place by storm when grooving through a gamut of everything from Ellington to James Brown and Jimmy Reed. It was Tucker's piano virtuosity that wowed most of all. Tucker's Club 100 appearance was recorded and segments issued on the British Big Bear label. Tucker sang and played piano, Harvey Weston, bass and guitar with Peter York on drums. A performance at Newark's Symphony Hall brought standing ovations.

Nineteen seventy-five also marked the last of Tucker's U.S. recording sessions. Seven songs were committed to tape, none of them ever released. Proceedings took place at the Vantone Studios in West Orange, New Jersey. It was to be a jazz session for a planned album. The aggregation called itself the Tommy Tucker Neo-Blues Ensemble. Collective personnel included Tucker (piano, electric piano, organ, percussion and principal arrangements), Hall Mitchell (trumpet), Louisiana Red (harmonica), Jimmy Anderson (soprano and tenor sax), Duke Anderson (organ and notation), Eddie Wright (guitar and bass,) with bass players Andy McLoud and Atlas Fisher, three drummers--Kenny Pollard, Hank Brown, and Johnny Williams, and a conga player by the name of Lawrence Killian.

Lack of interest and exposure in the United States for Tucker's more adventurous work made him look eastward towards Europe where he made many fans among those who enjoyed good roots-based, popular African American music from any period in any style.

In January 1977 Tucker sent tapes of his unissued sessions to Chris Lee, jazz editor for the Manchester Evening News in Great Britain. Lee, an avid fan, hawked Tucker's tapes around London, looking for a record company to take on Tucker's work. The D.J.M. label showed enthusiasm but little else. Lee arranged a string of Northern England bookings for Tucker later that year and even set up an interview for an article in Britain's prestigious Jazz Journal. Tucker's 1977 tour took him on a month's visit to the European continent plus Belle Vue's Elizabethan Room, the Odeon, and Club 43 in the Manchester area.

During the late 1970s, Tucker took up journalism and wrote a weekly "Jazz Notes" column for New Jersey's black family newspaper, This Week. Comments in his columns were sometimes bitter. He attacked the white establishment and criticized the powers that be for their false promises and empty rhetoric when it came to equal rights.

In early 1980 Tucker was preparing for another European tour, during which he hoped to record. Bruce Iglauer of Alligator Records in Chicago meanwhile was interested in making him a deal. Tucker had reel-to-reel tapes of songs he had recorded at A-1 Sound which he wanted to sell to Alligator. The tour came about but the deal with Alligator for some reason did not go through. In 1981 Tucker returned to Ohio and during a visit with his brother in Dayton, took the opportunity to perform at a club in Walnut Hills along with a rock group called the Slugs. Tucker and old friend drummer Johnny Williams occasionally appeared in public, usually with a pick-up guitar and bass. By now, Tucker's ex-wife and family had moved from Springfield and had put down new roots in the San Francisco Bay Area.

In early January 1982, Tucker was admitted to the Orange County General Hospital for food poisoning. Medical staff pumped out his stomach, and he seemed okay for a while. But then Tucker fell into a coma and had contracted jaundice. This was thought to be related to his heavy handedness with the bottle. He had also developed sclerosis of the liver. For reasons not known to the Tucker family to this day, the fatally ill musician was transferred to the New Jersey College of Medicine and Dentistry in Newark where he was immediately hooked up to a life support system. Tucker's son Richard Higginbotham relates that the family had flown up from California and was deeply distressed by the fact that Tucker was left to himself without supervision. When he started coughing blood, the musician was given up as a lost cause.

Tommy Tucker died January 22, 1982. A wake was held in Orange. His body was later flown to Springfield for burial. In 1983 the Japanese P-Vine label reissued Tucker's Hi-heel Sneakers album, thus making it easier for United States collectors to find his earlier recordings once more. Red Lightnin' Records in Norfolk, England acquired the rights to much of Herb Abramson's A-1 Studios material in the mid-1980s and proceeded to issue various album collections.

In 1986 Red Lightnin' issued an album titled Hot Sauce (RL 0071) containing Louisiana Red's previously unissued sessions from 1965, 1971, and 1973. From the October 1965 session, Tommy Tucker played piano on "Let These Blues," "Sometimes I Wonder," and "Gonna Move On Down The Line." On the November 1971 Louisiana Red session Tucker played organ on Don Covey's "Lightnin' Bug." Red sang Tucker's song "Whose Ol' Funky Drawers Is These" from a May 1973 recording date on which our man played piano. Red Lightnin' also released a vocal group collection from

Abramson's held-in-the-can stash. In all likelihood, Tucker played piano or organ on a smattering of the cuts.

Most important of all is the Red Lightnin' collection of Tommy Tucker recordings entitled Mother Tucker (RL 022.) The set included many of Tucker's most important songs from the early A-1 Studio days. The album was reissued four or five years ago on a collection titled Titans of R&B, featuring Titus Turner (Tucker's old pal) and Tommy Tucker (Red Lightnin' RL 086.) This album may still be available in collector record stores.

Tucker was the embodiment of the modern day folk-blues musician whose music reflected the day-to-day trials and tribulations of African Americans such as himself who came from the poor side of town. His lyrics portrayed the expectations of a well-spent life, good booze, fine women, and good times that went on forever.

- Opal Louis Nations, September, 1994

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Tommy Tucker U.S. Singles Discography (in order of release)

Dusters (Cavaliers)

label	record #	title	year
ARC	3000	Give Me time / Sallie Mae	1956
?	?	Castles In lhe Sky / Ivory Tower?	?

Belvaderes (Cavaliers)

Hudson	4	Don't Leave Me To Cry / I Love You	1955
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as Tee Tucker

Atco	6208	Rock & Roll Machine / My Girl (I Really Love Her So)	1961
Unissued		Wha Aha / When The Deal Goes Down	

Tommy Tucker

Checker	1067	Hi-heel Sneakers / I Don't Wantcha	1964
Checker	1075	Long Tall Shorty/ Mo' Shorty (instr.)	1964
Checker	1112	Alimony / All About Melanie (instr.)	1965
Checker	1133	Chewing Gum / All My Life I've Been A Fool	1966
Checker	1178	I'm Shorty / Sitting Home Alone	1966
?	?	Jive Time Story?	?
Checker	1186	Real True Love / A Whole Lots Of Fun	1966
Festival	704	That's life / That's how much I love You Baby	1967

Tommy Tucker U.S. Albums Discography (in order of release)

Atlantic LP	8058	Greatest Twist Hits (Rock & roll machine)	1961
Checker LP	2990	Hi-Heel Sneakers & Long Tall Shorty	1964