

## Galactic

Over the course of three decades, Galactic has become a cornerstone of New Orleans' dynamic music landscape – the same world that brought them together in the '90s as a late-night funk outfit steeped in the unique sounds of their city.

The musically adventurous group has evolved continuously since then, thanks in part to their penchant for collaborating with a wildly diverse array of guest artists. While those experiences have provided a steady stream of new musical perspectives and ideas to the group's core sound, other elements of their work – like their new role as stewards of the historic New Orleans music venue Tipitina's – have deepened their relationship with their city and its music community through the years, giving the band an even richer foundation for their ongoing explorations of new creative terrain.

***Audience With the Queen***, Galactic's forthcoming studio album with New Orleans rhythm and blues legend **Irma Thomas**, exemplifies all of that progress and more. Out April 11, 2025, the new album features Thomas' Grammy-winning vocals on every track, marking a departure from their 10 previous studio LPs, most of which revolved around the band's core instrumentalists – Ben Ellman (saxophones, harmonica), Rob Mercurio (bass), Stanton Moore (drums), Jeff Raines (guitar) and Rich Vogel (keyboards) – accompanied by a mix of different vocalists, including Anjelika “Jelly” Joseph and Josh Cagler.

Here, the 84-year-old Thomas retains the spotlight across 9 tracks, all of which the band wrote specifically for her famously warm, blues-drenched voice. Thomas worked with producers Ellman and Mercurio to select and fine-tune the lyrics and other details from there, finding her own way inside the story of each song.

“We wanted to contemporize the whole thing, bring her into our sound,” Mercurio explains. The result is a career-defining milestone for the band and a testament to what's possible when they open up their progressive sound to an artist who's helped shape the canon of modern New Orleans music the way Thomas has.

Known as the “Soul Queen of New Orleans,” Thomas' first big splash in music came with 1959's Billboard charting “Don't Mess With My Man.” A string of unforgettable hits recorded with producer Allen Toussaint followed, including “It's Raining” and “Wish Someone Would Care,” which hit No. 17 on Billboard's pop charts. By the time her moving post-Katrina reflection *After the Rain* won a Best Contemporary Blues Album Grammy in 2007, Thomas' influence was firmly entrenched in New Orleans and had long since spanned the globe, inspiring, among other things, the Rolling Stones to record an almost note-for-note take on her 1964 rendition of “Time Is On My Side.”

“We wanted every song to feel real coming from Irma Thomas, given the life she’s lived,” says Mercurio, who recalls being awestruck by “the way she internalizes a song” to tell its story from her heart.

Thomas does just that on the album’s fiery first single, “**Lady Liberty**,” a poignant track about racially fueled violence and social justice. “Another black man shot down last night and they keep adding up / Is this the world that we’re living in? The one we raise our children in? / Lord save us all, Lady Liberty took a fall,” Thomas sings in the chorus. The bridge offers a path towards change, bolstered by a hooky horn riff, growling guitar lines and the unbreakably tight ensemble playing that’s long been Galactic’s signature.

“No protesting is involved, it’s just that what’s happening around us needs to be sung about and heard,” Thomas explains. “I’m making people more aware, through song, to pay attention to what’s going on.”

While “Lady Liberty” comments on the world at large, the buoyant “**Where I Belong**” puts us squarely in Thomas’ world as she reflects on an incredible life in music. From her vocal growls to the bright and joyful tone of her rich contralto, Thomas exudes positive energy and strength against the backdrop of high-energy horn lines. During a spoken word pause sheathed in barely-there effects, Thomas assures us she still loves what she does and has no plans to stop. When she belts out, “I still got a love affair / with the sound of music in the air,” it’s hard not to feel her elation.

On the album’s opener, a reimagined take on Nancy Wilson’s “**How Glad I Am**,” organ peels filter through a vocal harmony like light through stained glass, leading the melody into an almost country lilt. Elsewhere on the diverse set, “**Puppet on Your String**” unfurls a complex love-gone-wrong narrative set to a retro-tinged beat and laced with gorgeous guitar work.

The album’s recording process began in New Orleans in December 2022, but the origin of *Audience With the Queen* dates back to 2010, when Thomas collaborated with Galactic on “Heart of Steel” for the band’s edgy and critically acclaimed album *Ya-Ka-May*. The tune quickly became a setlist staple for both Thomas and Galactic – we were so honored the song made it into her repertoire,” Mercurio recalls – which got the band’s wheels turning about the possibility of a future collab.

An intense period of heavy touring and recording followed, with Galactic, a longtime festival circuit favorite, working on tracks for albums like *Carnivale Electros*, *Into the Deep* and *Already Ready Already* between scores of live performances. Things got even busier in 2018, a year that ended with the band’s purchase of Tipitina’s – the uptown New Orleans club that had long been their homebase for legendary, all-night shows during Carnival and Jazz Fest.

When the pandemic shuttered live music operations at Tip’s, however, the ever-resourceful band got creative. In 2021, they launched Tipitina’s Record Club, the all-vinyl label that’s since

allowed them to share music by their favorite artists from New Orleans and beyond with fans. In addition to releasing previously unreleased recordings, historic reissues and stunning live performances, TRC producers Ellman and Mercurio wanted to record new material with other artists for the label.

“We were just going through a wishlist and we thought, ‘Oh, we should do an Irma Thomas record,’” Ellman recalls. They considered asking her to bring a band into the studio. “And then we just kind of had a moment where we’re like, ‘Whoa. Maybe [the band] should be Galactic.’ We had a label to put it out on and an audience and we had a history with her in the studio, so we approached her,” he says, adding that it was just the right time.

The timing was right for Thomas, too, it seems. Looking back on the recording process, which wrapped in 2024, Thomas says working with Galactic made her “feel youthful” in ways she didn’t expect.

“The fact that I’m sounding better now than I did when I was 20 – that is definitely surprising me!” she says with a laugh. “But I think that has a lot to do with the fact that I’ve been singing a long time and I’ve learned what I can and cannot do with my voice.”

The elements of surprise – and the benefits of constantly learning new things about music – have also fueled Galactic’s creative choices. Looking ahead, Mercurio sees more experimenting with the unexpected for the band.

“There’s something about pushing ourselves that creates even more of a spark of energy and creativity, even after all these years. Working with new artists always brings that out in us. It shows us new possibilities and new limitations that set our goalposts in a different spot each time,” he muses.

“I feel incredibly fortunate that we’re able to work with somebody like Irma Thomas,” Ellman adds. “I mean, we’ve worked with Walter “Wolfman” Washington, Cyril Neville, Corey Glover – just incredible lead singers, who have really contributed to the fabric of contemporary American music. I just feel like a kid and candy store.”

As for Thomas? “I won’t ever retire from singing,” she promises. “I’m having too much fun.”