

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Bon Ton and Bon Temps

"Laissez les bon temps roulez!" is that fanciful phrase whose roots can be found along the bayous of South Louisiana. Prominently planted in the Cajun lexicon, these words proclaim "Let the good times roll" and ideally describe the *"joie de vivre"* of New Orleans and its environs.

Hitting the national charts in 1950 was a recording by Clarence Garlow (who was born in Welsh, Louisiana, in Jefferson Davis Parish). Entitled "Bon Ton Roula", the song helped attract national attention to Cajun music recorded by black artists. Garlow later toured with zydeco pioneer Clifton Chenier and was mentor to blues guitarist Johnny Winter. Garlow even owned and operated the Bon Ton Drive-In Theatre in Beaumont, Texas.

Al and Alzina Pierce came to New Orleans with cherished recipes their families had created while living in Lafourche and Terrebonne Parishes and, in 1953, established the Bon Ton Café (the Crescent City's oldest Cajun restaurant). What better name could there be than "Bon Ton" for such an eatery?

All of the above is true, but that's not exactly how it happened. It all began with the arrival of Pietro Camarda from Ustica in 1852. He and his wife Peppina (short for Josephine) were married in 1856, becoming (the more American sounding) Mr. and Mrs. Peter Commander. Their three sons Emile, Anthony and Charles J. Commander would play an important role in the development of several fine New Orleans dining establishments.

An elegant 1889 advertisement boasts that "fine wines & liquors" were to be found at "No. 36 Magazine Street" at the "Bon-Ton Café – A. Commander & Co. Proprietors". This was Anthony Commander, who was listed as a bartender at the Sazerac Saloon in the 1888 city directory (the same year Henry C. Ramos invented the Ramos Gin Fizz at his bar in Meyer's Restaurant). In 1895, Anthony opened Delmonico on the corner of Erato and St. Charles Avenue (owned and operated today by Emeril Lagasse).

Anthony's brother Emile had improved over time a turreted Victorian edifice on the corner of Washington and Coliseum that came to be known as "Commander's Palace". Not named for some bygone military leader, Commander's began as a saloon, spent some time as a bordello and is today an internationally acclaimed restaurant and the crown jewel of the Brennan family empire.

Meanwhile, back at the Bon Ton, a famous mixologist was making his mark in the first half of the twentieth century. Albert Martin invented the famous Rum Ramsey cocktail (still a specialty at the restaurant). The café today is located in the Natchez Building at 401 Magazine, but back then it was just a few doors down on Magazine across the street from the Board of Trade. The intrepid "Trader Vic" Bergeron (creator of the Mai Tai) wrote that it "always gives me great pleasure to mention the late Albert Martin of The Bon Ton Bar on Magazine Street". He added that "his rum cocktails were the finest obtainable and if one desired a true Ramos Fizz in New Orleans, Albert Martin was the only man" he knew "who could make it properly."

Today the Bon Ton is in the able hands of Al and Alzina Pierce's nephew, Wayne Pierce, and his wife Debbie. Gumbo, jambalaya, crawfish étouffée, baked eggplant, turtle soup, onion rings and perfectly fried speckled trout are among the many offerings (seasoned, but with a reasoned touch). For dessert, the bread pudding with whiskey sauce is an almost wicked indulgence.

But the name "Bon Ton" has nothing to do with "Bon Temps", even though "good times" there are memorable. And Clarence Garlow simply misspelled "Bon Temps" when he made his recording. "Bon

Ton" comes from the French for "good tone" and is defined as "a sophisticated manner or style" or "the proper thing to do". It is synonymous with "high society" and is "marked by an elegant or exclusive manner or quality" like the word "tony". The expression has been around for some time. There are many businesses around the country employing the name, including a national department store chain. None have quite the tradition of the New Orleans landmark.

Nor is there anything like the history of "Let The Good Times Roll" as a song title. Besides Garlow's rendition, there are three indelible pieces of music by that name ... and all have a New Orleans connection.

Lovin' Sam Theard (1904-1982) was a New Orleans born blues singer-songwriter famous for his composition "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal You", a big hit for Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway and countless others. He also composed "Let the Good Times Roll" for jazz saxophonist and singer Louis Jordan, whose 1946 recording reached #2 on the R&B chart.

"Hey, everybody, let's have some fun
You only live once
And when you're dead you're done, so
Let the good times roll ..."

Ray Charles performed a commanding version of this song as did B. B. King on his tribute album to Louis Jordan.

Most are familiar with the young New Orleans duo, Shirley and Lee (Shirley Mae Goodman and Leonard Lee) who scored big in 1956 with Lee's composition "Let The Good Times Roll". This great rock & roll anthem reached #1 on the R&B chart and #20 on Billboard's Hot 100. Recorded at Cosimo Matassa's studio, the song rang out:

"Feel so good ...
When you're home ...
Come on, Baby ...
Rock me all night long ..."

Leonard Lee said the lyrics "just flowed in" after "playing a dance somewhere in Louisiana. Everybody was having such a good time ..."

Last (but not least) was Earl King's stellar "Come On (Let The Good Times Roll)". This 1960 recording for Imperial Records was first attempted as "Darling Honey Angel Child" on the Rex label earlier that year. Covered by Jimi Hendrix a few years later, the song begins:

"People talkin' but they just don't know,
What's in my heart, and why I love you so.
I love you baby like a miner loves gold.
Come on sugar, let the good times roll. Hey!"

We love our good times like the Saints love a goal. May we always "let the good times roll".

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