

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

True Bohemian Rhapsody

The true "Bohemian Rhapsody" is neither "*Caprice Bohémien*" by Rachmaninoff, nor is it the 1975 hit by the rock group Queen. Freddie Mercury and Queen provided the world with its extremely popular (yet intensely cryptic) "Bohemian Rhapsody", a stream-of-consciousness nightmare of a song that offered lyrics like:

"I see a little silhouetto of a man,
Scaramouche, Scaramouche, will you do the Fandango?"

Research indicates that "Bohemian Rhapsody" is the second most played song on British radio and jukeboxes, and in clubs collectively, after "A Whiter Shade of Pale" by Procol Harum. Could it be because both songs incorporate the word "fandango" into their lyrics?

But is there a song more truly worthy of the title "Bohemian Rhapsody", especially in a place that has been called America's most Bohemian city? And how was it that Carnegie Mellon University professor Richard Florida (author of "The Rise of the Creative Class") gave New Orleans a fairly low standing in his "Bohemian Index"? How could it be that the Crescent City (with its French Quarter, musicians, writers, artists, eccentric characters, jazz and funky vibe) ranked below Salt Lake City? And why the beaucoup boo hoos over such a low boho rating (41st out of the 49 largest metro areas)? These questions will soon be answered.

Bohemians refer, of course, to the inhabitants of the former Kingdom of Bohemia, located in the modern day Czech Republic. Their leader back in the day was "Good King Wenceslas", Duke of Bohemia, who cruised around Prague in the early tenth century.

An alternate meaning comes from the French word *bohémien* for a member of the Romani people (or gypsies). The French believed that the Romani originated from Bohemia, whereas they actually traveled through it. In the nineteenth century the term Bohemian had come to mean a certain kind of artistic or literary gypsy who secedes from conventional norms in both his life and his art. The Bohemian lifestyle is an untraditional one lived by writers, artists, musicians and actors (sometimes impoverished as their art is incubating).

Henri Murger popularized the term's usage in France in 1845 with the publication of a collection of short stories, *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème*. Ideas from this work formed the theme of Giacomo Puccini's splendid opera *La bohème* in 1896. A great scene in the opera takes place at the Café Momus, where the artistic and social environment in which the characters live is displayed. Aptly, Momus is the Greek god of satire, mockery, writers and poets ... and the name of one of New Orleans' earliest and most beloved carnival krewes.

The French Quarter has always been a haven for writers and poets, a place Tennessee Williams called "the last frontier of Bohemia". He also considered the Crescent City his "spiritual home".

So how dare Richard Florida come up with a boho number so low? One *Times-Picayune* letter-writer opined, "there are liars, damn liars, and Richard Florida". The author responded by saying that "New Orleans is a unique creative cauldron" and "a diverse and culturally creative Mecca", but that "the Bohemian Index has limits". It measures the number of people "employed as writers, musicians, entertainers or cultural producers" but doesn't always "capture the quality, the nature or the edginess of what they create". This statistical apology just made the locals want to throw this guy out the window even more.

Which takes us back to Prague and a special penchant Bohemians possessed for solving problems of this nature. Defenestration is the act of throwing someone or something out of a

window (*fenestra* is Latin for window), and Prague is famous for some first class defenestrations. Just as Jezebel met her demise in the Bible, the First Defenestration of Prague involved the killing of seven members of the city council by a crowd of enraged Czech Hussites in 1419. They were thrown from the windows onto the spears of the armed crowds below.

The Second (and most famous) Defenestration of Prague was an event essential to the initiation of the Thirty Years' War in Europe. A dispute over the construction of Protestant chapels on land claimed by the Catholic clergy created a showdown at Prague Castle on May 23, 1618. An assembly of Protestants tried two Imperial governors for violating religious freedom, found them guilty and ejected them and their scribe from the windows of the Bohemian Chancellery. They landed on a large pile of manure in a dry moat below. Depending on one's point of view, it was either divine intervention or the most fitting landing spot. War raged for thirty years, involved most of the major European powers and decimated almost half the male population of what is today Germany.

This utterly Bohemian predilection for defenestration manifests itself in New Orleans' truest "Bohemian Rhapsody", and this phenomenon occurs every year at "Carnival Time":

"The Green Room is smokin' and the Plaza's burnin' down,
Throw my baby out the window, Let those joints burn down."

Why? "Because it's Carnival Time!"

So sings Al Johnson in his quintessential Mardi Gras anthem, "Carnival Time". Seemingly as mysterious as Queen's lyrics, the song's words allude to a New Orleans defenestration. What's this all about? Inquiring minds want to know.

Recorded in December of 1959 at Cosimo's Studio and produced by James Rivers (in time for the 1960 Mardi Gras), Al Johnson's classic has entertained so many revelers year after year (proving his assertion that "everybody's havin' fun").

The Green Room and the Plaza were two popular nightspots on opposite corners on Orleans, and Al Johnson used to frequent these smokin' locales. They are no longer in business, but they are immortal in song. As for throwing his "baby out the window", Al explained that he just had to get her out of danger before "those joints" burned down. It was a defenestration of love, as elegant as any opera.

All because "it's Carnival Time!"

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