

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Cheap Thrills

Many remember "Cheap Thrills" as an incredible album in 1968 by Big Brother and the Holding Company with Janis Joplin as primary lead vocalist. The artwork was by underground artist Robert Crumb and is ranked number 9 on Rolling Stone Magazine's list of 100 greatest album covers. "Piece of My Heart" was the hit single written by Jerry Ragovoy, who also penned "Time is On My Side" for Irma Thomas (and later covered by the Rolling Stones). The title "Cheap Thrills" was presumably not in honor of Janis Joplin's guilty pleasure in having dated drug czar and morality maven Bill Bennett (in his younger, wilder days).

In New Orleans one could get some cheap thrills at any number of local taverns during the 60s and 70s. While not "skating" to Roger Miller's "You Can't Roller Skate in a Buffalo Herd" on the jukebox at Roy Anselmo's Carrollton Tavern, one could listen to Janis belt out "Me and Bobby McGee". That was a song Roger Miller had cut before Joplin's hit version, recorded just a few days before her death in late 1970.

Soon Roy opened a new place, Friar Tuck's. The grand opening saw this new college pub awash in Hollywood-style klieg lights, just like the ones at Pontchartrain Beach. And it was the birthplace of the irreverent and popular Krewe of Tuck's that parades on the Saturday before Mardi Gras. For those in neighboring Jefferson Parish, Sancho Panza was the place to be for the in-crowd in Fat City. Literary characters were ideal namesakes for these watering holes. Jimmy Anselmo (of Co-Eds and Jimmy's fame) preferred Victor Hugo to Cervantes and named one of his taverns in honor of Quasimodo.

But this was not the only century of cheap thrills. In one little corner of the Jefferson Parish of the early nineteenth century, bargains were in abundance (and Sancho Panza had something to do with that).

In Miguel de Cervantes' famous novel, Don Quixote promises his portly sidekick the governance of an *ínsula*, or island. Panza has lived his life insulated from the meaning of this word, but has long been awaiting some vague reward for his adventures. The pair's encounter of two imposters posing as noblemen precipitates these counterfeit pranksters awarding Sancho the governorship of a fictional fiefdom called *la ínsula Barataria*. From the Spanish word *barato*, meaning cheap, it can be interpreted as the cheap island or isle come cheaply. *Barato*, in old Spanish, also signifies a cheap trick or practical joke.

And so as to play a bit of a cheap joke on their Spanish rulers, French Creoles gave the name *Barataria* to a bay behind two barrier islands, *Grand Isle* and *Grand Terre*. This bay became a perfect location for the defense of a privateer's lair. Well-positioned firepower set up at the approaches (and canoneer Dominique You) made this area the ideal home for the Caribbean *Cosa Nostra* commanded by corsairs Jean and Pierre Lafitte.

And surely did they have all manner of cheap goods. Merchandise that materialized (via the use of their letters of marque) included silks, clothing, silverware, furniture, spices, rum, wine and all sorts of other booty plundered from foreign vessels. Brother Jean ruled the waves, while Pierre set up a retail outlet on Chartres Street downtown. Some bought goods from

Pierre's operation, while other locals shopped for smuggled bargain items for cash down in *Barataria*. Hollywood interpreted this scene amidst the oaks, moss and cypress trees. Prominent Creoles checked out the excellent array of everything from taffeta to tafia in both versions of "The Buccaneer" (1938 and 1958). And sadly, yes, in reality some of those actual transactions were the sale of slaves. In search of cheap labor, the cruel aspect of those times was no thrill for the unfortunate human cargo of a slave ship.

Writing throughout the ages, both historically and in novels, has oft times been churned out on the cheap. Contrarily, novels and songs are on occasion rich in symbolism. Sancho Panza decided to give up what he deemed to be the "dangerous office" of governor of an island he stated was "called the island of Barataria". The act of privateering was a cheap shot across the bow of legal shipping in the years leading up to the Battle of New Orleans, but the boys of *Barataria* came to the rescue of both city and nation. Janis Joplin's "Cheap Thrills" presented to the world an extraordinary blues singer with a powerful voice, but she left far too early. Cheap Trick was a band that wanted you to want them, so much so that they even performed the theme song of "That 70s Show". For others there was always the catchy rhythm of an advertising jingle, like Bryan Chevrolet's "The Little Cheaper Dealer".

The world has experienced the thrill of pirates, profiteering, popular songs and promotions. Much has been romanticized, for not everything in days gone by was ideal (not even in the 70s). But wherever there is history, there are interesting people. Wherever there are people, there might be music. And hopefully Sancho Panza was on the mark when in Don Quixote he said, "*Donde hay música, no puede haber cosa mala*", or "Where there is music, one can't have anything bad happening".

Oh, for those who may have had to look this up: Tafia is cheap rum.

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