

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Land of 1,000 Dances

Creole society in New Orleans had a love affair with dancing and delighted in attending balls. Bernard de Marigny, although more attuned to the rhythm of dice dancing their way to their destination, captured the essence of this romance in his *"Reflexions sur la campagne du General Jackson en 1814 et 1815"*.

The scene he set took place in the year 1804 at a *soirée dansante* given in the "Salle rue Condé" (today a section of Chartres Street). The "Anglo-Saxons" in attendance "asserted that as Louisiana had been brought in to the United States the amusements should" be provided American style and "the 'rill' (reel) should replace the waltz, and the jig the cotillion." Because of these "ridiculous pretensions" an "internal row took place" and "men were armed"!

A Creole belle of great sensibility and refinement spoke up and addressed the "furious Americans":

"Sirs, for thirty years we were Spaniards, and the Spaniards never forced us to dance the Fandango. We wish to dance neither the reel nor the jig."

General Wilkinson "stood on a chair", translated the lovely Creole's request and ordered up a waltz. Hurrahs rang out, and once again did Beauty quell the Beast. Americans and Creoles alike took to the dance floor.

In later years, New Orleans would once again impose its love of dancing (its own way) upon the American public. And it all started with the nation's first cartoon super hero.

Way before Superman or Batman, the "Dark Knight", an anatomically incorrect sailor man named Popeye made the scene in a comic strip entitled "Thimble Theater". His debut was January 17, 1929, and he soon became extremely popular. Moms were pleased to learn that it was spinach that gave him his super strength. Squint-eyed, biceps deficient, yet with huge forearms, Popeye was created by Elzie Crisler Segar. Segar also created Olive Oyl, Bluto and Swee'Pea, and he coyly named burger-loving J. Wellington Wimpy after his Chicago Art Institute anatomy teacher, Wellington J. Reynolds.

By 1933, Fleischer Studios (who also did Betty Boop) produced some excellent feature cartoons of Popeye and company. Most New Orleans boomers remember watching these in the afternoon on "Popeye and Pals" on Channel 4, hosted by Uncle Henry Dupre.

Local black kids watched Popeye, too, and "started doing the Popeye first," said Deacon John Moore. "Something You Got" by Chris Kenner was the song that started it all off in 1961. Soon the white college kids were doing the dance with the syncopated laid-back rhythm, even after the black kids moved on to the Slop and the Pony. They danced the Popeye to "I Know" by Barbara George and "Pop-Eye" by Huey Smith and his Clowns. Ernie K-Doe cut "Popeye Joe", and pretty soon the Popeye was a national dance sensation. Chubby Checker, in Philadelphia with all his American Bandstand exposure, sang "Popeye the Hitchhiker". In Memphis, Earl Forrest recorded "The Beale Street Popeye" and the Mar-Keys provided "The Popeye Stroll". There were countless more.

Eddie Bo of New Orleans had the definitive Popeye recording on the Ric label, "Check Mr. Popeye", with the flip side "Now Let's Popeye". Edwin J. Bocage (Bo's real name) instructed the dancers to put one hand on the shoulders with another on the hip, "A one and a two, now you're pullin' a ship. Come on let's Popeye, chil'ren." All of this was because "Olive's in the danger zone".

Eddie still performs in the Crescent City at venues like Rock 'n Bowl. He did Baby "I'm Wise", (which would become Little Richard's "Slippin' and Slidin'") and the fantastic "Tell It Like It Is"/"Every Dog Got His Day". Capturing the city's funky parade beat, this is a totally different song than Aaron Neville's slow ballad of the same name.

While Chubby Checker was the arbiter of dance crazes nationwide (his real name was Ernest Evans, a take-off on New Orleans' own Fats Domino), New Orleans had 1,000 more (or so it would seem).

Chris Kenner, whose record started the Popeye craze, was born the same year as Popeye in Kenner, Louisiana. He learned to sing gospel music in his church choir, and moved to New Orleans in his teens. His first big hit was "Sick and Tired" in 1957 on the Imperial label. Boldly affirming his disapproval of his love's "rag tied 'round" her head, Chris (one would assume) might end up requiring a bandage 'round his. New Orleans loved this song (still does), and Fats Domino did a successful cover of it.

In 1961, Kenner scored big with "I Like It Like That", which the Dave Clark 5 covered four years later. And then in 1962, from his gospel roots and a spiritual named "Children, Go Where I Send Thee", Chris Kenner created his biggest hit, "Land of 1,000 Dances".

Like any great artist, it's what one leaves out of a great work of art. Kenner (in his earthy voice backed by Allen Toussaint's accomplished piano arrangement) only mentions sixteen dances. They are: The Popeye (of course), the Sweet Pea (always close at hand), the Pony, the Mashed Potato, the Alligator, the Watusi, the Fly, the Chicken, the Tango (makes up for that Fandango incident), the Yo-Yo, the Twist, the Slow Twist, the Hand Jive, the Fish, the Slop and the Bop.

Two years later, an L. A. band named Cannibal & the Headhunters was performing in Fullerton, California. Lead singer Frankie "Cannibal" Garcia forgot the words to Kenner's hit and added the "na, na na na na ..." vocal line. Their recording hit #30 on the Billboard chart in Spring of 1965. Wilson Pickett, with his soulful rendition the following year, hit #6. He kept the "na, na na na na ..." hook, but only mentioned the Pony, Mashed Potato, Alligator, "Twistin' with Lucy, doin' the Watusi", and added the Jerk.

An enduring classic, it was also covered by the J. Geils Band, The Action and Patti Smith (to name but a few). Tina Turner did a live cover at Le Zero club in France in 1987. Kenner's version was featured in the movies "Forrest Gump" and "The Full Monty", and the crowd pleasing "na" sequence was sampled in the dancehall hit "Here Comes the Hotstepper" by Ini Kamoze.

"Skip the light Fandango", it was the Popeye that started it all. Might even be a great name for some spicy New Orleans chicken.

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