

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

New Orleans in 1956

The year began with a gubernatorial election on January 17, 1956, carrying "Uncle Earl" K. Long to his second full term as Governor of Louisiana. Receiving over 50% of the vote, his opponents were not even entitled to a runoff. That included DeLesseps Story "Chep" Morrison, who continued on as Mayor of New Orleans. He'd been elected ten years before, replacing Mayor Robert Maestri.

Kids in the rest of the United States were all excited about a new kind of music that folks in New Orleans had been playing and listening to for years. Antoine "Fats" Domino was hitting it big with this "new" rock 'n' roll. "Ain't That A Shame" debuted in July 1955 and went gold. "Bo Weevil" and "I'm In Love Again" came out in March and April of 1956 and both went gold. Then there was "My Blue Heaven", "When My Dreamboat Comes Home" and "So-Long" (all in 1956). But the biggest smash of all was "Blueberry Hill" on October 6, 1956. It peaked at #2 on the Billboard charts.

"Blueberry Hill" wasn't even a new song, having been published back in 1940. Two New Orleans artists made recordings of the song before Domino (Connee Boswell and later Louis Armstrong), but "Fats" had the huge hit in '56. Purportedly named for a popular make-out spot, the real "Blueberry Hill" is in Taos, New Mexico, looking out over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. It is nowhere near "Monkey Hill" in New Orleans.

Earlier in the year 1956, "Fats" headlined a show in Hartford, Connecticut, where eleven fans were arrested for howling and dancing uncontrollably. Dr. Francis Braceland (who'd served as chief psychiatrist of the Institute of Living at Hartford) testified that this rock 'n' roll music was "a communicable disease" that was "driving teenagers to do outlandish things. It is cannibalistic and tribalistic."

"Fats" also appeared in a 1956 movie that has been described as "the most potent celebration of rock music ever captured on film". *The Girl*

Can't Help It was intended as a screen-vehicle for sex kitten Jayne Mansfield, but it highlighted instead the unbridled rock energy of Little Richard and other early rock stars.

On May 5, Elvis Presley's first LP reached #1 on Billboard's album chart and stayed there for ten weeks out of its forty-eight weeks on the chart. Elvis was fast becoming the "King of Rock 'n' Roll" in 1956 but admitted, "I can't sing like Fats Domino can. I know that." The future "King" gave a radio interview to Jim Steward in New Orleans on July 10, 1956, where he talked about his upcoming release, "Hound Dog". He also commented on how long he thought rock 'n' roll would last:

"I wish I knew", he said, "but as long as it lasts, as long as it sells, I'll continue doing it as long as that's what the people want. And if they change, if it dies out, I'll try to do something else."

He never had to. Appearing a month later at Pontchartrain Beach on Thursday, August 9, 1956, a Jacksonville, Florida, juvenile judge issued an arrest warrant for Elvis the very next day (just in case he swiveled his hips). It was back to New Orleans on August 12 for two shows at the Municipal Auditorium. Elvis began work on his first movie, "Love Me Tender", that same month and went on to thrill the world for years to come.

The summer of 1956 saw the opening of the two-lane Lake Pontchartrain Causeway. Its southern terminus in Metairie, Louisiana, connected the Greater New Orleans Area with Mandeville and other communities on the Northshore. The second span was added in 1969. The longer of the two (at 23.87 miles) is the longest bridge in the world.

Other bridges were opening in 1956, as well. The Supreme Court's ruling two years before in *Brown v. Board of Education* held that state mandated school segregation violated the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution. The Orleans Parish School Board refused to desegregate after the Brown decision, and lawyers representing a group of black parents in *Bush v. Orleans Parish School Board* asked a federal court to order the board to do so. The Honorable Judge J. Skelly Wright issued that order in 1956, citing the Brown decision.

Mayor "Chep" Morrison delivered the keys to the city on November 29, 1956, to the cast of "I Love Lucy" who were in town for the annual benefit ball of the Children's Hospital at The Roosevelt Hotel. Lucy and Desi, as well as co-stars Vivian Vance and William Frawley, were on hand for the event. The revered Roosevelt (famous for luxury accommodations, superb entertainment and dining) would later become The Fairmont, but is once again today thrilling New Orleanians as The Roosevelt (a Waldorf Astoria Collection® Hotel).

Louisiana native Keith Thibodeaux (born December 1, 1950) would become the Arnaz's TV son "Little Ricky" at age six. He played a mean set of drums on the series and later joined the rock band *David and the Giants* in 1969 (remember "Super Love"?).

If one were a child in the 50s, he or she tuned into "I Love Lucy" with his parents. If an adventurous young man, he would seek recreation outside (perhaps with his Daisy "Red Ryder" BB Gun). Or he could visit the neighborhood Rexall Drug Store and easily purchase any chemicals needed to make gunpowder. Neither parents nor neighbors seemed to give these comings and goings a second look. Ah, simpler days.

If the parents of this young man didn't buy him enough comic books, he could always hop on his bike and head for the nearest barbershop for a "flat top", "crewcut" (or "Balboa" in rougher neighborhoods). Among the large array of comics at the tonsorial parlor, DC's World's Finest Comics No. 84 of September-October 1956 featured "The Mystery of 1,000 Masks" with the Green Hornet and his sidekick Speedy. Dressed surprisingly like Robin Hood, the Green Arrow was an archer with trick arrows and other devious devices. In this issue he and Speedy sped down to the Crescent City in 1956, seeking a crook whose statute of limitations was to run out the day after Mardi Gras. This villain disguised himself as a carnival reveler in order to mask the recovery of a hidden stash of stolen money. Green Arrow, who almost blew his secret identity as Oliver "Ollie" Queen, managed to capture the bad guy in the end. And then the haircut was over.

Also that Mardi Gras, some new things were happening. The Krewe of Zeus became the first organization to begin the Metairie parade tradition in 1956. Patricia Henican reigned as Rex's queen that year, having learned of her selection from her dad while they were raking leaves in their front yard. And according to Art Neville of the Neville Brothers, "Mardi Gras Mambo" became "a big local hit at the Mardi Gras of 1956". First recorded as a country and western single by Jodie Levens, DJ Ken "Jack the Cat" Elliott re-recorded the R & B version by 17-year-old Art and his group "The Hawketts" in 1954 at New Orleans Radio Station WWEZ. Art explained, "Year after year it grew in popularity until it became a staple."

And when Little Richard wailed out the movie's fantastic theme song, "The Girl Can't Help It", young Art Neville did some of the vocal work right there at Cosimo Matassa's studio:

She mesmerizes every mother's son.

(She can't help it. The girl can't help it.)

When she's smiling, beefsteak becomes well done.

(She can't help it. The girl can't help it.)

She makes grandpa feel like twenty-one.

(She can't help it. The girl can't help it.)

Art wrote, "We're the cats singing background. We each got fifteen bucks."

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