

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

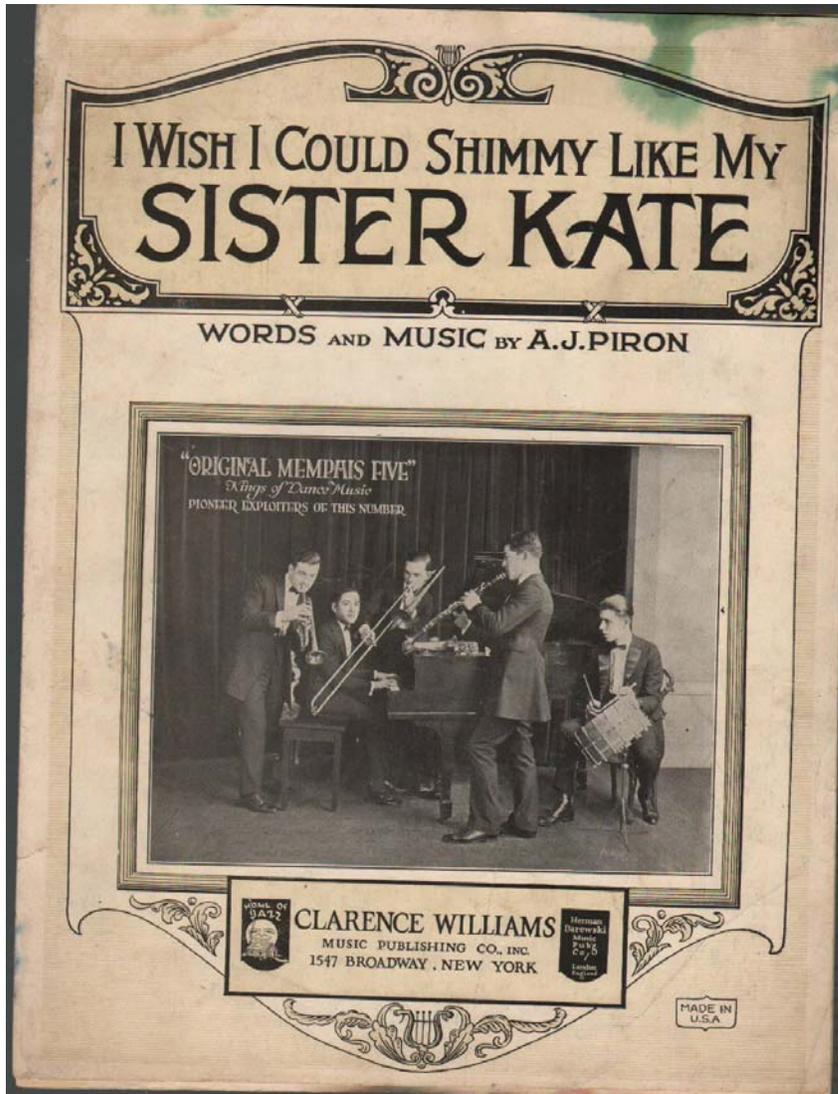
Risqué Rhythms

Take a step back into the Scott Fitzgerald era in New Orleans. The night is tender and your tuxedo shirt is starched. Or perhaps that describes your dancing partner and you are dressed like Zelda awaiting the orchestra's next number. You are inside the New Orleans Country Club amidst Gibsonsque profiles and the music begins to play. If you think the band is composed of stuffy musicians hammering out predictable tunes, you might be wrong. In all likelihood you'd be shaking your blues away to one of the Crescent City's most loved jazz bands, Armand J. Piron's New Orleans Orchestra.



Armand J. Piron's New Orleans Orchestra with Piron on the far right

Armand J. Piron (1888-1943) was a bandleader who played jazz violin. A Creole of color who walked with a crutch from childhood, he and Clarence Williams had formed their own publishing company in 1915. Four years later they made a fortune with "I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister, Kate", a song Louis Armstrong claimed he wrote. Piron took his band to New York in 1923, playing the Cotton Club and Roseland Ballroom. The band recorded there but later returned to their hometown.



"Shimmy" Sheet Music, 1922

A youthful Louis Armstrong had been performing a tune with obscene lyrics inspired by a Storyville madam named Kate Townsend. According to Satchmo, Clarence Williams promised him \$25 for the song but never paid him. In later years Piron said the song was neither his nor Armstrong's but, like so many local melodies, it had been through several incarnations. Louis and Piron both used the phrase "shake like jelly on a plate" but Piron said "who knows if Louis

made that up himself." Piron knew that by cleaning up the song it would be a big hit and he was right.

The Meters later cleaned up a slightly naughty children's song when they recorded "They All Asked for You". By simply transforming the word "asked" into the local vernacular ("axed"), the humorous reference to animals' *derrières* was muted. They then threw in some "red beans and rice" and "tomato paste" accompanied by the Creole patois of "Eh, la bas!" into the big "Creole gumbo" and had themselves a winner. The French founders of New Orleans lived *avec plaisir*, so food, music and dance have always been the heart and soul of the city.

An earlier lyric cleansing took place at Cosimo Matassa's J & M Recording Studio. The way the story goes is that Richard Penniman, after unsuccessful recordings for RCA and Peacock, came to New Orleans for a session with Specialty Records. Producer Bumps Blackwell thought that Richard's songs, generally slow blues, were not particularly good enough. A break was called and Richard and the band dropped into the Dew Drop Inn. Little Richard let loose on an old upright piano and belted out a raucous and lewd "Tutti Frutti, Loose Booty". Back at the studio young lyricist Dorothy LaBostrie cleaned up the words (changing "Booty" to "Rootie" and the "damns" to "wop bam booms") and a few minutes later they created Rock 'n' Roll history.



Little Richard makes Rock 'n' Roll history

Pat Boone covered "Tutti Frutti", but that was putting the song through one too many wash cycles. Dorothy LaBostrie gave a different account of the song's genesis. She told author Jeff Hannusch that "Little Richard didn't write none of" the song. She said she wrote the whole thing in fifteen minutes having been inspired by seeing tutti frutti ice

cream as a selection in the drugstore near her house on Galvez Street. One must choose the most believable story since "success has many fathers, and failure is an orphan."

Many New Orleanians still say icebox instead of refrigerator even though the Iceman cometh no longer. But the Iceman made a visit to New Orleans jukeboxes via Ville Platte with a very popular novelty song by Big Joe entitled "Ice Man". In a charming Cajun accent, Joe explained why "the ladies love for me to come around."

Another double entendre classic from a local musical giant is Dave Bartholomew's "My Ding A Ling," a song he recorded three times in the early 50s. The third time (in 1954) was with The Bees as "Toy Bell". Bartholomew said he had learned the song from an Ohio man named Hayes. As usual, it was a case of cleaning up the lyrics. It wasn't until eighteen years later when the song became Chuck Berry's only Number One hit.

There are numerous other examples of recordings with barely bawdy banter such as Jean Knight telling "Mr. Big Stuff": "Don't Mess With My Toot-Toot." And just like the musicians of the past, New Orleans-born rapper Juvenile (real name, Terius Gray) cleaned up his 1999 single "Back That Thang Up". Even the explicit version used "Azz", rhyming with "jazz" instead of "crass". So when in New Orleans you hear something a bit saucy, just clean it up a little. Nothing risqué, nothing gained.

NED HÉMARD

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