

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The New Orleans Jump

There is a hopping tune entitled "The New Orleans Jump" and was recorded by Andy Kirk and also by Roosevelt Sykes. Sykes (1906 – 1983) was a famous blues musician (inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 1999) also known as "The Honeydrinker". This rollicking cigar-chomping boogie blues piano player lived out his final years in New Orleans.

And when "The New Orleans Jump" is mentioned, the reference should not be confused with the energetic style of New Orleans hip hop music originating in the late 1980s known as "The Bounce". The essence of "Bounce" music is its call and response style party chants and dance call-outs, which are typically sung over what is known as the "Triggerman beat".

There are numerous much older African-derived musical chants that have come down to us though the years in the form of animal stories. Prominent in Louisiana folklore, they are known as *cantes fables* in French.

*Ai yè ya, Compère Lapin,
C'est ti bête qui conné sauté.
Wai yè ya, Papa Lapin,
C'est ti bête qui conné sauté.*

Ai yè ya, Brother Rabbit,
He is a little creature who knows how to jump.
Wai yè ya, Father Rabbit,
He is a little creature who knows how to jump.

This brings us to the type of "New Orleans Jump" we are talking about, the *sauté*. *Compère Lapin* mentioned above knows how to *sauté*. So do *Créole* chefs in *la Nouvelle Orléans*. The word *sauté* is a form of

the French verb “to jump”. In a *sauté*, all the ingredients are heated at once, and cooked in a very short period of time. To execute this process, the ingredients are quickly moved around in the pan, either by the use of a spatula, or by repeatedly jerking the pan itself (*sauté* literally describes the jumping motion of the pan’s contents as they are being cooked).

A discussion of sautéing will follow, but first a few words about the devious little character “who knows how to jump”.

“Brother Rabbit”, known to most of us by his contracted name “Br’er Rabbit” is a wiley little creature whose origins may be purely West African, although some believe they could be Native-American. We know about these fables from many different sources, but one of the first writers or historians to compile his observations was Louisiana native Alcée Fortier (whose father and grandfathers were sugar cane planters of French *Créole* ancestry). Born June 5, 1856, in St. James Parish, the son of Florent Louis Fortier and Edwige Aimé, Alcée was a neighbor of Laura Plantation (where he visited as a young man). The Fortier and Aimé families were prominent in the social and political life of the parish and the state. Maternal grandfather was St. James Parish sugar planter, Valcour Aimé.

In the 1870s, Alcée visited the workers’ cabins at Laura Plantation (on the West Bank of the Mississippi River near Vacherie, Louisiana), as well as other nearby plantations. As a teenager, he began to gather together these Senagalese stories from former slaves, just as they related them to their own children, all fascinating accounts of *Compère Lapin* and the slow-witted *Compère Bouki* (the trickster rabbit and the stupid fool).

In 1880 Fortier was elected professor of French in the University of Louisiana, later named Tulane University. He was Professor of Romance Languages there his entire career, but expanded his studies to include Acadian French, Louisiana Créole, as well as other European languages. In 1894, Alcée Fortier published his folk stories, mostly derived directly from the African American oral storytelling tradition he witnessed near Laura Plantation, under the title *Louisiana Folk Tales: In French Dialect and English Translation*.

Meanwhile, on July 20, 1879, Fortier’s friend and colleague in Georgia, Joel Chandler Harris (1845 – 1908), published “The Story of Mr. Rabbit and Mr. Fox as Told by Uncle Remus” in the *Atlanta Constitution*. It was but the first of thirty-four plantation tales that would comprise *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* in 1880. These wonderful dialect stories he had heard were said to be fables told by former slaves in Georgia and the Carolinas. These tales, too, revolve around that sly rabbit who usually succeeds by using his wits. Chandler was a master in the use of dialect in the personage of animal characters.

Also, throughout his journalistic and literary career, Harris actively promoted African-American civil rights, suffrage and equality. He regularly denounced racism and promoted racial reconciliation and the importance of higher education for African Americans.

These stories were of great delight to President Teddy Roosevelt, who invited Harris to the White House. Mark Twain proclaimed Harris to be "the only master (of African American dialect) the country has produced." And these fables also introduced international readers to the American South. Rudyard Kipling wrote in a letter to Harris that he found himself and others "quoting whole pages of Uncle Remus." Kipling would go on to write his own wonderful *pourquoi* tales, his *Just So Stories*.

In 1888, Charles Colcock Jones, Jr. (1831 – 1893) published *Negro Myths of the Georgia Coast* (retitled *Gullah Folktales from the Georgia Coast*). It recounts the tales he heard exchanged by South Atlantic coastal blacks working on his family's rice and cotton plantation. His characters are Buh Rabbit and Buh Fox, to name but two. Son of Presbyterian clergyman, educator and planter, Charles Colcock Jones, Sr., Charles Jr. was an attorney, historian, archaeologist and mayor of Savannah, Georgia. Charles Jr.'s brother, Dr. Joseph Jones (1833 – 1896) was a Louisiana physician and medical school professor at the University of Louisiana, later named Tulane. Dr. Jones was the grandfather of New Orleans attorney Joseph Merrick Jones (1902 – 1963), who served as Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs in the U.S. State Department and was for many years the president of the Board of Tulane University. He built a successful law practice in New Orleans as the senior partner of the firm that is today known as Jones Walker, one of the largest law firms in the Gulf South.

Laura Plantation is today considered very important to African American history and is included on the Louisiana African American Heritage Trail. Alcée Fortier recorded two main characters in his folk tales: *Compère Lapin* and *Compère Bouki*. *Lapin* is French for rabbit and *Bouki* (or *Boukee*) is a Wolof word, the native language spoken in Senegal The Gambia and Mauritania in West Africa, and means "stupid hyena". In the 1720s, Senegal was the homeland for almost all of the first slaves who arrived in Louisiana. For another sixty years, Senegalese slaves formed the core of the African slave trade in Louisiana (until the 1780s, when the trade shifted to the English colonies, again bringing slaves out of Senegal). During these many years, the Senegalese slave stories (whether in Louisiana or in Georgia or the Carolinas) were being handed down from generation to generation. And they were always fables featuring the clever rabbit and other animal characters.

Today in Senegal, Wolof-speaking children learn French in school. Local Wolof stories were translated into French in the 1950s, and they are almost (word for word) the same that Fortier collected in the 1870s.

Back in New Orleans, something extraordinarily delicious is always being sautéed somewhere in town. It is a method of cooking that uses a small amount of fat in a shallow pan over relatively high heat (high heat, low fat). The individual ingredients are usually cut into smaller pieces or sliced thinly to expedite the cooking. The sautéed ingredients are browned while preserving their texture, moisture and flavor. If meat, chicken or fish is sautéed, a cooking technique known as deglazing is utilized for removing and dissolving caramelized bits of food from the pan in order to make a sauce.

One may experience sautéing the “holy trinity” of Cajun and *Créole* cuisine (onions, green bell peppers and celery) or a *mirepoix*, the traditional trilogy of carrots, celery and onions used in classic French stews and soups.

Sautéing can sometimes be confused with pan-frying, in which larger food items (steaks or chops, for example) are cooked rapidly, and flipped to the other side. Some cooks distinguish between pan-frying and sautéing based on the depth of the oil used. Remember: high heat, low fat. Sautéing also differs from searing because searing only browns the surface of the food. Olive oil or clarified butter are often used for sautéing, but other fats will suffice. Regular butter is more flavorful (than clarified butter) but burns more easily due to the presence of milk solids.

When ingredients are allowed to be sautéed, they hop and “jump” around in the pan confirming that one has begun with an adequate amount of high heat. Always remember to heat your pan and fat of choice first before adding the ingredients. It's an immediate clash, not a period of adjustment. True but simple *sauté*, it is said, can be performed without even moving the pan at all. Pan movement is referred to as “flipping the pan” and is not required in true *sauté*. “Flipping a pan” or movement is just a professional term for ingredient agitation without the use of utensils.

Tom Fitzmorris' recipe for sautéed crab claws gives one an idea of how sautéing really works:

After sautéing the garlic in butter until fragrant, “Add the crab fingers and sprinkle with Creole seasoning and salt. Agitate the pan to cook the crab fingers evenly.”

You get the idea. Agitation is involved, but it pays off.

When *Compère Lapin* gets himself into a stew, he, too, commences to hop and “jump” around in a state of agitation. Then he starts to reason rather than react. He usually manages to figure a way free by using his wits, often bucking authority and occasionally bending social mores as he sees fit. Brother Rabbit, after all, “*C’est ti bête qui conné sauté*”.

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“The New Orleans Jump”
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