

A City Most Historical

The Pirates of Penzance; or, The Slave of Duty is Gilbert and Sullivan's wonderful comic opera (their fifth) that had its official premiere not in England but in New York City at the Fifth Avenue Theatre on December 31, 1879, where it was a tremendous hit.



Poster for Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*, c. 1880

With music by Arthur Sullivan and libretto by W. S. Gilbert, *The Pirates of Penance* had a "piracy" theme in more ways than one. It was the only Gilbert and Sullivan opera to have its official premiere in the United States for a reason. At that time, U.S. law did not provide copyright protection to foreigners. And after the success in London of the duo's previous opera, *H.M.S. Pinafore*, in 1878, more than 100 American companies quickly staged unauthorized productions that paid Messrs. Gilbert and Sullivan no royalties and often changed their wording without permission. In order to forestall, if not prevent, additional copyright piracy, the talented Victorian-era theatrical partnership with the long sideburns delayed publication of the *Pirates* score and libretto and decided to mount the first production of their

opera in the United States, before others could copy it. They succeeded somewhat, but failed, along with their producer, over the next decade, to control the American performance copyrights to *Pirates*, as well as their other operas.

THE PIRATES,
THE PIRATES OF THE GULF,
THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE,
THE PIRATES WHO AIDED JACKSON
IN THE DEFENSE OF NEW ORLEANS,
LAFITTE WAS A PIRATE,
THE PIRATES ARE GENTLEMANLY
BUCCANNERS,
SO WAS LAFITTE.
THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE WILL BE
AT THE ACADEMY TO-NIGHT.
GILBERT-SULLIVAN'S BEST MUSIC.
— 3 HOURS OF FUN. —

*Picayune ad for Pirates at The Academy of Music, December 24, 1882,
with just a touch of New Orleans "pirate" pride*

Perhaps the most popular song from *The Pirates of Penance* is "I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General" (also known as the "Major-General's Song"). It is what is known as a "patter song", one which the singer, in order to deliver the often fast-paced, tongue-twisting lyrics to maximum effect, should be capable of excellent enunciation. Performed by Major General Stanley at his first entrance, towards the end of Act I, the character introduces himself by presenting in song his impressive and well-rounded educational resumé, while admitting to a few shortcomings.

And, according to the opera's stage directions, in reciting the words of the libretto, at the end of each verse the Major-General is "bothered for a rhyme". Still he manages to come up with one just in the nick of time, and in each case manages to complete the verse with a flourish.

What if Gilbert and Sullivan had written an operetta about New Orleans, an impressive resumé replete with historical and cultural references, such as those adroitly enunciated in the Modern Major-General's Song?



"Just point the way for my sashay to Broad Street's Dollar General"

Below is a loving pastiche of "A Modern Major-General", New Orleans style, from Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*. And remember that a pastiche, unlike a parody, seeks to celebrate, not mock, the work that it imitates.

New Orleans is the model of a city most historical

New Orleans is the model of a city most historical.
In heralding our hurricanes Nash Roberts was our oracle.
Our streets have names, like flambeaux flames,
mysterious and mythical,
Fantastical, numerical and even metaphorical.
It is a spot where words are not what you might call grammatical,
Like "Where Y'at?" and "Axe You Dat" and phrases most impractical.
On Mardi Gras the crowds all roar, it's really quite phenomenal,
And you'll see guys in full disguise like snowmen quite abom'nable.

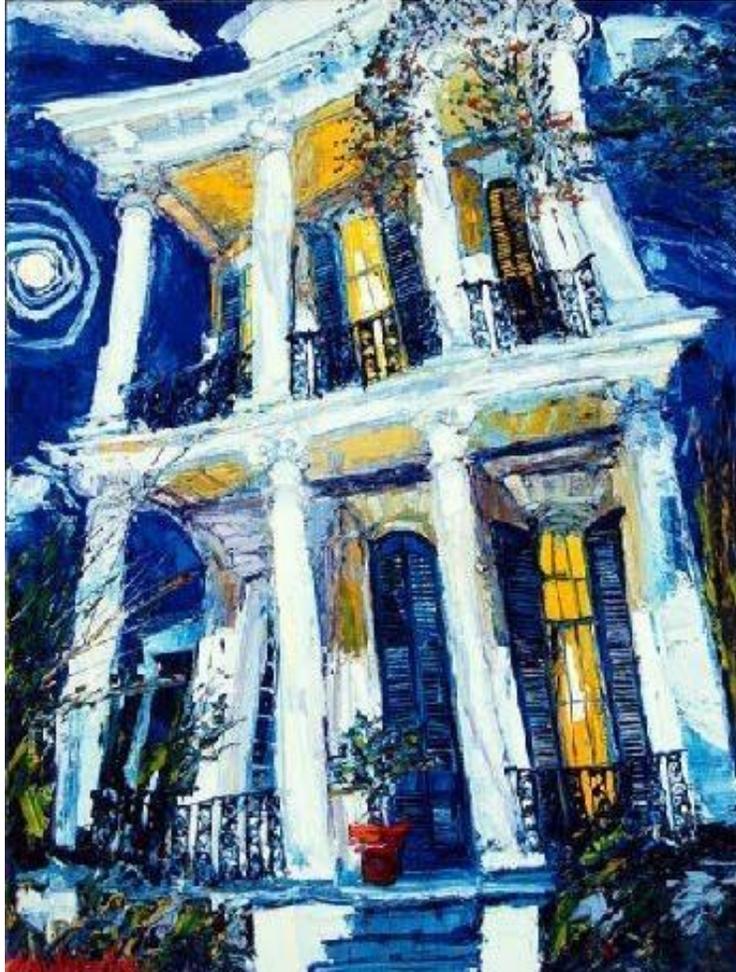
It's quite a town for getting' down, it's always *très* spontaneous.
To second line and drink some wine is not a sign of zaniness.
In short, in matters that appear to be phantasmagorical,
New Orleans is the model of a city most historical.



When serving shrimp one mustn't skimp on lading on the remoulade.

The city's culinarians love their ravigote and remoulade,
And trout meunier with pommes de terre is not a dish at all so odd.
They also rave on how they crave their po-boys over submarines,
And what is more they so adore their sno-balls and trout amandines.

I quote in elegiacs all the joys of our metropolis:
When houses lean, you must've seen the art of Michalopolous.
Our seafood fare's beyond compare, like redfish, drum and pompano,
And our soulful sound, it's all around, like Longhair and Fats Domino.



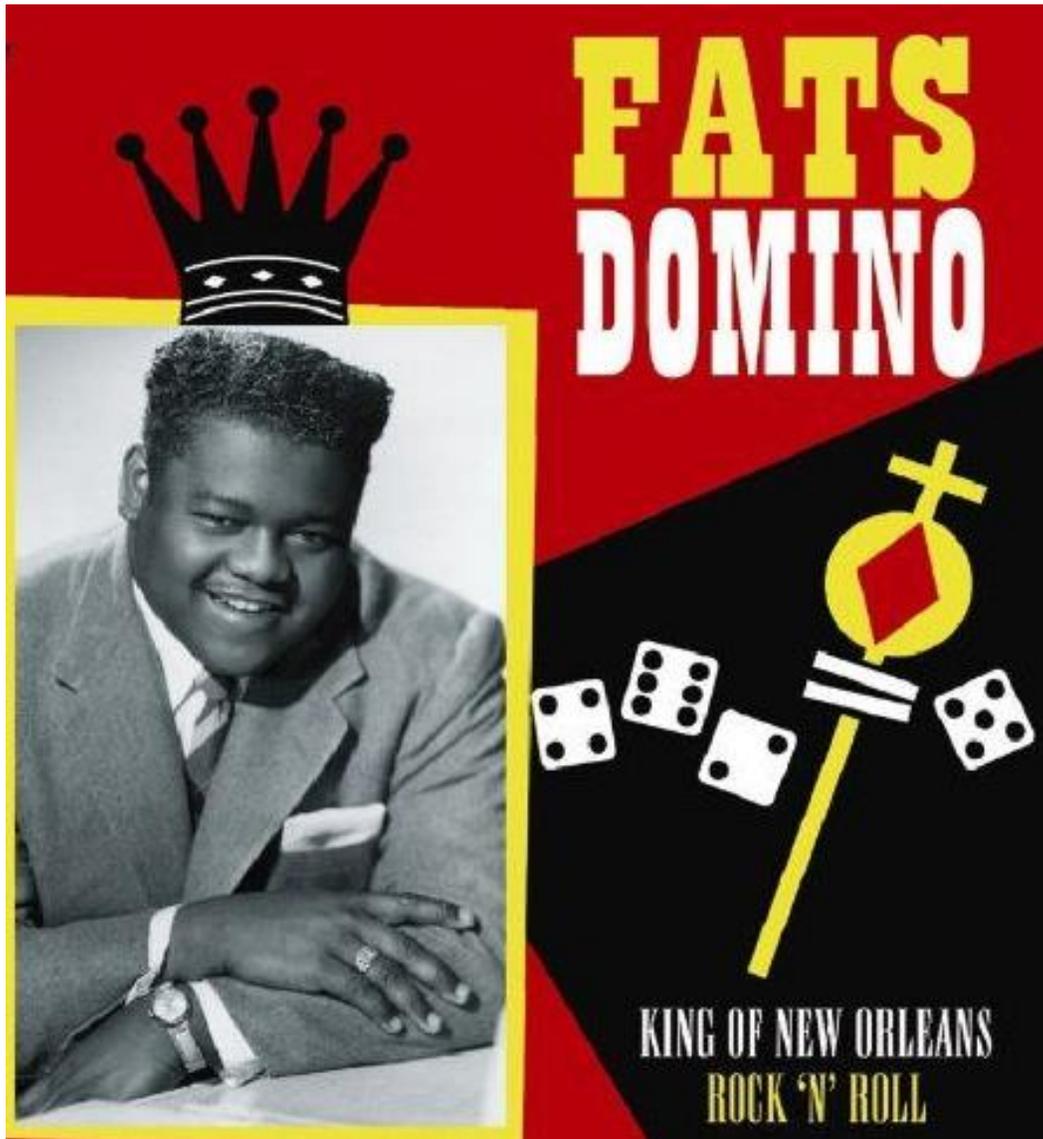
When houses lean, you must've seen the art of Michalopolous.

In matters architectural, we have shotguns and some camelbacks,
And it's no crime at cocktail time to mix up lots of Sazaracs.
And live oak trees, they're sure to please in settings most aboriginal.
New Orleans is the model of a city most historical.

Hard to measure are our treasures, they're spectacular and various,
When Dorsey crooned those Toussaint tunes, he was funky yet
hilarious.

Read the *Picayune* when it's opportune, it's our city's periodical,
And on Bourbon Street it's an added treat just to hear songs Harry
Connick-al.

Out at Audubon or City Park, our events are recreational
And our football team when it dares to dream is really quite Saint-
sational.
Bring your kids or wife, or your friends for life, you can even bring
your paramour,
Head to Morning Call for some Joe y'all, or McKenzie's for a *petit four*.



On some bad advice, they put in dice instead of adding dominos.

So c'mon y'all, grab a parasol, the music is parade-able
And when you're called out at a ball, it's simply masquerade-able
To praise its Jazz and razzmatazz is not at all rhetorical
New Orleans is the model of a city most historical.



And to second line is the way we shine, it's how we are spontaneous.



And it is, it is a glorious thing to be a Pirate King.

Mea culpa for substituting *petit four* for *Pinafore* in the lyrics, still I hope you enjoyed this Crescent City homage to Gilbert and Sullivan.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"A City Most Historical"
Ned Hémard
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