

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Domino Effect

It could be the name of the main Bond girl in the James Bond novel and movie, *Thunderball*, or a prostitute encountered by Tom Cruise in Stanley Kubrick's movie *Eyes Wide Shut*. It is also the title of a popular song written and recorded by Northern Irish singer-songwriter Van Morrison, his personal musical tribute to a legendary New Orleans' R&B singer and piano player *extraordinaire* (nicknamed "Fats").

Of course the name in question is "Domino", which remains Morrison's highest charting single ever, surpassing his earlier signature song "Brown Eyed Girl", which had charted at Number 10 in 1967. New Orleans' own Deacon John and his Ivories perform an excellent rendition of what one reviewer described as a "continually exhilarating" song that is "a riff-heavy and remarkably contagious example of Van Morrison's desire to pay tribute to his well of inspiration."



But do you know the fascinating history behind the name “Domino”?

Of course, you remember the game you probably played as children. Dominoes (or dominos) are the collective gaming pieces making up a domino set, usually consisting of twenty-eight tiles. Each domino is a rectangular tile with a line dividing its face into two square ends. Each end is marked with a number of spots (or pips) like dice, or is blank. The backs of the domino tiles in a set have no distinguishing characteristics. They're either blank or have some common design.

Similarly, in the area of mathematics the word domino often refers to any rectangle formed from joining two congruent squares edge to edge. But how did this game of rectangular tiles come to be called “dominoes”?

It all goes back to the tiles' resemblance to carnival costumes, to Venetian Carnival masks known as *domini*, so-called because they had the appearance of French priests' winter hoods, being black on the outside and white on the inside. The name (first used circa 1694) ultimately derives from the Latin *dominus*, meaning “lord” or “master”, probably from *benedicamus Domino* (let us bless the Lord). The hood that often accompanied the mask was called a *bahoo*. These costumes were usually black, but occasionally varied to white and blue.



Writer Aileen Ribiero, in her work, *The Dress Worn at Masquerades in England 1730 to 1790*, described the appeal of this large, hooded domino cloak with a mask covering the eyes, worn at masquerades. She wrote that the domino costume represented intrigue, adventure, conspiracy and mystery, four elements that were an essential ingredient of the masquerade atmosphere. And the "domino" was often worn by both sexes.

Dominoes (the masked costume variety) were advertised in the New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, November 1, 1855, page 2, column 5. Madame Fierobe of "112 Conti street," the ad stated, "has lately very largely increased her extensive and varied assortment of costumes, dominoes, masks, ... so that she can now supply them appropriate for the representation of every nation, age and style. As heretofore her prices will be found very moderate. See advertisement."



A New Orleans "Costume Depot" on Camp Street

The *New Orleans Daily Delta*, that same year, described the "gay-hearted" maskers of Carnival, who "came forth in fanciful attire to celebrate the Mardi Gras":

"The past seemed to live again, as cavaliers in costumes of the days of Louis Quatorze rode by on prancing steeds. Not only were the riders decked in fancy robes, but also their horses came in for a share of the decorations, and bore rich cloths round their necks and ornamental appendages to their tails."

Antoine Dominique "Fats" Domino, Jr., (born February 26, 1928) recorded his version of "Mardi Gras in New Orleans" in 1953, the flip side of "Going to the River" (Imperial 5231). It was only one of countless hit recordings Domino would cut since he first attracted national attention with "The Fat Man" in 1949. That early rock and roll record featured a rolling piano and Fats providing his "wah-wah" vocals (mimicking a horn) over a strong backbeat. Cut at Cosimo Matassa's J&M Studios, at Rampart and Dumaine, it sold over a million copies and is widely regarded as the first rock and roll record to do so.

Fats would release many hits songs (eventually 37 Top 40 singles)

with co-composer and producer Dave Bartholomew, drummer Earl Palmer and saxophonists Alvin "Red" Tyler and Herbert Hardesty. Fats may not have been the most flamboyant artist of the 50s, but he was surely the most rooted in the worlds of blues, R&B and the numerous strains of jazz that gave rise to rock and roll. This transitional figure (connecting rhythm & blues seamlessly to rock and roll) ultimately sold more records than any 50s-era rock artist except Elvis. From 1950 to 1963, Fats made *Billboard's* pop chart 63 times and its R&B chart 59 times, scoring more hit records than Little Richard, Chuck Berry and Buddy Holly combined. His best-known songs include "Ain't That a Shame", "Blueberry Hill" and "I'm Walkin'".

Fats Domino was born into a musical family, and began performing for small change in local joints while working odd jobs (like hauling ice) to make ends meet. In 1946, he began playing piano in Billy Diamond's band at the Hideaway Club. It was there that Diamond gave him the nickname "Fats". In 1949, Fats met Dave Bartholomew (his producer and collaborator) and Lew Chudd, who signed him to Chudd's Imperial Records label. The rest is history. Domino finally crossed into the pop mainstream in 1955 with "Ain't That a Shame" which hit the Top Ten, but Pat Boone's milder cover of the song actually hit #1 (receiving wider radio airplay during that era of racial segregation). But things changed quickly, with Domino himself appearing in two films released in 1956: *Shake, Rattle & Rock* and *The Girl Can't Help It*. On December 18, 1957, Domino's hit "The Big Beat" made it on to the late Dick Clark's *American Bandstand*. "Everybody started callin' my music rock and roll," noted Fats, "but it wasn't anything but the same rhythm and blues I'd been playin' down in New Orleans."

Genial, shy and down-to-earth, Fats was the least affected of rock and roll's initial superstars. The British Invasion in 1964 devastated the careers of many first-generation rock and roll/R&B artists like Domino, whose streak ended that same year. He made the Hot 100 just once more in 1968 – ironically, with his cover of the Beatles' "Lady Madonna," a song Paul McCartney called "a bluesy boogie-woogie thing" that he had specifically written with Fats' backbeat style in mind. "It reminded me of Fats Domino for some reason," McCartney remembered. The Beatles adored Domino and visited him in New Orleans when they played at City Park Stadium in 1964.



President George W. Bush, First Lady Laura Bush and Fats Domino (in his signature white cap) outside Fats' home on Caffin Avenue after the President presented him the National Medal of Arts on August 29, 2006. The medal was a replacement for the one originally awarded by President Bill Clinton that was lost in Hurricane Katrina.

In 1986, Fats became an inaugural inductee into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The following year, he received a lifetime achievement award at the 29th Annual Grammy Awards ceremony. But in 2005, things did not look good. Speculation ran rampant that Fats had perished in the floodwaters rushing through his Ninth Ward home. The world cheered as news came that Fats had been rescued - but Fats lost his home, his pianos, his gold and platinum records and much of the city he loved.

Domino was the first artist to be announced as scheduled to perform at the 2006 Jazz & Heritage Festival, but he canceled just hours before he was to take the stage. "He wasn't feeling well," a friend reported; but he did briefly greet the crowd, apologizing and thanking fans for supporting the Fest. Domino also released an album *Alive and Kickin'* in early 2006 to benefit the Tipitina's Foundation, supporting indigent local musicians.

In 2007, some of the greatest names in rock and roll contributed tracks to the album, *Goin' Home: A Tribute to Fats Domino*. Funds from its sales were used to help rebuild Fats' home in his beloved New Orleans. That same year, Fats returned to the stage on May 19 at Tipitina's, performing to a full house. In September 2007, he was

inducted into the Louisiana Music Hall of Fame. He has also been inducted into the Delta Music Museum Hall of Fame in Ferriday, Louisiana. In December 2007, Fats Domino was inducted into the Hit Parade Hall of Fame.

Back on April 7, 1954, Fats Domino already had a number of hit records under his belt when President Dwight David Eisenhower made these remarks on how countries could fall to communism in Indonesia:

"Finally, you have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the 'falling domino' principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences."

This "Domino Theory" was resurrected in May 2009, when Fats Domino made an unexpected appearance at his namesake benefit concert aimed at raising funds for the Brees Dream Foundation to help rebuild schools and playgrounds devastated by Hurricane Katrina. The concert was aptly named "The Domino Effect".

In history, as in culture, one thing always seems to lead to another: from Venetian Carnival masks to games played with tiles, from a toppling theory for armed American intervention during the Cold War to the President of the United States visiting Fats Domino on Caffin Avenue.

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