

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

As Fate Would Have It

Pat Sajak and Vanna White would have been quite at home in New Orleans in January, 1828. It was announced back then in *L'Abeille de Nouvelle-Orléans* (New Orleans Bee) that "Malcolm's Celebrated Wheel of Fortune" was to "be handsomely illuminated this and tomorrow evenings" on Chartres Street "in honour of the occasion". The occasion was the "Grand Jackson Celebration" where prizes totaling \$121,800 were to be awarded.

The "Wheel of Fortune" was known as *Rota Fortunae* in medieval times, and it captured the concept of Fate's capricious nature. Chaucer employed it in the "Monk's Tale", and Dante used it in the "Inferno". Shakespeare had many references, including "silly Fortune's wildly spinning wheel" in "Henry V". And Hamlet had those "slings and arrows" with which to contend. Dame Fortune could indeed be "outrageous".

In New Orleans her fickle wheel caused Ignatius Reilly's "pyloric valve" to close up. John Kennedy Toole's fictional protagonist sought comfort in "The Consolation of Philosophy" by Boethius, but found none. Boethius wrote, "Are you trying to stay the force of her turning wheel? Ah! Dull-witted mortal, if Fortune begins to stay still, she is no longer Fortune."

Ignatius jotted down his fateful misfortunes in his lined tablet adorned with a most impressive figure in full headdress. The first copyright for Big Chief went to the Western Tablet Company of Saint Joseph, Missouri, but today the tablets are no longer being produced. And now the Big Chief has been replaced by the BlackBerry. Oh Cruel Fortuna!

Fate has not always been kind to New Orleans, but a happier musical Fate visited the Crescent City in the not-too-distant past. His name was Fate Marable (December 2, 1890 – January 16, 1947), and he was an accomplished pianist and unquestionably the most famous riverboat bandleader. At seventeen years of age, he was hired by Captain John Streckfus and played the steamboats of the Streckfus Line plying the Mississippi between New Orleans and St. Paul from 1907 until 1940.

Marable (who was born in Paducah, Kentucky) truly appreciated this new "jazz" sound emerging from New Orleans after World War I. In 1918 he organized the first New Orleans band for the company, and (making its debut the following year) the group featured such future jazz legends as Louis Armstrong on cornet, Warren "Baby" Dodds on clarinet, Johnny Dodds on banjo, George "Pops" Foster on bass and Johnny St. Cyr on guitar. Throughout his career, most of his band members were recruited from New Orleans. Other notables who played in the band were Henry "Red" Allen, Narvin Kimball, Al Morgan and Zutty Singleton.

Fate also found his muse by playing the ship's calliope, which had a tremendous range up and down the river. Only trouble was that so much steam condensation poured back down upon him, he had to wear a hooded raincoat.

Marable was a disciplined orchestra leader who wanted flawless performances, and the New Orleans musicians joked about their stints with him as "going to the Conservatory" with daily two hour rehearsals that included a stopwatch to maintain the proper tempo (70 beats a minute for a fox trot and 90 for a one step). Still Marable recognized Louis Armstrong's great

gift for improvisation and allowed him to deviate from playing his breaks note for note. A personal cultural clash took place during the three summers of 1919-1921, and (although Satchmo respected Marable's attention to detail) he knew he wouldn't be just a player in the horn section much longer.

After Armstrong left, Marabale and his "Society Syncopators" recorded their only disc on the Okeh label on March 16, 1924. It was "Frankie and Johnny" (a fox trot) with "Pianoflage" on the flip side. It was recorded in New Orleans and was the first record on which Zutty Singleton performed.

Fate Marable died of pneumonia in St. Louis, but the Streckfus steamers kept rolling along. Many remember fondly the sidewheeler "President" (built in 1924) that spent so many years in New Orleans. It was her homeport from 1941 to 1985, providing excursion cruises, dinner and dancing, special parties and Jazz Fest concerts. On May 24, 1988, she left New Orleans for good and was retired from service in 1999.

Whether boat builders, piano players or cornetists, as Longfellow wrote in *A Psalm of Life*:

"All are architects of Fate,
Working in these walls of Time;
Some with massive deeds and great,
Some with ornaments of rhyme.

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