

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Irish Mayor of New York Visits New Orleans**

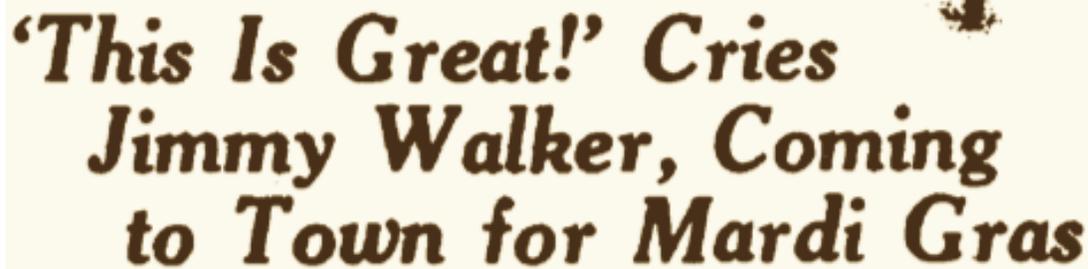
Rudy Giuliani, former mayor of New York, has been in the national spotlight for some time, especially since the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center. Traveling back in time, another New York mayor was very much in the public eye. James J. (Jimmy) Walker (June 19, 1881 – November 18, 1946), known as “Beau James,” was the fun-loving mayor of Gotham (1926 to 1932) during part of that period known as the Roaring Twenties. This 125-pound Irish Tammany Hall politician made a trip to the Crescent City for Mardi Gras in 1928 as a guest of New Orleans’ 300-pound Irish mayor, Arthur O’Keefe. Walker packed his fancy green silk pajamas and 36 pairs of spats for his trip down South and brought with him his political savvy and Irish sense of humor.



*Mayor Jimmy Walker of New York*

It was the Jazz Age in the city that gave birth to it, and the stock market crash of 1929 was more than a year away. Reporter Gwen Bristow of the *Times-Picayune* was smitten: "Jimmy Walker is a darling! Slim and blue-eyed with the manners of a Continental nobleman in the movies, bringing with him four wardrobe trunks full of wearing apparel, Jimmy Walker came into New Orleans Monday night, having dashed from Gulfport at sixty miles an hour in order to be on time for the Proteus parade."

After the last flambeaux moved out of sight, the dapper mayor sighed, "New York was never like This!"



**'This Is Great!' Cries  
Jimmy Walker, Coming  
to Town for Mardi Gras**

*Times-Picayune headline of February 21, 1928*

The New Orleans press delegation was regaled with the contents of the bespoke mayor's wardrobe trunks. "Yes, a hundred monogrammed handkerchiefs by Charvet of Paris. Fifty neckties ... from Italy, England and France. He always wears necktie, socks and handkerchiefs to match, and a little finger ring with a harmonizing stone."

The following day, Mayor Walker was front and center for the Mardi Gras day excitement. On the reviewing stand Walker took in the grand spectacle that was Rex. Leon Irwin reigned that year, and it was he who received the only champagne toast from Mayor Walker on his trip. Mayor O'Keefe remarked that he had never seen anybody get so hilarious on ginger ale as did Mayor Walker.

As the mules pulled along the swaying floats, the bands played on. Walker must have enjoyed the music, for he himself was a composer (having earlier written "Will You Love Me in September as You Do in May?"). The mood was festive that year. A lady on Canal Street fancied herself a flapper, drawing a sizeable crowd dancing the "Black Bottom" with an accompanying accomplice on ukulele. Zulu continued to satire Rex and the headline in the *Louisiana Weekly* proclaimed that 1928's "Zulu Burlesque on Rex to be Most Elaborate Ever."

New York's mayor caught a coconut when Zulu rolled by and yelled back: "From one nut to another!" A "Gods of Our Ancestors" float

bombarded him with a huge box of candy. Armed with clever quips, Hizzoner aimed to please his Italian constituents back home when a float honoring Christopher Columbus rolled by. He called the explorer the greatest man that ever lived. "Except for him, I'd be in Ireland now," Walker announced. And when the Pocahontas float arrived, Walker made a joke about John Smith and Governor Al Smith (in 1928 the first Catholic to win a major-party presidential nomination).

Jimmy Walker made a farewell speech to the ladies and gentlemen of New Orleans and "surrounding cities, hamlets, villages, towns and states" saying he "was never quite so thrilled in my life." He certainly covered all the bases. He returned home with a gold key to the city and a life membership in the Louisiana Jockey Club. Back home, happy days were "here again" (but not for long).



*The dapper Mayor Jimmy Walker*

Walker was very popular as mayor, but this mayor of Prohibition era New York allowed booze, speakeasies and chorus girls dancing "The Charleston" to proliferate. His affairs with various showgirls were widely known. He won re-election handily in 1929, but with "The Crash" the mayor's fortunes also took a downward spiral. Patrick Cardinal Hayes blamed the economic downturn on the mayor's immoral lifestyle. The mayor left his wife for showgirl Betty Compton, and it caused a scandal. This enfolding drama was later romanticized in the motion picture, "Beau James". Before his reign as Bacchus in 1973, Bob Hope portrayed Jimmy Walker in Paramount's 1957 Technicolor film.

In real life (as in the movie), investigations into corruption forced Mayor Walker to resign in late 1932. He quickly fled to Europe to escape possible prosecution and marry Compton.



*The 1957 biopic*

Later he returned to the United States (after a Federal tax investigation decided there was nothing to go after). Mayor LaGuardia appointed Walker labor mediator in the garment industry. Eventually, Walker became head of Majestic Records in New York. The label enjoyed its greatest success in the 1940s, and one of its major artists was New Orleans' own Louis Prima. Prima composed and recorded "A Sunday Kind of Love" on Majestic #1113. Other well-known performers recorded their versions of the song created by the artistry of the trumpeting scat singer from New Orleans. It later became a triumph for New York's popular doo-wop group, the Harptones, in 1953. The cultural and historic exchanges between the Big Apple and the Big Easy continue to this day.



*The great Louis Prima of New Orleans*

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