

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Mardi Gras Gangnam Style**

There's a galloping dance (and accompanying song) that has been sweeping the nation. "Gangnam Style" by South Korean recording artist PSY became the first online video to receive a billion Internet hits on December 21, 2012. Released the previous July, the music video shows PSY performing an outrageously funny horse-riding dance while wearing several "classy" suits and black sunglasses. During his efforts to create such a comical dance, PSY tried out various "cheesy" animal-oriented dance moves (even pandas and kangaroos) before settling on a galloping horse, which involves simulating the riding of a horse, with hands atop an imaginary pommel, imitating holding the reins and twirling a lasso while alternately working the legs into a shuffling side gallop. Seoul's "Gangnam District" is a hip and trendy area to live. PSY has said that the mindset of his dance is "Dress classy and dance cheesy". The song pokes fun at those who try to be "classy", but aren't really.

After "The Twist", Chubby Checker brought the world "The Pony" with his 1961 Number One hit "Pony Time". But "Gangnam Style" and "Pony Time" were not the first time dancers galloped joyfully. It happened in Paris and New Orleans in the 1830s and 1840s. Further information on this popular New Orleans form of Mardi Gras horseplay shall be forthcoming.

The celebration of Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday) arrived in Louisiana with two Canadian brothers, Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville and Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville. Sent by Louis XIV to secure the territory of *La Louisiane* for France, the brothers' expedition entered the mouth of the Mississippi on Monday, March 2, 1699. Their party continued upstream to a spot about sixty miles downriver from what would become New Orleans, in present-day Plaquemines Parish, and encamped. This was the following day, Tuesday, March 3, 1699, Mardi Gras. In honor of this European holiday, expedition leader Iberville named the site *Pointe du Mardi Gras* and the connecting tributary *Bayou Mardi Gras*.

The origins of Carnival (generally believed to mean “farewell to flesh” just before Lent) can be traced to Medieval Europe, where the Catholic Church adopted age-old customs from the *Lupercalia*, a Roman circus-like pastoral festival taking place each year in mid-February.

The actual beginning of the observance of Mardi Gras festivities on the streets of the Crescent City is not entirely certain, but a recorded account from 1743 shows that the custom of Carnival balls was already established. Pierre de Rigaud de Vaudreuil de Cavagnal, Marquis de Vaudreuil (1698 – 1778) French colonial governor of Louisiana hosted a ball that year to celebrate Carnival. Earlier, in 1730, Marc-Antoine Caillot, a clerk in the employ of the Company of the Indies, wrote of his *ad hoc* costuming experiences that Mardi Gras in the fledgling Louisiana colony. Cross-dressing was involved.

Louisiana historian John Smith Kendall wrote that Mardi Gras was given some fresh attention “in 1827 by some young Louisianians on their return from Paris, whither they had been sent to complete their education. They organized a street procession of maskers, somewhat primitive, no doubt, but sufficient of a novelty in those days to prove a great success. Every year thereafter the experiment was repeated, and each time it grew in popularity.”

These were the years before the Mystick Krewe of Comus, New Orleans’ oldest continuously active organized krewe. Once parading on Mardi Gras evening, “It was Comus,” opined Carnival scholar Henri Schindler, “who, in 1857, saved and transformed the dying flame of the old Creole Carnival with his enchanter's cup; it was Comus who introduced torch lit processions and thematic floats to Mardi Gras; and it was Comus who ritually closed, and still closes, the most cherished festivities of New Orleans with splendor and pomp.”

This celebrating prior to Comus was quite different from what Carnival eventually became. Kendall explained, “Each masker provided his own costume, there was no preliminary organization, the participants went for the most part on foot, and the music, if there was such, was hired by private subscription on the part of the various little groups of celebrants. Generally, the festivities came to an end with a ball at the St. Louis Hotel or the Salle d’Orleans, at which only the élite of the aristocratic old city was present.”

The masking and merriment, this rich confusion, continued until 1833, when Bernard Xavier Philippe de Marigny de Mandeville (1785 – 1868), the great Creole developer of the Faubourg Marigny, put forth a great effort to put together a more organized Mardi Gras and set it on a permanent footing. Marigny, affluent plantation owner and prominent public servant, raised sufficient money to fund an official Carnival celebration. He had earlier served as President of the Louisiana Senate and counted among his friends Andrew Jackson, the Marquis

de Lafayette, Sam Houston, Zachary Taylor and other famous figures of his time.



*Bernard de Marigny ... organized Mardi Gras*

Kendall saw two traditions evolving during these years “along two well-defined lines quite distinct one from the other, though related in their common object.” The first was the development of the open-air pageantry, excellent at attracting visitors to the Crescent City, and the second was “the perfecting of the unique system of masked balls which is the main feature of the Carnival” for New Orleanians. In 1837 (the year Bernard de Marigny’s real estate investments took a dive in the panic of that year), the first parade (or “peripatetic tableaux” first developed in Mobile in 1831) hit the streets of New Orleans, and two years later Crescent City revelers rolled out a gigantic six-foot tall rooster, riding in a carriage, and “emitting stentorian crows, to the great delight of an appreciative crowd.”

Also in 1833 (the year of Marigny’s official festivities), Daniel Auber’s

opera, *Gustave III*, or *Le Bal Masqué* (the masked ball) debuted in Paris at the *Salle Le Peletier* of the *Paris Opéra* on February 27, 1833. The opera was a major success for its composer. More importantly, it greatly influenced the observance of Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

The opera presentation featured a unique finale: a grand march of maskers followed by a *galop*, or *galopade*. A *galopade* is a lively galloping style dance in duple time popular in the nineteenth century. The duple musical meter is characterized by a primary division of two beats to the bar, like a polka. When Auber's opera was first presented in New Orleans in 1840, it rapidly became a local tradition for Creole maskers to parade around the French Quarter and end up at the *théâtre* just in time to join the cast onstage for the opera's grand march finale ... and away they would gallop.



*Composer Daniel Auber*

Contemporary French writer and critic Jules Gabriel Janin described the wonders of the last act's marching finish, "a fairyland of beautiful women, of gauze, of velvet, of grotesqueness, of elegance, of good taste and of bad taste, of details, of learned researches, of esprit, of madness and of whimsicality", and it features that glorious *galopade*.

Janin wrote of the participants, "At their feet, constantly moving, is the circling crowd, disguised in every imaginable costume, and dominoes of every conceivable hue. Harlequins of all fashions, clowns, peddlers, what shall I say? One presents the appearance of a tub, another of a guitar; his neighbor is disguised *en botte d'asperges*; that one is a mirror, this a fish; there is a bird, here is a time-piece — you can

hardly imagine the infinite confusion. Peasants, marquises, princes, monks, I know not what, mingle in one rainbow-hued crowd. It is impossible to describe this endless madness, this whirl, this *bizarrerie*, on which the rays of two thousand wax tapers, in their crystal lustres, pour an inundation of mellow light. I, who am so well accustomed to spectacles like this — I, who am, unfortunately, not easily disposed to be surprised — I am yet dazzled with this radiant scene.”



*Botte d'asperges, great Mardi Gras costume in the 1840s*

One can only imagine how this spectacle was enhanced by the grand array of Mardi Gras maskers emerging from the *Vieux Carré* joining in this grandiose circular *galop*.

From galloping asparagus to “cheesy” South Korean horse dancing, one never knows what dance craze will capture a people’s imagination. Fall of 2012, I asked a member of New Orleans’ own fantastic “610 Stompers” if they would be dancing “Gangnam Style” any time soon. He confided to me that they would keep their dance moves “original”, but (much to the delight of their countless fans) I’m sure we’ll see some hilarious galloping going on this Mardi Gras.

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