

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

My Spy Boy

The great New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian anthem *Iko Iko* was first recorded as *Jock-A-Mo* in 1954 for Checker Records by New Orleans singer James Crawford, who worked under the name of Sugar Boy & the Cane Cutters. His group was also known as the Chipaka Shaweez, and the song is loaded with *Créole patois* (a blend of French and, in this case it is believed, some original Gambian words). *Jock-A-Mo*, Dr. John tells us, "means 'jester' in the old myth. It is Mardi Gras music, and the Shaweez was one of many Mardi Gras groups who dressed up in far out Indian costumes and came on as Indian tribes." Also in the Chipaka Shaweez, according to Dr. John, "were Professor Longhair on piano, Jake Myles, Big Boy Myles, Irv Bannister on guitar, and Eugene 'Bones' Jones on drums."

Crawford, who "lived near the Battlefield where the Indians paraded" (Simon Bolivar and Melpomene), drew his tune from much earlier rhythms and incantations: "It came from two Indian chants that I put music to," he explained. "*Iko Iko* was like a victory chant that the Indians would shout. *Jock-A-Mo* was a chant that was called when the Indians went into battle. I just put them together and made a song out of them."

Jock-A-Mo became a huge hit in 1965 as *Iko Iko* by the Dixie Cups on the Red Bird label, and was later included on the soundtrack for the 1987 film "The Big Easy". It has been covered by countless artists (such as the Grateful Dead, Cyndi Lauper and Warren Zevon) and interpolated into numerous other movies. The Belle Stars' cover of the song was featured in the film "Rain Man", and a later version by Zap Mama was featured in the opening sequences of the film "Mission: Impossible II".

One may recall the early version of the song's lyrics:

"My spy boy saw your spy boy, sittin' by the bayou (or, sometimes, by the 'fi-yo', i.e., 'fire'). My spy boy told your spy boy, "I'm gonna set your flag on fi-yo'."

This original terminology comes straight from Mardi Gras Indian lore. A "spy boy" was an emissary sent out by the Mardi Gras Indian "tribes" to scout out the road ahead and to see whether any other "tribes" were anywhere in the "hood". In those rough-and-tumble days, inter-tribal showdowns sometimes resulted in street violence and bloodshed.

The "fi-yo" in the lyrics (like the Neville Brothers' *Fiyo on the Bayou*) refers to the ceremonial fire that the Indians ignite before taking it to the streets on Mardi Gras Day. "Set yo' flag on fire" refers to the combative ritual of taking the tribe's pennant from the "flag boy" and destroying it, a New Orleans version of "Capture the Flag".

Iko Iko was a mocking chant "you grew up saying in the neighborhood," according to singer-songwriter Allen Toussaint, something used "like a cocky argument". Art Neville, however, thinks that what the Indians really said was "hike-o, hike-o all day" ('cause that's the kind of serious traveling they did "All on a Mardi Gras Day"). "It was *iko* by the time it got to Chief Jolly," Art said. And by the time of Dixie Cups, "my grandma" was substituted for "my spy boy". Huh?

The original nomenclature and unique form of Crescent City Indian lore was well known by young William Thomas Dupree, a New Orleans orphan who was "spy boy" for the Yellow Pochahantas tribe of Mardi Gras Indians. He would hit the streets at 5 o'clock in the morning on Mardi Gras Day. Since music was so much a part of Indian life, the young boy soon began playing piano in numerous New Orleans saloons and barrelhouses. He learned a lot under the tutelage of legendary greats such as Tuts Washington and Willie Hall (who he called his "father" and who taught him to play *Junker's Blues*).

Young William Thomas' real father was from the Belgian Congo and his mother was part African American and Cherokee Indian. Born between 1908 and 1910, he was orphaned around age 2 and sent to the New Orleans Home for Colored Waifs, the same institution that housed Louis Armstrong at age 11 after he fired a pistol to celebrate New Year's Day. It was there that "Satchmo" learned to play the cornet.

As a young man Dupree became a traveling man, a wayward minstrel off to Chicago and Indianapolis, always playing piano while working on the side as a cook or an assortment of other odd jobs. In Detroit he met the great Joe Louis, who encouraged him to become a boxer. He

ultimately fought in 107 bouts, winning many championships and picking up the nickname "Champion Jack", which the famed American blues pianist used the rest of his life.

Dupree is best known as a blues singer and pianist in the New Orleans style with an amusing way with words: "Mama, move your false teeth, papa wanna scratch your gums." His biggest commercial success was *Walkin' the Blues*, a duet with Teddy McRae. He sang about life, jail (*Angola Blues*), drinking (*Who Threw the Whiskey in the Well*) and drug addiction (*Junker's Blues*, which Fats Domino refashioned into his first hit, *The Fat Man*). Sometimes Dupree would indulge in the jive hipsters' word play known as "Vout", as in his *Mr. Dupree Blues*. And often he sang light-hearted tunes like the *Dupree Shake Dance*: "Come on, mama, on your hands and knees, do that shake dance as you please". Although Jerry Lee Lewis did not record Dupree's *Shake Baby Shake*, the lyrics of *Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On* – "You can shake it one time for me!" - echo Dupree's words.

One of Champion Jack Dupree's recordings was entitled *Rampart and Dumaine*, his New Orleans version of *Frankie and Johnny*. It has been suggested that the original *Frankie and Johnny* was inspired by details surrounding an actual murder, which took place in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1899. It tells the story of a woman, Frankie, who finds that her man Johnny was making love to another woman and shoots him dead. Some experts such as Leonard Feather wrote that the song was much older, sung at the Siege of Vicksburg; and Carl Sandburg says it was in widespread use before 1888. Others date it back to 1830.

But in New Orleans, the corner of "Rampart and Dumaine" was the location of the J & M Music Store and recording studio, where Cosimo Matassa recorded such musical luminaries as Little Richard, Professor Longhair, Fats Domino, Big Joe Turner and many others. Longhair's original version of *Mardi Gras in New Orleans* and Dupree's version of *Frankie and Johnny* both explicitly mention that intersection.

Before the 1991 film starring Al Pacino and Michelle Pfeiffer, Elvis Presley played a riverboat gambler named "Johnny" in the 1966 film "Frankie and Johnny". "Frankie" was played by the star of "The Beverly Hillbillies" and former "Miss New Orleans" of 1957, Donna Douglas. Landing in New Orleans, the musical cast and riverboat crew attend a masked ball, where "Frankie" and two other hot belles each rent the same Madame Pompadour costume. Confusion ensues, jealous "Frankie" shoots "Johnny", but her gambling lover is saved because the bullet struck a lucky medallion "Frankie" had given him.

But to New Orleanians, "Frankie and Johnny" has other connotations.

It's a trip to a beloved furniture store called Frankie and Johnnie's at 2600 St. Claude. Have a prison record? Bankrupt? On social security? Frank Trapani's wonderful commercials had you see the Special Man, who'd always answer, "Let'er have it!" This was followed by, "With Noooooooooo problem!" by another understanding Special Man.

To others in the Crescent City, it's a wonderful seafood restaurant known as Frankie and Johnny's at 321 Arabella Street, corner Tchoupitoulas, which specializes in po-boys and some great fried seafood.

And to some old timers and serious music aficionados, it's Champion Jack Dupree's *Rampart and Dumaine*, his unique take on *Frankie and Johnny*. Champion Jack Dupree also recorded the song *Yellow Pocahontas* about his early days as a "spy boy".

After several national and European tours (he moved to Europe in 1960), appearances at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, Dupree eventually settled in Germany where he died of cancer on January 21, 1992.

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