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NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

"Quite a Flap

1915 saw the name *jazz* attributed to the exciting music created in New Orleans but was then being played in Chicago. It burst forth from Congo Square, from funeral processions with marching bands and from the brothels and saloons of Storyville. New Orleans pianist Jelly Roll Morton (real name Ferdinand Lamothe) had the first published jazz arrangement in 1915, his "Jelly Roll Blues". He and others had taken this New Orleans style of music up to Chicago and New York where it soon created quite a storm.

Down in the Birthplace of Jazz, the New Orleans Hurricane of 1915 was a powerful storm, as well. Making landfall on September 29 near Grand Isle with 125 mph sustained winds, it entered the city at 7 am. Knocking the cupola off the *Presbytère* and leveling the Presbyterian Church on Lafayette Square, the hurricane also wiped out half the rides at Old Spanish Fort Amusement Park. Electricity to drainage pumps failed, and parts of Mid-City suffered significant flooding. 275 people perished, although only 21 in New Orleans.

Earlier that year on May 22 in New York, there was again another tempest. Nineteen-year-old banking heiress Eugenia Kelly was causing quite a flap on her way to court on the fashionable Upper East Side of Manhattan. Coming into a sizable fortune in just two years, Eugenia's mother had her daughter arrested with the threat of committing her to a correctional institution. Afraid that she would "become depraved", Mater complained of the young belle's love for jazz, cigarettes, absinthe and brandy. And all with a married man named Al Davis, a "tango pirate" preying on the naïve rich girl.

Readers were captivated by the accounts of the trial proceedings. On the third day, Eugenia finally gave in and agreed, "mother was right". A settlement had been reached. But she would soon elope with the recently divorced Mr. Davis after all. And, surprise, they'd divorce, too (but she did inherit the money). By then she was old news, and almost every young girl in the country was a flapper.

Acerbic critic of American culture, H. L. Mencken wrote, “The Flapper of 1915 has forgotten how to simper; she seldom blushes; and it is impossible to shock her.” Scholars disagree on the origin of the word “flapper”, but the term itself predates the 1920s by at least a century. The word’s origins range from a “young female prostitute” (akin to the flapping of a fledgling partridge or duck) to the “unstrapped buckles of her shoes” (mocked in the cartoons of John Held, Jr.). Mencken wrote that, in early nineteenth-century England, the word denoted “a very immoral young girl in her early teens”; but in America he believed it to be “one of a long series of jocular terms for a young and somewhat foolish girl, full of wild surmises and inclined to revolt against the precepts and admonitions of her elders.” The insouciant flapper said *adieu* to the “Gibson Girl” and came to symbolize the flamboyant, reckless spirit of the Jazz Age.

Flappers were All-American, but they had a French connection. In 1913, Coco Chanel opened up her very first shop. By 1923 she told *Harper’s Bazaar*, “simplicity is the keynote of all true elegance”. Her androgynous *la garçonne* look (“boy” with a feminine suffix) epitomized the image of the 1920s flapper, and provided the freedom of movement this musical style called *jazz* required. Short bobbed hairdos, flattened breasts, and straight corsetless waists accentuated the look. The flappers adored their newsboy caps and bell-shaped *cloche* hats (created by Parisian milliner Caroline Reboux). They sported broad bright neckties (like Eugenia Kelly) and layers of long beaded necklaces.

Flappers strove to refashion gender roles in the 20s, having assaulted the ideal of femininity in America’s Gilded Age. These young women (ultra-modern, full of pep and sexually emancipated) were seemingly unflappable, disdaining convention by smoking, drinking and dating frequently. They wore heavy makeup and “kiss proof” lipstick. They attended “petting parties” with their "snugglepup", (an affectionate name for their dashing sheik) who might “see a man about a dog" (buy whiskey). He was, after all, “the cat’s pajamas”. These girls abandoned pantaloons for “step-in” panties and wore simple bust bodices to hold their chest in place while dancing. And they loved “speakeasies” where they could dance lively dances like the “Charleston” or “Black Bottom”.

The “Black Bottom” originated in the African-American community in New Orleans, worked its way to Georgia and then moved on up to New York. The dance’s stomping steps, the knees swaying and the shuffling movements helped the dance replace the “Charleston” in popularity. Said to imitate a cow’s hind legs mired in the mud, the dance was performed all over the South before Perry Bradford wrote his version in 1919. Jelly Roll Morton’s composition in 1925 was the “Black Bottom Stomp”. Ginger Rogers danced DeSylva, Brown and

Henderson’s 1926 “Black Bottom” quite well as “Roxie Hart” in the original 1942 film version of the 2002 movie “Chicago” with Renée Zellweger, Catherine Zeta-Jones and Richard Gere.

Mrs. M. A. Davis of New Orleans (no relation to the “tango pirate”), while visiting the Hotel Astor in New York, gave a 1922 interview to the New York Times mourning the “flapper’s passing” in Gotham since the popularity of longer skirts. The headline further stated, “New Orleans Woman Says Bobbed Hair Is Now Popular There.”

“I really think it is a shame to lose the flapper, for you have lost a type,” said Mrs. Davis. “The New Orleans flapper hasn’t realized yet that she must put her skirts down; in fact, she has just commenced to bob her hair. It was interesting to note during our Mardi Gras last Winter that at one of the carnival balls, where a Queen with six attendants was the outstanding feature, not a single one of the girls had bobbed hair, but the fad is just taking both old and young there now. We always seem to be just behind New York, no matter how often we come to see you.”

Perhaps Mrs. Davis forgot that New Orleans was always in vogue, sending its creations (*jazz* and the “Black Bottom”) up to New York.

The writer who became spokesman for this generation, found himself lauded as “F. Scott Fitzgerald, who originated the flapper”. And he had his Zelda, “the most popular girl at every dance”. In his “Tales of the Jazz Age” he wrote of “My Last Flappers” and Jim “the Jelly-bean”, “one who spends his life conjugating the verb to idle in the first person singular”.

Call “a Memphis man a Jelly-bean” and he’ll possibly “hang you to a convenient telegraph-pole”, he wrote. “If you call a New Orleans man a Jelly-bean he will probably grin and ask you who is taking your girl to the Mardi Gras ball.”

Jim fell for Nancy who had “a mouth like a remembered kiss”, who “left a trail of broken hearts” all the way “to New Orleans”. But the flighty flapper fled and married the other guy. Poor Jim, but that was the Age.

The Era of the Flapper crossed over into the Jazz Age, a period following the end of World War I through the Roaring Twenties, and culminating with the onset of the Great Depression. After Wall Street flopped in 1929, finances went flat and flappers faded from the scene. The high-octane hedonism of the Age was now out of place amidst the economic hardships of the 30s. But the carefree flapper paved the way for bolder ideas to come, even in the City that Care Forgot.

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