

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Shall We Dance

Dancing has been an essential part of New Orleans' psyche almost since its very beginning. Pierre François de Rigaud, Marquis de Vaudreuil-Cavagnal replaced Bienville, the city's founder, as Governor of Louisiana. He set the standards high with his polished manners, frequently sponsoring balls, dinners, and other elegant social *soirées*. Serving from 1743 to 1753, he even provided the colony with a Parisian dancing master named Baby. Below are numerous quotes through the ages about the Crescent City's special love affair with dancing:

There were balls, with court dress *de rigueur*, where gaily uniformed officers danced with bejeweled women. This was the beginning of fashionable life in the colony.

- LYLE SAXON, writing of "de Vaudreuil's régime" in *Old Louisiana*

The eccentricities of Baby's mind, as well as those of his physical organization had made him famous in the colony, and the doleful mien with which he used to give his lessons, had gained him the appellation of the *Don Quixote of dancing*.

-Louisiana Historian CHARLES GAYARRÉ on Baby, the Dancing Master

The female Creoles being in general without education, can possess no taste for reading music or drawing, but they are passionately fond of dancing ... passing whole nights in succession in this exercise.

- PIERRE-LOUIS BERQUIN-DUVALLON, *Travels in Louisiana and the Floridas in the Year 1802, Giving the Correct Picture of Those Countries*

It's the land where they dance more than any other.

- LOUIS-NARCISSE BAUDRY DES LOZIÈRES, *Second Voyage à la Louisiane*, 1803

Upon my arrival at New Orleans, I found the people very Solicitous to maintain their Public Ball establishment, and to convince them that the American Government felt no disposition to break in upon their amusements ...

- GOVERNOR W. C. C. CLAIBORNE in a letter to James Madison, 1804

Two quadrilles, one French, the other English, were formed at once. An American, taking exception, brandished his stick over a fiddler, and there was at once, great turmoil.

- PIERRE CLÉMENT DE LAUSSAT, last French Governor of Louisiana, on the tensions on the dance floor between Creoles and Americans at a ball held January 8, 1804 (Laussat knew how to throw a party - with different colors of champagne for toasts to Spain, France and the United States)

Sirs, for thirty years we were Spaniards, and the Spaniards never forced us to dance the Fandango. We wish to dance neither the reel nor the jig.

- UNKNOWN CREOLE BELLE at 1804 ball in the *Salle Rue Condé*

Their persons are eminently lovely, and their movements indescribably graceful, far superior to any thing I ever witnessed in Europe ...

- THOMAS ASHE, *Travels in America, Performed in 1806*, an English observer (aware of their devotion to dance), lavishly praises the Creole women's "various charms" of grace, symmetry and elegance of motion

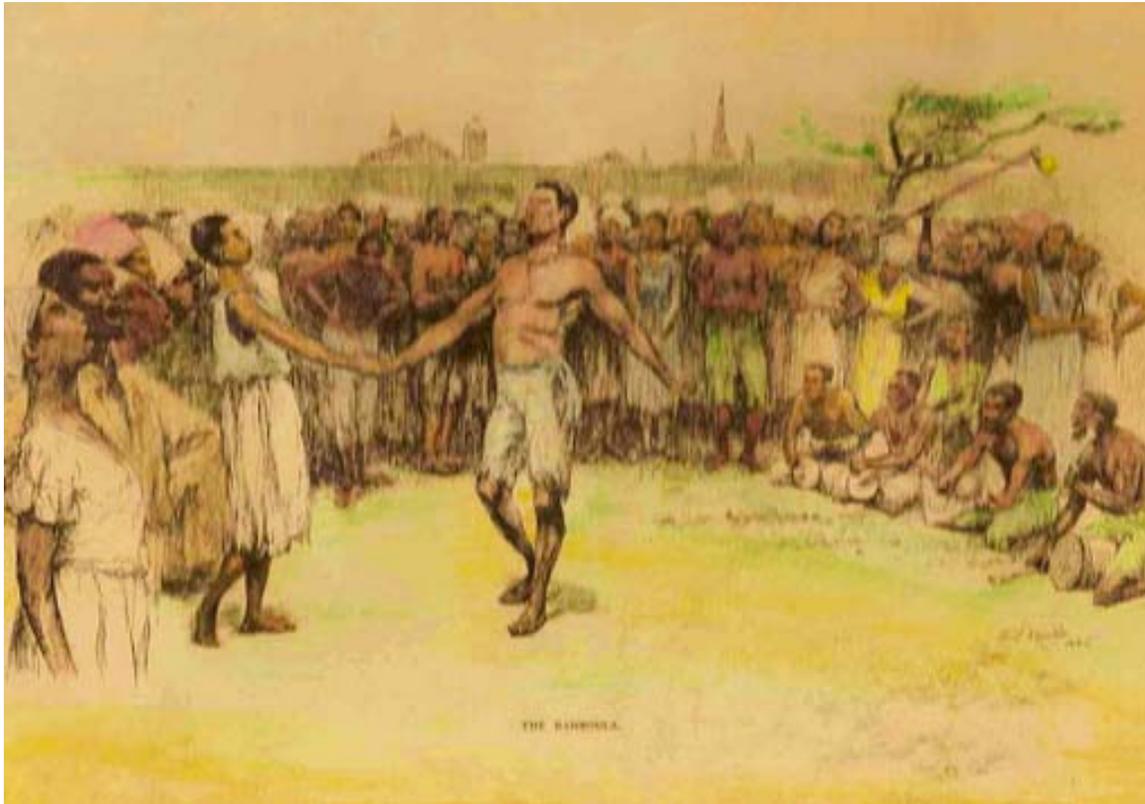
A dance of seeming contradictions accompanies this musical give-and-take, a moving hieroglyph that appears, on the one hand, informal and spontaneous yet, on closer inspection, ritualized and precise. It is a dance of massive proportions. A dense crowd of dark bodies forms into circular groups – perhaps five or six hundred individuals moving in time to the pulsations of the music, some swaying gently, others aggressively stomping their feet.

- BENJAMIN LATROBE, on the dances in Congo Square, February 21, 1819

The booming of African drums and blast of huge wooden horns called to the gathering... The drums were very long, hollowed, often from a single piece of wood, open at one end and having a sheep or goat skin stretched across the other... The smaller drum was often made from a

joint or two of very large bamboo ... and this is said to be the origin of its name; for it was called the Bamboula.

- GEORGE WASHINGTON CABLE, *The Dance in Place Congo*, Century Magazine, February, 1886



The Bamboula danced in Congo Square, artist E. W. Kemble's depiction of the event for Cable's article

On aime passionnément la danse à la Nouvelle-Orléans (they passionately love the dance in New Orleans).

- article in the *New Orleans Abeille*, April 2, 1829

Ma was delighted with her trip, but she ... was horrified at the Schottische as performed by Miss Castle and me. She was perfectly willing for me to dance until 12 o'clock ... but then she would top off with a very inconsistent sermon on dancing in general; ending with a terrific broadside aimed at the heresy of heresies, the Schottische.

- MARK TWAIN, on an 1861 trip down to New Orleans with his mother (the Schottische, very popular at New Orleans dances for years, is a combination of two movements, the first three counts of a polka with a deliberate circular hop on the fourth count)

Fire broke out in the stage decorations ... and while the flames were readily extinguished, many of the guests fled in panic. But dozens of others remained and danced for hours around the pool of water the stage had become.

- HENRI SCHINDLER, *Mardi Gras Treasures: Jewelry of the Golden Age*, on the fire that broke out in 1898 amid the ball decorations of the High Priests of Mithras Ball at the French Opera House

You got to know how to pony	Oh, yeah!
Like Bony Maronie	Ooo, ooo!
You got to know how to twist	Oh, yeah!
Goes like this	Ooo, ooo!
Mashed Potato	Oh, yeah!
Do the Alligator	Ooo, ooo!

- CHRIS KENNER, from his recording *Land of 1,000 Dances*, 1962

Up stepped Big Bluto, bold as can be,
Grabbed Poor Olive and said "Chick, you're goin' with me."

- EDDIE BO, from his recording *Check Mr. Popeye*, 1962

It's not gangster music; it's not R&B; it's project music.
Ya Heard Me, music documentary on the New Orleans Bounce, some truly booty-ful dance music

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