

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

The Long, Hot Summer of 1958

On June 26th, 2016 (the Sunday before last), the temperature at Audubon Park in New Orleans reached a sweltering 102 degrees, tying a record set in 2012. At Louis Armstrong International Airport in Kenner, the thermometer climbed to 100 degrees, breaking the old record of 98 for that date, also set in 2012.

But back in 1958, on the 26th of June, the temperature at the airport (it was Moisant then) reached a high of only 82. But there were other factors making that summer in New Orleans sizzle, one of which could be experienced at your neighborhood movie theatre.



William Faulkner's The Long, Hot Summer hit the big screen in 1958

Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward starred in *The Long, Hot Summer*, a film based in part on three works by William Faulkner. Newman plays the role of a handsome accused barnburner and con man named Ben Quick, who arrives in a small Mississippi town and through his determination and hard work quickly ingratiates himself with the patriarch of the town's richest family, Will Varner (played by Orson Wells). The movie was filmed in Jackson, Baton Rouge, Clinton, East Feliciana, Vacherie and New Roads, Louisiana.

The film is not to be confused with *Suddenly, Last Summer*, a one-act play by "Tennessee" Williams which opened off Broadway in 1958. It was presented as part of a double bill with another of Williams' one-acts, *Something Unspoken*. Together the two plays were given the overall title *Garden District*, but *Suddenly, Last Summer* is now usually performed alone.



Playwright Thomas Lanier "Tennessee" Williams, III, who found inspiration in New Orleans' French Quarter

For those of you musically inclined, the summer of 1958 was one replete with novelty songs. David Seville (real name Ross Bagdasarian), creator of Alvin and the Chipmunks, had a big hit with "Witch Doctor" that summer. Jan Berry (of the California duo Jan and Dean) had a hit song about a Los Angeles burlesque dancer performing as Jennie Lee, the "Bazoom Girl", but Dean Torrence was not his partner on that recording. "Jennie Lee" was a popular platter instead for Jan & Arnie, Arnie being Arnold P. "Arnie" Ginsburg. Jan and Dean would later sing such great hits as "Surf City", "The Little Old Lady from Pasadena" and "Dead Man's Curve".

A truly wacky tune called "The Purple People Eater" reached number one on the *Billboard* pop charts the summer of '58 from June 9 to July 14, and reached number 12 overall that year. Recording artist Sheb Wooley, who appeared in dozens of westerns from the 50s through the 70s, sang about a "one-eyed, one-horned, flying, purple people eater":

"I said Mr. Purple People Eater, what's your line?
 He said eating purple people, and it sure is fine.
 But that's not the reason that I came to land.
 I wanna get a job in a rock 'n roll band."

What Young People Think Are the
Top Records of the Week
 (Compiled by Gilbert Research Company)

Rating		Song and Recording Star	Girls	Boys
Last Week	This Week			
1	1	Purple People Eater Sheb Wooley	1	1
2	2	All I Have to Do Is Dream Everly Bros.	2	2
4	3	Secretly Jimmie Rodgers	3	4
3	4	Big Man The Four Preps	4	3
7	5	Jennie Lee Jan & Arnie	5	6
9	6	Return to Me Dean Martin	6	7
6	7	Witch Doctor David Seville	9	4
5	8	Chanson D'Amour Art & Dotty Todd	8	8
—	9	Do You Wanna Dance Bobby Freeman	7	11

The New Orleans States provided this song chart July 6, 1958

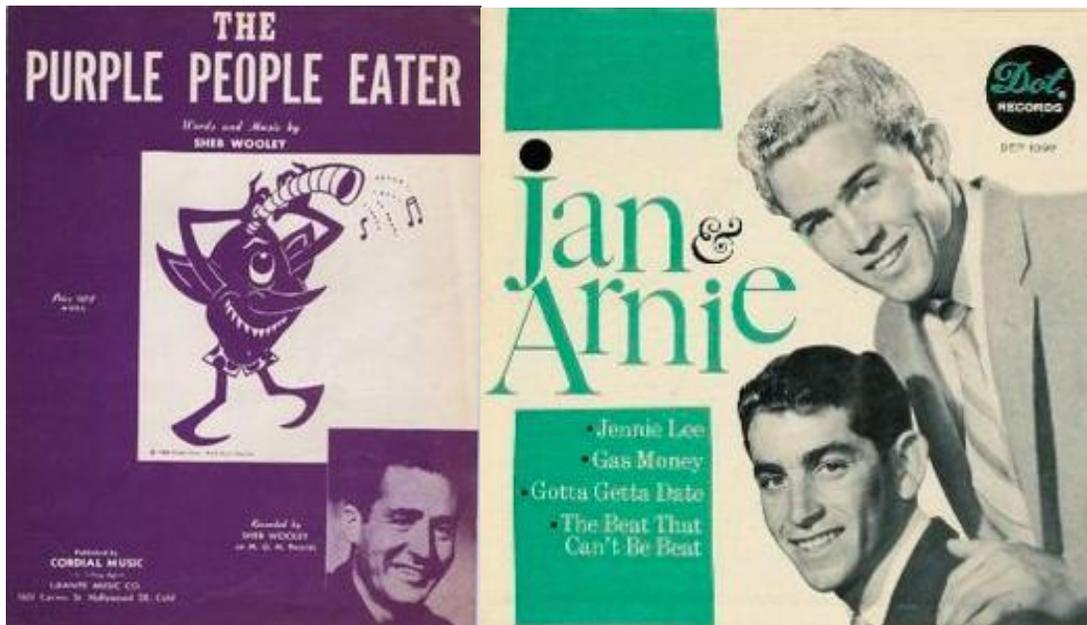
I was only nine-years-old that summer, but I remember seeing stuffed "purple people eaters" available on sale at Woolworth's on Canal Street, not to mention hula hoops, which were both a local and national phenomenon. The "foam rubber stuffed" purple creature with one big eye, "yellow felt horn and yellow felt wings" was also available in the Handkerchief Department of D. H. Holmes, first floor, as shown below in a *Times-Picayune* ad of July 18, 1958:

“purple people eater”

The beastie that's captured the whole country's fancy! The flying purple people eater has one eye, one yellow felt horn and yellow felt wings. Purple body, foam rubber stuffed.

1.00

**Holmes Handkerchief Dept.
First Floor**



The Purple People Eater

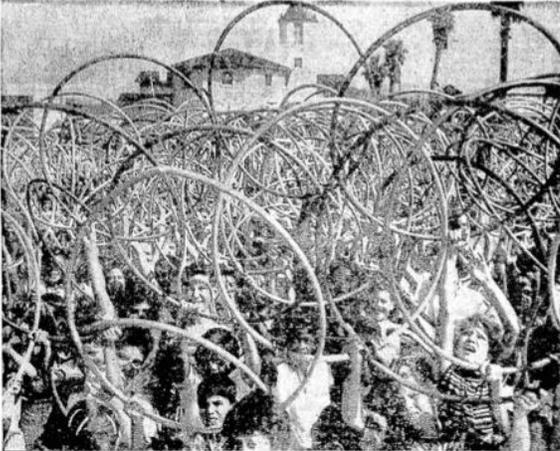
Jan & Arnie, sans Dean

While we were shopping for these various items downtown, a suburban shopping alternative was under construction that summer of 1958 when today's Veterans Memorial Boulevard was merely a shell road and the site was surrounded by open acreage. The single-level (and at that time unenclosed) 431,700-square-foot complex opened for business on March 22, 1960, and included as major tenants D. H. Holmes at the lake end, Godchaux's and J.C. Penney.

The hula hoop mentioned earlier, at least in its modern form, is a toy hoop made of plastic tubing designed to be twirled around the waist, limbs or neck for exercise and fun. The popular novelty was invented in 1958 by Arthur K. "Spud" Melin and Richard Knerr, but both kids and adults around the world have played with toy hoops for generations, twirling, rolling or throwing them about. Melin and Knerr, two USC college grads, also founded the WHAM-O Mfg. Co. in South Pasadena, California, ten years before. On September 21, 1958, the day before the last day of summer the *States-Item* announced a "Hula

Hoop Contest" with "\$1,000 in keen prizes".

Boys and Girls
(and adults, too)
the new States-Item
announces a
HULA HOOP Contest



\$1,000 in keen prizes

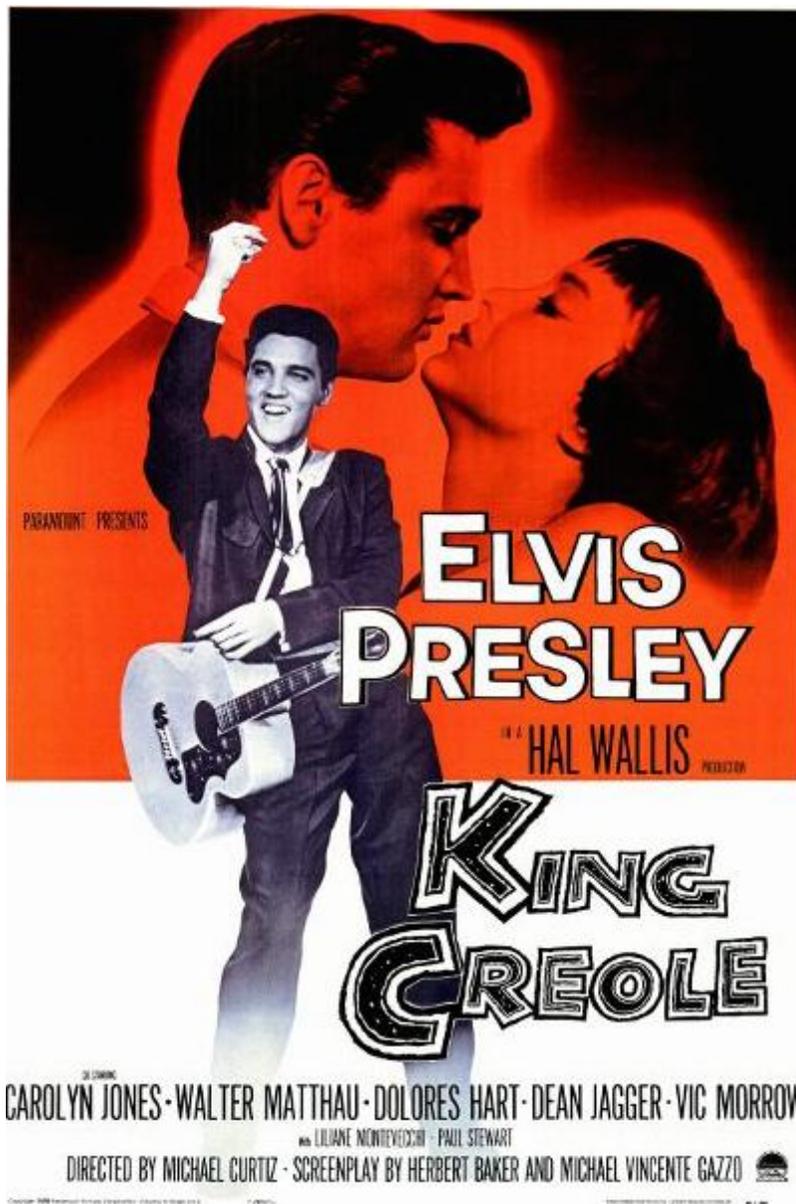
Hula Hoops were all the rage the summer of 1958.



Hula Hoops got us in shape for "The Twist" two years later.

Hula hoopers weren't the only ones swaying their hips in the Crescent City in 1958. Elvis Presley was in town in 1958 while filming *King Creole*, a musical drama produced by Hal B. Wallis and directed by Michael Curtiz. It starred Elvis, Carolyn Jones and Walter Matthau. Paramount Pictures released the film that summer, July 2, 1958, to both critical and commercial acclaim. Of all his pictures, the role of Danny Fisher in *King Creole* was Elvis' favorite. Location shooting was delayed several times by adoring crowds of fans.

Movie critics were ecstatic in their praise of Presley's performance, and *King Creole* peaked at number five on *Variety's* box office earnings charts. The soundtrack song "Hard Headed Woman" did great, too, reaching number one on the *Billboard* pop singles chart and number two on the R&B chart.



King Creole movie poster

Music producer Cosimo Matassa (April 13, 1926 – September 11, 2014), inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2012, was also making music in New Orleans in 1958. He was instrumental in developing what became known as the “New Orleans Sound”, which Dr. John referred to as featuring strong drums, heavy guitar and bass, light piano and horns with a strong vocal lead.



Cosimo Matassa in 1958 at his Governor Nicholls Street Studio



PONTCHARTRAIN BEACH OF 1958 COMPARED TO THE WAY IT LOOKED IN 1928

Back in 1928, Milneburg Lighthouse was one of the most prominent features of the landscape of the shore of Lake Pontchartrain. The Pontchartrain Railroad ran to and from the amusement park, and most of the area was somewhat desolate. Today, 30 years later, the lighthouse (circled in

both pictures) is still a fixture of the beach, and is located in the heart of Kiddieland. But most other features have been built since 1928, making this New Orleans playland one of the finest in the world. The beach is celebrating its 30th anniversary this month.

And Pontchartrain Beach was celebrating its thirtieth birthday in August 1958. Countless New Orleanians enjoyed summer fun at the Beach, not only on the Beach itself but also on the rides and along the Midway.

A summer of songs, fun movies, the Beach, purple people eaters and gyrating hips: It may have been a "long, hot summer", but for those of us still around to remember, the summer of '58 was totally COOL!

NED HÉMARD

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"The Long, Hot Summer of 1958"
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