"For Ofays Only": An Annotated Calendar of Midnight Frolics at the Lyric Theater

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, a loose network of African American vaudeville theaters took hold throughout most of the United States, offering black entertainment for black audiences. In 1921, various factions of this adventurous theatrical movement consolidated under the banner of the Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA). This powerful new organization guided the forces of African American stage entertainment for nearly a decade. Under its aegis, highly diversified African American touring companies, often headlined by stars of the burgeoning race recording industry, toured the fabled TOBA circuit, making weeklong stands at affiliated theaters.

One integrative feature of the TOBA environment, however aberrational, was the "Midnight Frolic," in which touring companies were presumed upon to give late-night performances for white folks.
only. These midnight shows for whites do not appear to have differed palpably from the “regular” performances given for the race. Black veteran entertainer and critic Salem Tutt Whitney sized up the Midnight Frolic phenomenon in his Chicago Defender column of May 29, 1926, under the headline, “Jim Crow Frolics”:

“Midnight frolics for whites, in Race theaters, are quite the vogue throughout the South. My objection to them is that they come after two and sometimes three regular performances, and yet the managers expect the frolic to be the peppiest entertainment of the series... The white frolics are generously patronized. What are some of the results? The receipts from these frolics enable the managers to pay a higher price for larger and better companies for the entertainment of their Race patrons. Many white people see our girls and boys in action for the first time and are favorably impressed by their talent. To date I have not heard of any trouble that has occurred from the invasion of the white frolickers of the Race neighborhoods. No cars have been stolen, neither have any white women been insulted. Some of the Race theaters are situated in the most congested districts and the white enemies of Race progress have been rather peeved that the frolics have not precipitated the race riots they predicted. On the other hand, they have increased the white patrons’ interest in our group and have tended to make for mutual understanding. The Race people who frequent the vicinity of the theaters during these frolics have been inclined to dress up and put on their best appearance while the visitors are being entertained.”

Whitney went on to note that, in addition to Houston and Memphis, “Midnight frolics for whites are a weekly event in New Orleans, Atlanta, Greenville, S. C., Winston Salem, N. C., Pensacola and Dallas.” In New Orleans, the designated TOBA show stop and host to “Jim Crow Frolics” was the Lyric Theater, on the corner of Iberville and Burgundy streets. Following a long history of service to the city’s white population, the Lyric was resurrected as an African American playhouse in 1919, under the proprietorship of local white businessmen Clarence Bennett and Maurice Boudroux. Promoted as “America’s Largest and Finest Colored Theatre,” it accommodated upwards of 2,000 people. Except for the owners, everyone involved in its day-to-day operation was black: “ticket sellers, Colored manager out in front, Colored man at the door, girl ushers – a real crew.”

In a letter published in the Indianapolis Freeman of September 27, 1919, cornetist Amos White, who had just taken up residence in New Orleans after mustering out of the Army, described a seemingly typical evening’s performance at the Lyric:

“Having read so much of the Lyric Theatre, its offering and its large patronage, upon our arrival in the city we spared no time in looking up the house... We found a playhouse in reality, with every comfort that could be offered...

As headliners of the vaudeville offering Billie Walker and Babe Brown scored riotous applause... For
the last half they used Mariney Jones’ latest song sensation “I’m Awfully Lonesome, Nobody Cares for Me,” also “Sweet Baby Doll” by that noted writer and musician Geo. W. Thomas of this city... Mariney Jones’ orchestra contributed to their act by going on the stage and jazzing ‘em up while they used those numbers, such as only a bunch of New Orleans people can do...

A line or so for the celebrated orchestra, under direction of Mr. John Robicheaux [sic] or this write-up could not be complete. Composed of cornet, clarinet, violin, trombone, piano, double bass, trap drums... [it] comes up to the standard and plays the best music obtainable, not all jazz but classics as well”

John Robichaux had been a fixture on the local music scene since the early 1890s. He conducted the Lyric Theater Orchestra from the first raising of the curtain until late in 1926. Robichaux’s orchestra provided musical accompaniment for almost everything that happened at the Lyric, including the Midnight Frolics. A skeletal history of Robichaux’s Lyric Theater Orchestra can be gleaned from African American press reports. The Indianapolis Freeman of February 21, 1920, informed, “Alvin (Zoo) Robertson the trombonist of ability is spending the winter season in New Orleans, La., his home, and is engaged at the Lyric theatre.” Six weeks later it was noted that Robertson had “closed a successful season at the Lyric Theater... and left March 23rd for New York to open the summer season with P. G. Lowery’s Famous Annex Circus Band with Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey’s Combined Shows.”

The Chicago Defender of November 11, 1922, reported, “A good show can’t help but go ‘over the top’ in New Orleans with Prof. Robicheaux’s jazz orchestra of six pieces ‘hitting on all six.’... He still has his orchestra intact, with the exception of the drummer, who is a late addition and whose name is Arthur [Zutty] Singleton... [Andrew] Kimball [sic], that jazz cornetist, is still the outstanding feature of the aggregation. He just won’t come up into God’s country and show his stuff on the ‘Stroll.’ Once he does, then, oh, boy! Chi will get a treat.” In the Defender of October 20, 1923, Lyric Theater stage manager Ernest Session gave a more complete picture of “the Lyric’s jazz orchestra”:

“Prof. John P. Robichaux, violinist, has gotten together five of the best musicians, beside himself, and jazz is their middle name. With Mrs. Margaret Maurice at the piano they simply walk their way into hearts of a music mad city, the New York of the South. Alphonse Pecon [sic, Picou] does some good work with the clarinet and we all know it is one of the hardest instruments to master, but Alphonse did it. Now we come to the trombone king, John Lindsey, and from the time he picks up his instrument until the baton falls we set enthralled – some jazz. Arthur Singleton is the drummer and oh boy! He has the spotlight on him so often the performers threaten to give notice. Our boy beats a wicked drum. And last of all we have Mr. Jazz himself, or as he is called in everyday life, Andrew Kimble, our cornetist. If you’ve never heard Kimble you’ve never heard jazz for he really jazzes a mean cornet.”
Margaret Maurice ad, *Woods Directory*, 1914

The Defender of April 4, 1925, reiterated that, “The orchestra, under the direction of Prof. Robicheaux, is one of the best in the city. Miss Morese [sic] at the piano is a marvel.” As early as 1912, Mrs. Margaret Marshall-Maurice was advertising herself as a “Concert Pianist” and “Music Teacher,” with a studio in her uptown home.⁶

John Robichaux appears to have remained at the Lyric until the fall of 1926, when his name disappears from contemporaneous reports. Subsequent notices refer to Gill’s Orchestra, under the direction of Charles Gillian.⁷ Gillian may have been imported from Chicago, where he was playing at a “town café” in 1917.⁸

The Lyric Theater was hosting Midnight Frolics by late-1920, at the latest. In the *Chicago Defender* of January 15, 1921, entertainment editor Tony Langston published a letter from itinerant vaudevillian Frank Montgomery, indicating that he had “just finished an engagement at the Lyric.” Montgomery told Langston that, upon his arrival, owner Clarence Bennett had admonished him:

“You were booked in here before and I advertised a midnight show, and when you did not show up there was a lot of people disappointed. Of course, I gave a midnight show and it was a good show, but they came to see Frank Montgomery... The people know Frank Montgomery and his ‘Hello 1920’ Company, and when he is advertised they want to see him, so I am going to give another midnight show for Frank Montgomery & Company New Year’s night.” Well, Tony, the house was packed from pit to dome, and they were standing all up in the aisles, and they were sitting in all the aisles, in the balcony and the gallery. We showed to 2,500 people and turned away over 800. The mayor of New Orleans, his staff and some of the biggest business men and millionaires in New Orleans were there to see the show. We had Esta Bijou [sic] & Wells and Wells on as extra acts, and they went over wonderful. Miss Esta Bijou is doing the best act now that she ever did in her career.”

At the time of her Midnight Frolic appearance as an extra attraction with Frank Montgomery’s “Hello 1920” Company, Louisiana native Esther
Midnight Frolic with Ethel Waters and Her Black Swan Troubadours, *New Orleans Item*, April 20, 1922

Bigeou had just broken up with her showman husband, Irvin C. Miller, with whom she had been touring in mainstream vaudeville. Over the next few years, Bigeou became one of the most frequently featured headliners of the Lyric’s Midnight Frolics.

Another early Frolic favorite was Ethel Waters, who helped pioneer the local radio waves for African American entertainers in New Orleans. On the evening of Thursday, April 6, 1922, local station WGV “put out the first strictly vocal and instrumental musical program ever broadcast in New Orleans,” featuring white singers and musicians on loan from the Strand Theater. An enthusiastic response from listeners prompted the station to institute “live” music as a nightly feature, and on Friday, April 21, 1922, “Every shoulder twitched and every foot beat time… when Ethel Waters, the nationally known negro singer, and her famous Black Swan jazz masters opened up on the radio transmitter.” The next Evening’s *New Orleans Item* advertised that these “same masters of jazz with Ethel herself, will appear Saturday night in a midnight frolic for whites at the Lyric theatre where they have made almost a phenomenal success during the week.”

At the beginning of 1923, the Lyric instituted Midnight Frolics on an “occasional” basis. The designated night to “frolic” was Friday, and whenever one was scheduled, it was advertised and promoted in Wednesday, Thursday and/or Friday evening editions of both the mainstream daily *New Orleans Item* and *New Orleans States*. Certain rules and regulations were clearly delineated in every promotional blurb. First and foremost, Midnight Frolics were “for white persons only.” Tourists were especially targeted. A 1926 edition of the *States* stipulated that the typical audience at a Midnight Frolic was comprised of “tourists, theatrical performers in other shows which have closed for the night, dilettantes and society folk.”

Jim Crow protocol required that admission to the Midnight Frolics be “by invitation only.” Printed “invitations,”
which could be secured at the city’s “leading hotels” and newspaper offices, entitled bearers to pay an admission fee at the door. Also related to Jim Crow protocol were repeated assurances that the Frolics did not begin until after the local white theaters were closed for the evening. Frolickers were regularly advised that the doors opened at 11:00 p.m., the curtain rose at 11:15, and the shows lasted until “well after midnight.”

Intent on conveying a heightened sense of adventure to prospective customers, ads and announcements chronically misrepresented the Midnight Frolic phenomenon as unique to New Orleans, and misstated that the origins of African American stagecraft were directly related to the opening of the Lyric. It was also insinuated that the Midnight Frolics had an educational component, that they gave white audiences a chance to assess the “progress of negro thespianism.” However, black New Orleans-born performer and race film pioneer D. Ireland Thomas noted in the Chicago Defender of February 21, 1925, that, “Some time ago I received several letters of complaint against a certain theater in New Orleans for not offering the Lafayette Players to the white people in the usual midnight rambles. Some letters were very strong, protesting against the management of the theater for not taking advantage of the chance to show the white people that we were up in the dramatic art as well as in comedy – or, to say it plain, that we were capable of doing better things on the stage than making fools of ourselves.”

Race contradictions and advertising hype notwithstanding, whites who ventured to a Midnight Frolic at the Lyric Theater got a full course of “authentic,” up-to-date African American variety entertainers, from blues shouters and blackface comedians to opera singers, “banjo kings,” “harmonica kings,” vocal quartets, male and female impersonators, high-stepping “bronce beauty” choruses, jazz bands, yodelers, jugglers, wire walkers, hoop rollers, one-legged dancers and more.

The following annotated calendar of Midnight Frolics held at the Lyric Theater between 1923 and 1927 has been assembled from contemporaneous advertisements and announcements in the New Orleans States.11

**January 12, 1923:** “Midnight Show At Lyric Theater,” “A midnight show will be given at the Lyric theater, Friday night, January 12... Among the performers on the bill will be Anita Bush, Clara Smith and a number of others... The show is being given because of the constant demand of the people of New Orleans for a midnight entertainment. Mr. Bennett said that over a thousand people had asked such a show within the past two or three weeks.”

Note: Correspondence from black New Orleans entertainer and cabaret manager Arthur Wynn in the Chicago Defender of January 20, 1923, confirms that the Anita Bush Company "played [the Lyric] this week with Boyd & Boyd and Clara Smith and partner. They had a midnight ramble Friday night for ofays only and, boy, you ought to see the autos lined up outside.” Six months later, Clara Smith launched her illustrative race recording career.

**February 9, 1923:** “Second Midnight Frolic At Lyric,” “The announcement of the Lyric Theatre of its second ‘Midnight Frolic’ for Friday night, Feb. 9, is of unusual interest to the patrons of
these unique entertainments... Ethel Waters, the blues singer, who appeared here last year at a Midnight Frolic, will be the headline act. With her is Ethel Williams, the colored dancer; also O’Bryant, the colored violinist, who will offer an entirely different line of jazz; Brown and Brown, the whirlwind dancers, are promised as another surprise, and ‘Ferguson the Only’ says ‘Watch my smoke.’

“As is the custom, the management will present two or three acts from the Lyric School of Dramatic Art and Dancing... Professor Robichaux will conduct the Lyric jazz orchestra.”

March 2, 1923: “Colored Talent At Midnight Show Of High Promise,” “With a vaudeville bill which promises to excel any yet offered at the big colored playhouse, the management of the Lyric announce their next Midnight Frolic for white patrons Friday night, March 2.

“Almost every owner of a phonograph has heard Sara Martin, the famous colored blues singer on the Okeh records. She will sing her blues in person at the Lyric Friday night. With the Sara Martin Revue are some of the best known negro performers on the stage. Mayo and Glenn, Green and Price, The original Frank Tansel, Straine and Thomas, Carter and Clark and other surprise acts, en masse, make a vaudeville bill which the management promises to be a knockout.”

“Although most of the acts are new in the South, visitors from the North will recognize Sarah Martin, famous ‘blues’ singer, Mayo-Glenn, Green and Price, Frank Tansel, Straine and Thomas and Carter and Clark as leading colored vaudeville performers. There will also be several surprise acts which are not announced. Probably the Lyric Sheik will entertain.”

Note: The statement that “almost every owner of a phonograph has heard Sara Martin” may not have been much exaggerated. Race recordings were not just for race consumers. Many white followers of the Midnight Frolics were no doubt attracted by names they recognized from race recordings. Sara Martin’s latest race recordings, as well as those by Mamie Smith, Eva Taylor and others, were advertised in the mainstream New Orleans States of June 29, 1923. Reporting on the appearance of Bessie Smith at a Midnight Frolic at the Eighty-One Theater in Atlanta, the black weekly Pittsburgh Courier of February 16, 1924, noted, “Miss Smith is a great favorite in Atlanta. Few white homes here are without her records made by the Columbia Phonograph Company.” The “crossover” appeal of race recordings, especially those bearing double entendre blues songs, was noted in a 1927 article by sociologist Guy Johnson, which appeared in the Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, under the title, “Double Meaning in the Popular Negro Blues.” Johnson’s observations were resurrected in a 1967 doctoral thesis on “Jazz and Race Records:”

“Negro folk songs had provided the vulgar expressions which the blues singers... introduced into songs which they recorded... The words and figures of “unprintable” folk songs had thus found their way into the larger society... The records, Johnson explained, had a ‘tremendous sale to white people.’ Further, even though it was ‘doubtful if any group ever has carried its ordinary vulgarities over into respectable song life so completely and successfully as
the American Negro,’ one was led to suspect, Johnson concluded, that ‘the white man, too, enjoys seeing the ‘other meaning.’”¹²

March 28, 1923: “Lyric Theater Midnight Show Best Of Season,” “The Midnight Frolic at the Lyric theater, America’s largest and finest colored playhouse, Friday night, March 28, promises a treat for the patrons of these unique entertainments. Cherry Blossom, the Japo-Negro soprano who has been acclaimed by critics of Boston and the east as the greatest lyric soprano since ‘Black Patti’ will be the headline act... Eddie Lemons, a pocket edition of the late Bert Williams, Howell and Harbaugh, the negro dancers, Grace King trio, Houze and Houze, with the Surprise Vaudeville promise to complete a bill which the management claims is the best all-negro vaudeville program which they have ever offered at the Midnight Frolics.

“As usual tickets will be sold to holders of invitations only which may be secured at your newspaper office or at any of the leading hotels. The price of admission all over the house except the box seats, is one dollar; reserved box seats, one dollar and a half.”

June 1, 1923: “Wild Cat Dance Will Feature Midnight Frolic,” “The cream of the T. O. B. A. circuit which controls over sixty theaters throughout the country, is being brought to New Orleans to make this the biggest and best show yet presented at any of the now famous Midnight Frolics.

“Isabella Jackson, the famous colored dancer who has just returned from a tour of Europe and Australia will present her original ‘Wildcat Dance.’ Green and Bailey a typical old time dark act [sic], is
said to be a riot of real negro comedy. Goodner and Williams are two girls who are bound to please. Others acts are Al ‘Frisco’ Brown, negro dancer, the Lafayette Quartette from the Lafayette Theater, New York; Brown and Brown, the whirlwind dancers from Chicago, Sam Davis, the negro monologist and Willie ‘Surprise’ Glover, ‘The darktown comedian’.

**June 29, 1923:** “Lyric Midnight Show Promises New Surprises.” “This ‘midnight’ show is called the ‘vacation performance,’ given to enable local residents to see the negro vaudeville team perform. Ordinarily, the shows are given in the winter as a treat to tourists, but this time the audience will be mainly local residents.

“The all star team of Whitman sisters, including the champion buck and wing dancer of the United States, a male impersonator who has played in this country and abroad, a coon shouter, jazz dancers and dialogue couples, will be the main attraction.”

**August 3, 1923:** “Lyric Theater Has Fine Bill For Midnight Show.” “Charles Anderson, a negro yodeler of international reputation, will be one of the headliners of the all star cast of colored players obtained by the Lyric theater for its second midnight show of the summer season... The headliner of the bill... is Bessie Smith, the most famous blue song moaner of the country, whose phonograph records are in great demand.

“There will be a sketch of everyday negro life by Joe Carter and Liza Clark, singing and dancing by Ferbee and McConn, a fancy dancing act by Harris and Harris and singing by aspiring and potential sopranos of the Lyric School of Dramatics in addition to special music by Robichaux’s orchestra.”

Note: Bessie Smith’s first recordings were released in February 1923. In October 1923, yodeler Charles Anderson made the first of his historic recordings for the Okeh label. Originally from Birmingham, Alabama, Anderson was perhaps the first person to combine yodeling and blues singing in the manner immortalized by country music star Jimmie Rodgers. Charles Anderson and Bessie Smith had frequently shared stages in the rough-and-tumble southern vaudeville theater environment of the previous decade.

**August 17, 1923:** “Midnight Show Shimmy Dance at Lyric Theater,” “An ‘original shimmy dance,’ patterned after the vibratory and ‘slow motion’ gyrations of negro shufflers in the old time dance halls that were so small a dance had to be invented which would accommodate many couples on a limited floor space, will be one of the leading numbers of the Midnight Frolic... A special act has been announced by the theater for persons who desire to hear a colored singer moan out blues songs. It will be the singing of the elemental African strains by Esther Bigeou, a negro girl usually employed only to make Okeh phonograph records.

“In the uproarious mirth-providing negro dialect that no white actor can entirely succeed in imitating, Jimmie Crosby, a colored monologist, will entertain... Crosby is known in the theaters of the north for his irrepressible mirth and for his native wit.

“Although the headliner, Esther Bigeou, a blues song singer of international reputation has been especially engaged for the midnight show, the management declares that other numbers are almost equally
entertaining. Ford and Ford will do an ‘original shimmey dance’; Long and Jackson will stage a laughable comedy skit and Nelson and McPherson will deliver comical singing, dancing and patter... The show lasts until well after midnight.”

Note: Esther Bigeou made her first commercial recordings in 1921.

**August 31, 1923:** “Seat Sale for Midnight Frolic at Lyric Large,” “Hundreds of invitations issued already by newspaper business offices and hotels indicates a large attendance at the Midnight Frolic... Ethel Waters, one of the best known negro songsters in the United States, who is steadily engaged by the Black Swan Record Company to reproduce her voice phonographically, will sing characteristic blue songs. Emmet Anthony, monologist, will entertain with his whimsical negro characterizations. Williams and Williams in a dancing and singing number and Brown McGraw with his side splitting comedy are among others of a notably pleasing list of entertainers.

“New thrills will be provided for those of the Lyric guests who have never witnessed colored actors perform and those who have witnessed them before will be given a better evening’s fun than usual by a cast unusually gifted in droll mimicry and ludicrous serio-comic dialogue.”

**October 12, 1923:** “Crowds Rush for Tickets to the Midnight Show,” “With hundreds of persons imploering newspaper offices and hotel lobbies for invitations to the Midnight Frolic..., the management [has] predicted a record fall opening attendance... Players unusually gifted in droll mimicry of negro and white life have been especially selected to entertain the white audience. Henrietta Loveless, a lyric soprano said to rival the famous ‘Black Patti,’ is one of the headliners. Another is Whistling Pete, a warbler of unusual proficiency. Then there are the Boissey Legge Bandanna Girls, a troupe of saffron gyristers who have won success throughout the country with their quick and slow dancing.

“Gaston and Tally are talented singers and dancers and Chanton and Gray and McLane excel in the lively thrust and riposte of vaudeville repartee with an added flavor of typically ambiguous negro inflection.”

Note: The Chicago Defender of October 20, 1923, carried news from Lyric Theater stage manager Ernest Session, submitted just before the Frolic of October 12, informing that the roster of Boisy DeLegge’s Bandanna Girls included Cow Cow Davenport and Dora Carr: “Miss Carr has a pleasing voice and her rendition of her numbers is very good. Mr. Davenport, playing the piano and dancing, won the heart of the public... The company will give a midnight performance to Ofays only Friday night.” Three months after appearing at the Lyric, Davenport and Carr landed a recording contract in New York City. When they returned to the Lyric in the spring of 1926, they had several representative recordings to their credit, including Davenport’s signature “Cow Cow Blues.”

**October 26, 1923:** “Tourists Show Great Interest in Midnight Frolic,” “These frolics, in the opinion of many, are becoming as typical of the quaint entertainment of New Orleans as is the Casino of Paris, or the roof garden of New York... The show is being put on entirely by colored actors and actresses...
and the audience will be confined to white persons, many of whom make of the Frolic a spicy finisher to social events or other theatrical performances the same evening...

"The headliner... will be a colored girl star of the Columbia Phonograph Company, Clara Smith, whose records of blue songs are household property throughout the land.

"The sidesplitting exhortations of a typical negro preacher who is bidding strongly for salvation for his flock will be portrayed by the male Hooten of Hooten and Hooten. Then there will be Strong and Jenkins with their ‘rithmetic bugs.’ Nuggie [sic] Johnson notable singer, dancer, talker, the Brownie Trio (‘seal skin brown, too, what I mean’), and the nimble and witty musical Boatners... Every type of entertainment from a skit to a catch as-catch-can rough and ready street parley will be numbered."

**November 16, 1923:** "Midnight Frolic at Lyric Will Feature ‘In Bad,’" "Drilled note and letter perfect in their parts and accustomed to the setting and costumes by a dress rehearsal Thursday night, Clarence Bennett’s company of talented negroes will launch the comic opera, ‘In Bad,’ at the Midnight Frolic...

"Reading critical reports of rehearsals of the operetta, which declared it to be a series of laughs from start to finish, a number of residents in St. Tammany parish obtained invitations from the theater and announced they would make an excursion into the city to witness the opening production. The excursion will include people from Covington, Abita Springs, Mandeville and Bogalusa.

"New Orleans’ theateregoers, keen to witness negroes in an original operetta musically depicting the comic side of their everyday life and mishaps, have besieged the hotel lobbies and the newspaper for invitations... A few invitations still remain to be given out, said Clarence Bennett, part owner of the theater and former president of the national circuit over which the show will travel before it goes to New York."

**December 30, 1923:** "Midnight Show at Lyric Friday Night," "The Frolics... have come to be sought by tourists as shows that can be witnessed no where else in the world but New Orleans... With a nationally famous troupe of versatile colored entertainers, especially gifted in portraying the whimsicalities of typical southern negro wit, singing and dancing, the Frolic tonight bids fair to outshine even the last one. Ida Cox, noted ‘blue’ singer, is the headliner."

Note: At this time, Ida Cox was only about six months into her lengthy, prolific recording career.

**January 4, 1924:** "Record Crowd Is Expected at Midnight Frolics," "Hundreds of tourists besieged hotel lobbies and newspaper business offices Thursday for invitations to the first Midnight Frolic of the new year... The Frolics are performances given occasionally by the owners to give white audiences an insight into the native talent, whimsicality and primitively rhythmic dancing of negro players: for the bill tonight an unusually versatile company of blue singers, dancers, acrobats and mimics has been engaged.

"The Frolics begin after the final curtain drops in white theaters and it lasts until past midnight.

"The headliners will be the Clarke musical comedy troupe."
February 1, 1924: “Every Shuffle, Clog, Blues at Midnight Frolic.” “Reporting a stampede upon the hotels and newspapers for invitations to the Midnight Frolic... the Lyric theater... announces expectations of a banner crowd of white persons to watch the antics and hear the blue songs of the negro entertainers... “Sarah Martin, star colored singer of ‘blues’ of the moaning variety, will be the headliner of a well varied bill that includes dancers, dialogue couples, dancers trained in every shuffle and clog, and a contortionist who has been doing the ‘big time’ in the North. “Typical negro wit and humor of the sort that is famous the world over as a contribution to universal fun from the southern states will be presented by the colored troupe.”

February 22, 1924: “Midnight Frolic at Lyric Offers Dixie Favorites,” “The Dixie Favorites,” three colored entertainers who so convulse and thrill an audience that they ‘cramp the style’ of the following Thespians, will [be the] feature [act]... Willie, Noogie [sic] and Udell are the trio which has been billed in nearly every southern theater and many of those in the North as the ‘Dixie Favorites.’ Their especial talent for pulse speeding, syncopated music caused The Lyric to employ them in addition to the universally gifted troupe playing this week to the regular colored audiences of the big playhouse. “Ordinarily the Lyric theater entertains negro audiences only. The Frolics for white patrons are staged whenever a particularly talented group of negro actors and actresses is engaged... “Especially emphasis is placed by the theater management on acts which typify the comical twists in speech and which caricature the expressions of the Southern negro on plantation, in village and in city. The music is of the sort which a negro does better than any other race – jazz music, heavy in minor tones, quickly syncopated or elementally measured in slow beats.”

Note: A report from the Lyric in the Chicago Defender of March 1, 1924, confirmed that the “Dixie Favorites” were Willie Jackson, Udell Wilson and Walter “Nookie”/“Nuggie”/“Nukie” Johnson, three local cabaret habitués from Storyville days, offering “a piano cabaret act in which many varieties of work are put over.” Willie Jackson remained a fixture on the local scene until April 1926, when he recorded his first session for Columbia, including “Old New Orleans Blues” and “She Keeps It Up All the Time.” Shortly thereafter, he hit the road with Ethel Waters, and he subsequently entertained at such famous New York nighteries as Connie’s Inn and Small’s Paradise.

February 29, 1924: “Lyric Theater Puts On Another Midnight Frolic,” “Owing to a great number of persons being turned away last Friday night... after the house was filled, the management announces... a special Carnival Midnight show... Invitations to the special Mardi Gras midnight riot of Thespian fun may be obtained by white persons who ask for them either in the theater lobbies or in the business offices of the local newspapers... As numbers of persons invited to the last Frolic failed to get into the theater because they arrived too late, the management is forewarning them this week to arrive at 11 p.m., when the doors open. The curtain rises at 11:15 p.m.”
country, deliver their quaint chatter. This fun-making pair has been especially contracted for by the Lyric for its Friday night Frolic...

“A mirthful bill of surprise vaudeville with Piron’s famous orchestra – the Victor phonograph record star players – will feature the frolic.”

Note: Piron’s New Orleans Orchestra cut its first commercial recording in December 1923, in New York City, for the Okeh label, and it was immediately advertised in the mainstream daily *New Orleans States*.

**April 10, 1924:** “Lyric Theater To Be Wrecked By Shuffling Feet,” “A dancing show that will make even the walls of the building shimmy when a score of negroes fire a bombardment of feet at the stage in clogs, soft shoe and buck and wing numbers of all varieties will be presented…

“One of the unusual acts contracted… for the Frolic is that of Jolly Saunders, a negro prestidigiter of countrywide fame. Saunders possesses an extraordinary suppleness of muscle and quickness of eye even for a professional.

“A comedy sketch called ‘Maria’ will be presented by the Carters.”

**May 23, 1924:** “Midnight Show Friday Night,” “Midnight Frolickers, stimulated by the news that the Lyric theater has arranged contracts with two phonograph company record singers and in addition has obtained the famous Quaker City trio and a versatile band of colored variety performers, are seeking invitations to Friday’s Midnight show…

“Edmonia Henderson of the Paramount Record Company and Esther Bigeou, song bird of the Okeh Record Company, will share headline honors with the
jokesters, dancers and singers of the Quaker City trio. There will also be a vaudeville bill of unusual merit."

Note: In a letter published in the Chicago Defender of May 31, 1924, Lyric stage manager Ernest Session described Edmonia Henderson as a "Blues vampire," and confirmed that, "The management decided to give a Midnight Ramble in order that the white citizens may have a chance to see these Colored artists... The ramble had three other acts, including Miss Esther Biejou [sic], the blues singer, with that million dollar smile."

May 30, 1924: "400 Vibrations Each Second At Midnight Show," "A pre Fourth of July fireworks celebration will be given... when the Lyric theater constellation of stars begin shooting arcs and parabolas of negro humor and vibratory dance to the white public in a Midnight Frolic..."

"Ordinarily the Lyric, which was inaugurated to give colored folk their own theatrical entertainment, does not allow white persons to witness the performance of the negro Thespians more than once every month or six weeks. Last Friday, however, three headline performers were obtained and one of them, Esther Biejou, star blue singer of the Okeh record company, drew such commendation that the auditors asked to hear her again.

"Esther Biejou... will demonstrate typical elemental jazz music... Other negroes will do vaudeville stunts including titillating dances with 400 vibrations a second; the Hooten pair will appear in person to render their popular sing song, 'Preachin' the A. B. C.'s"

"Willie Jackson, the songster, a ventriloquist, a whimsical acrobat and saffron jokesters of Senegambia will complete a well rounded program."

June 20, 1924: "Old Fashioned Cake Walk Will Feature Frolic," "Reviving the most picturesque dance in which negroes ever took part, the Lyric theater will include a 'cake walk' contest in its Midnight Frolic Friday night for invited white guests. The 'cake walk,' a dance which many of the younger generation have never witnessed, will be directed by Captain May Kemp, one of the most unusual colored women in the country."

"Captain May bears the distinction of being the only negro woman commissioned in the regular army during the war. Her rank was captain.

"She was engaged by the Lyric to leave her dancing school in New York, the largest negro school in the country, to
come to New Orleans with a company of dancers to show the local white public how the old time, high stepping, laugh producing negro cake walk was danced."

"[Another] feature will be the musical comedy troupe of Cleo Mitchell, with eight colored chorus girls and a number of saffron stars."

"S. H. Dudley, Jr., son of the old negro who used to delight audiences years ago with his comical act called 'Dudley's Mule,' will dance the 'broken bone' freak dance."

Note: A prime motivator in the black vaudeville theater movement of the previous decade, S. H. Dudley, Sr., was still delighting audiences at the time of his son's Lyric Theater appearance, and he remained active until his death in 1940.

**July 18, 1924:** "Lyric Theater Has Fine Midnight Bill," "The Two Matthews, droll and amusing character artists, were especially engaged for... the Midnight Frolic... But the headliner will be - Sarah Martin! A woman of her race who may be registered among the great artists of the world! A woman whose songs have been immortalized and preserved for all time on the phonograph records of the 'Okeh' and whose voice is as well known in the homes of America as any that have been supplied by the great opera organizations of the world.

"Manager Bennett for the occasion has temporarily absent himself from his duties as the chief executive of Abita Springs, to be here."

**July 25, 1924:** "Midnight Frolic At Lyric Friday Popular," "Sarah Martin, star blue song moaner for the Okeh Record Company will be the headliner. With Sarah is a company of jazz dancers who guarantee they will put arches in flat feet. Collins and Collins furnish a sharp contrast to Sarah's art by staging a song and dance number that will make the ribs palpitate like the membrane of a snare drum.

"Vader and Vader, White and Moore, Airship and Forbes and others will add to the gaiety."

Note: World War I hero Richard "Dinty" Moore happened to be in New Orleans during this time, campaigning for road improvements on behalf of the automobile industry, and it was announced in the *States* of July 26, 1924, that he would be attending the Midnight Frolic for the second week in a row: "'Dinty' Moore, millionaire hobo, who won renown in the air service by flying his plane back of the German lines in an effort to rescue Quentin Roosevelt when the latter was brought down, ran across an old war buddy in the lobby of the Lyric theater [last] Friday in the person of Julius Weller, president of the Dixie Brewery. Weller fought for the same squadron as Moore. The two decided to celebrate their reunion by occupying the same box [this] Friday."

**August 22, 1924:** "Lyric Midnight Frolic Friday Is For Whites Only," "A higher form of negro theatrical art than is usually seen in the South, though typical of the colored entertainer, will be presented at the Lyric theater Midnight Frolic Friday night by Irvin C. Miller, the famous theater skinned comedian [sic] who piloted the musical comedy, 'Liza', through a three years' continuous run in New York City.

"The same girls whose rhythmic dancing caused the satiated New Yorkers to proclaim a new thrill to the world will appear with Miller at the Frolic..."
“Perhaps no better known colored girl dancer exists than Aurora Gelly, the original ‘Liza,’ of the New York company, who will be one of the stars of the production which has been especially contracted for by the theater. She is often referred to as the ‘Gilda Grey among colored dancers.’ Another highlight will be a pair of colored dancers, Hartwell Cooke and Lloyd Mitchell.”

Note: Irvin C. Miller, ex-husband of Esther Bigeou and brother of Flournoy Miller, of Miller and Lyles and “Shuffle Along” fame, continued to conduct black theatrical companies through the South long after the fall of TOBA. Ads in the *Louisiana Weekly* during the fall of 1945 announced the advent of Miller’s Brown Skin Models at the legendary Dew Drop Inn.

**August 29, 1924:** “Get Invitations Early For Friday Midnight Show.” “‘A sure cure for the blues,’ is the description Clarence Bennet, part owner of the Lyric theater, gives for the Midnight Frolic… ‘It should be named that,’ he says, ‘instead of Back to Alabama.’

“A constellation of the brightest negro stars in the theatrical world, the same group that threw the audience into paroxysms of laughter at the Frolic last week, has been engaged again… The Frolic this week will be different than last, although the same type of musical revue will be shown.”

“The management of the Lyric theater announces that Jack Wiggins, the champion colored dancer of the world—and no white man has successfully challenged him—has wired he will be on hand Friday night to defend his title and gold medal which he won at the Madison Square Garden in New York.

“Two of the five challengers of Wiggins have agreed to meet him at the Midnight Frolic. Hartwell Cooke and Lloyd Mitchell are their names.

“The dancing contest is an added attraction to the musical revue with the famous ‘Liza’ girls which has already been announced. The contest was arranged because of the opposition which newcomers in the dancing world are raising to Wiggins’ claims. Any colored man or woman may enter the contest and should they win, the audience will decide by applause the winner—they will be given Wiggins’ medal.”

**September 12, 1924:** “Ex-Champ Dancer Comes Back At Midnight Show.” “Jack Wiggins, buck and wing dancer, who lost his championship medal at the Lyric theater Midnight Frolics in August when the audience, which acted as jury, proclaimed an eccentric stepper his superior, has petitioned the management to allow him to take a whirl this Friday at regaining it. His request has been granted and Jack not only challenged his successful opponent to a return match but throws down the kid shoe to any other colored dancer to try to outstep him…

“‘Ma’ Rainey, who started a new epoch in music when she originated the ‘blue songs,’ will be the star warbler of the show.”

**October 31, 1924:** “Extra Seats For Midnight Frolic.” “A special Hallowe’en frolic will be the program tonight… Lulu Whidby, a ‘creamy cocoa’ dancer whose curves would astonish Dazzy Vance, is the motory sensation of a troupe of saffron songsters, steppers and boisterous fun makers of the colored world of art. Eddie Lemons, a droll comedian, Quintard Miller, with a chorus of dancers called the ‘Chocolate
winter tourist horde, several hotels have used up their supply... The theater management announced it would give out the remaining supply at the box office...

"The dark talent of the stage burlesques the comical characteristics of the laughable type of colored man and woman. Friday night the take off will be the shaded denizen who struts into 'sassiet,' airing that dress suit, them jewelry, those cane. The 'Smarter Set,' just a notch above the mode of the 'Smart Set,' will be depicted in all its vain glory and with dances peculiar to Somililand, interpreted."

December 5, 1924: "Midnight Show To Be A Real Hummer," "A real 'Basket' of fun is promised... when Basket and Johnson, the two most promising stars of Nubia, prance upon the stage. With Blackland, they expect to 'knock 'em dead at the Frolic."

"Ida Cox, the renowned female singer, whose lyric efforts have been exclusively contracted by the Paramount company, has been engaged as the star of the Friday night jamboree.

"Doyle and Willie, two saffron dancers, singers and jokesmiths, whose stuff includes all the genial Afro-American humor of the South's plantation days, will be on the bill.

"Hudson and Hudson, lately recruited from New York's most popular vaudeville houses, and Doyle and Willie, whose fame throughout the darktowns of America is supreme, will sping their typical negro jokes and songs...

"Ida Cox, the headliner, is employed by the Paramount Phonograph Record Company, to sing 'blue' songs. The company, which ordinarily does not allow its star to appear in person, was prevailed upon by the Lyric theater to
make an exception for the Midnight show."

Note: Contrary to the assertion that Ida Cox’s record company didn’t allow her to make personal appearances, Paramount and other labels actively formulated cooperative agreements with the Theater Owners Booking Association to promote their artists on TOBA time. In a column titled, “T. O. B. A. Mentions,” the Chicago Defender of May 23, 1925, cited a particular example: “Now comes the announcement by the president of the T. O. B. A., Milton Starr, to the effect that, in cooperation with Frank B. Walker of the Columbia Phonograph company, they have gotten out a complete new and attractive line of lithographs of the two stellar Columbia favorites, Bessie and Clara Smith. These lithographs will be supplied gratis to all T. O. B. A. theaters playing these two stars.”

**December 26, 1924:** “Three Steppers Feature Of Show At Lyric Friday,” “Butterbeans and Susie, typically humorous and melodious, gifted with a sense of rhythm, sidewalk gestures, will lead off the Frolic. Blue songs, shiver dances and negro dialect will accentuate the entire program. A full variety cast of negro actors and actresses from out of town and a generous sprinkling of local dark fun-makers has been obtained...

“With the latest eccentric negro dance of the year lurking in their ankle bones, the three girls of the Nina Marshall trio are streaming to pass the headliners... in applause... The three girls of the famous ‘yellow female’ trio were engaged by special contract to entertain the Frolickers. But Butterbeans and Susie, the laughing, rollicking, jazz and blue song colored couple, will do their level best to draw more thrills from the spectators... The Frolic will be a holiday jollification for the benefit of a white audience... Winter tourists who have not witnessed a negro Frolic at the Lyric are expected to take advantage of this opportunity.”

Note: Butterbeans and Susie—Jodie and Susie Hawthorne Edwards—were no doubt touring on the strength of the hit recordings that they started making for Okeh about six months prior to this Lyric Theater appearance. They owed their stage name, and much of their brand of confrontational humor and blues singing, to a 1917 meeting with Butler “String Beans” May, the first blues star of black vaudeville.¹⁴

**January 2, 1925:** “Midnight Show For Whites Only,” “With the speed of
lightning, a chorus of Senegambian whirlers and jazz steppers in the Smarter Set company, will start off the holiday jollification at the Lyric theater Midnight Frolic Friday night...

"Negro comedians, patter artists, songsters and dancers have been engaged to entertain the white audience. It will be the starter of 1925 Frolics, known throughout the countryside as the unique theatrical exhibitions of New Orleans...

"Among the group of colored stars who will provide the entertainment will be Salem Tutt Whitney and J. Homer Tutt, two men who have recently become sensational mirth provokers... [They] have been rehearsing their 1925 repertoire of jokes and will try try them out on the audience. Witnesses to rehearsals say the humor is crowded with uproarious, modern quip and jest. A new dance by the speed chorus has also been evolved and will be added to eccentric evolutions of the colored steppers."

Note: In fact, brothers Salem Tutt Whitney and J. Homer Tutt had been well known as "sensational mirth provokers" since before the turn of the century.

January 9, 1925: "Frolic To Show Northern Brand of Negro Jazz,"

"'Jailhouse' Tolliver, the world champion negro roller skater, will do a dizzying arabesque dance on wheels... a dance that winds up with a thunderous clog on a table top, three feet square... Another uproarious number just arranged for the Frolic will be a northern negro jazz band. Robichaux's orchestra of colored players will help whip up the syncopations during the overtures, and later the northern players will demonstrate how jazz is played above the Mason-Dixon line.

"The main Frolic will start with a minstrel show of 22 players."

Note: Trick roller skater and road show manager Alexander Tolliver didn't get the nickname "Jailhouse" until late in his highly eventful career. In New Orleans during the winter of 1915-1916, Tolliver undertook to assemble and field an "All Colored Circus," which became alternately known as "Tolliver's Big Show" and "Tolliver's Smart Set." In March 1916, concurrent with the departure for Chicago of what became known as the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, Tolliver's Big Show/Smart Set headed out to Birmingham and other points South with a New Orleans jazz band of its own: Fred Kewley, clarinet and leader; Willie Hightower, cornet; Alvin "Zoo" Robertson, trombone; David Jones, mellophone; H. B. "Caggie" Howard, piano; J. W. Craddock, string bass and tuba; and Eddie "Rabbit" Robinson, drums.


"Jules McGarr's Ragtime steppers, a wild African crew of fast noisy dancers, singers and joke singers [sic], are in New Orleans on their way to San Francisco, and have been signed... for a mid-winter midnight frolic... This company of colored entertainers has been the hit of the New York season this year and is making a jump to the west coast to fill a demand there for negro entertainment. In New Orleans for a stopover of a few days, the company expected to pass a short vacation, but agreed to break into the rest for a Frolic..."

"A mirth provoking pair of negro vaudeville stars, Mack and Mack, have
been added to the... Frolic... In the troupe of Ragtime Steppers is a chorus of eight dusky maidens who have been trained for several months execute a dance expressing a wild orgy of the dark folk of Somaliland. The dance will be the climax of a negro show depicting the typical everyday life of the southern brown Jellybean...

“One of the surprises... will be the evolutions of two negro acrobats, one doing straight muscular exhibitions and the other burlesqueing vaudeville gymnastics. Negroes do not usually go in for acrobats on the stage and this pair has been engaged to show what the dark man of muscle can do...

“Mack and Mack, a man and woman novelty number, received an offer yesterday for a contract to sing for a phonograph record company. They will put on the famous song, dance and dialogue skit which attracted the disc house's attention to them.”

Note: Blues & Gospel Records, 1902-1943, confirms that on January 22, 1925, the day before their Midnight Frolic engagement, Billy and Mary Mack – their real last name was McBride - made their debut recording for Okeh, coupling “Black, But Sweet Oh God!” with “My Heart Breakin' Gal.” When the Macks returned to the Lyric in 1927, they were heading their own company, Mary Mack’s Merry Makers. Mary Mack was actually a homegrown New Orleans talent, born just across the Mississippi River in Algiers. On July 1, 1959, at their home in Chicago, Billy and Mary Mack were interviewed by Bill Russell for the Oral History Collection of the Hogan Jazz Archive.

Februvary 6, 1925: “Midnight Show To Be A Hummer.” “Dressed as a red devil, a mustachedioed negro juggler of great strength and dexterity will add to the entertainment at the Lyric theater Midnight Frolic... Pamplin is the name of the colored tosser of iron balls, boxes and other objects.

“Billy Gibson’s T. O. B. A. Revue, a musical variety show with a snappy chorus, and Williams, the bird vocalist, are other star attractions for the Frolic.”

Note: Juggler John Pamplin had been active in the profession since the early
1890s. In 1899 he toured Australia with Orpheus McAdoo’s Georgia Minstrels and Alabama Cakewalkers.

**February 13, 1925:** “Some Stepping Will Be Seen At Midnight Frolic,” “That remarkable eccentric dancer who won the championship of the world in New Orleans a year ago when he wrested from Jack Wiggins the premier honors will be one of the many entertainers to whoop it up Friday night at the Midnight Frolic...

“Wiggins, the colored dancer who had kept the much prized belt of the dark world for dancing during two years, challenged all comers here last year. Lloyd Mitchell, an agile, dark skinned unknown, took up the gauntlet and captivated [with] his dancing, along with expert clogging, twisting and falling... Since then he has traveled the country and has brought roars of approval in every metropolis for his physical eccentricities.

“Mitchell will be one of the negro stars aiding Broadway Rastus, the nationally reputed comedian, and Gally De Gaston, the humorous monologist, to bring joy to the carnival throng that will crowd the big negro theater.”

“Steps never before seen on any stage in New Orleans will be executed... by Lily Yuen, the wonder dancer of Charleston, S. C. This colored girl was discovered less than a year ago entertaining a Carolina clientele of waterfront negroes in amazing, original dances. She was unceremoniously hauled into theater and has since gained wild applause in every section of the country.

“Especially engaged for the Frolic..., Lily has been added to a group of gifted colored stars... Cecil Rivers, a negro tenor with a high, crystal clear voice, will give a number called ‘Orange Blossoms,’ which is weirdly beautiful.”

**February 20, 1925:** “Toughest Hide, Widest Grin at Midnight Show,” “Sharp pointed nails driven through a board and placed on the stage with the points upward will be reclined upon... by a dark skinned strong man named McCurry. After McCurry stretches out upon the nails, as nonchalantly as though they were a bed of roses, four heavy men will step upon his abdomen. A tough hide.

“‘Sunshine Sammy,’ the little colored boy of New Orleans who was taken to Hollywood in his infancy and who has been the negro principal in a thousand film plays of Our Gang, Harold Lloyd comedies and Snub Pollard burlesques, will be the headliner of the Frolic.”

**March 6, 1925:** “Dress In Black Except Clothes At Lyric Show,” “Sailor girls dressed in black, with the exception of their clothes, will be headliners Friday night at a special Midnight Frolic for local white persons...

“Bob Russell’s Sailor Girls, they are called and their dances are nautical and varied. Every sort of a watercraft hornpipe from a sampam [sic] dance to a man-o-war drill will be given by these dusky belles of Thespia.

“A dashing Senegambian who proudly stars under the name of The Black Valentino and his warbling and tangoing wife have been engaged by the theater...

“Eleanor Wilson, a singer whose range is the city limits and the quality of whose voice is acknowledged even by herself to be strained honey from the bees fed on
buttercups will shine among the coterie of entertainers.

"By special arrangement with the Paramount Phonograph Record Co., the Lyric Theater has obtained the services of that company’s star colored singer, Thelma Larizo [sic], as an added major number for its Midnight Frolic...

"Thelma Larizo has never appeared in New Orleans before. She has mastered the art of expressing negro spirituals and blue songs with all the fantasy of motion, and the minor tone quality of her primordial forebears.

"Sharply contrasting with the Larizo number will be that of the dizzying fast chorus known as Bob Russell’s Sailor Girls... The colored stage is particularly proud of the precision and of the varied dance and song repertoire of this group...

"One of those colored male quartets whose close harmony recalls to the listener his schoolboy days will furnish a contrast... to the snappy jazzy gyrations of Bill [sic] Russell’s dark-skinned Sailor Girls and the striking blue songs of Thelma Larizo...

"One of the purported knockouts on the bill will be Arthur Brykins, whose comical slide trombone playing on a broom with a pair of bellows-like lungs, is guaranteed to vibrate the old theater structure."

Note: In the spring and fall of 1924, added attraction Thelma La Vizzo recorded several titles for Paramount, including “New Orleans Goof Dust Blues,” accompanied by the New Orleans Creoles with Richard “Mariney” Jones on piano.

March 13, 1925: “Jazzy Chorus To Put It Over At Midnight Frolic,” “A theatrical company of colored men and girls that played for four years continuously and with success in the Standard theater of Philadelphia has been engaged... to give a special musical comedy midnight frolic... ‘Sands of Honolulu’ is the name of the comedy that will be staged by the Sandy Burns company. It is a lyrical interpretation of the pleasurable life of the dark folk of the Hawaiian islands, of their songs and of their humor. A broad note of burlesque runs through the show to give opportunity to three star comedians, Burns, Tom Russell and Emmett Anthony.

"A wonderful chorus of amber colored dancers, coloraturists, eccentric steppers and talented mimes make up the personnel of the company which is making a short stopover in New Orleans during a Southern trip prior to its return to Philadelphia.

"Bonnabelle Drew, the Drew princess of the senegambian stage world, whose educated ankles must set an example for a dozen little chorus girls to follow, will lead the ensemble of the Sandy Burns Musical Comedy Company...

"By special arrangements, the Lyric has engaged two teams of colored vaudeville artists to provide amusements. The first is Russell Lee and Daisy, a couple of gifted songsters and dialoguists, and the second is Bobbie Robinson and Alex Jackson, the former styling himself ‘The Banjo King’ of America.

"The Burns Company is composed of carefully culled colored actors, chorus girls and musicians who have played together for several years... A perfectly trained chorus that ‘sure do put it on’ will play the major part of the Frolic in a comedy called ‘The Sands of Honolulu.’ The Burns Company is in New Orleans for the first time since its four years’
continuous run in Philadelphia and one year in Chicago.”

Note: A Texan by birth, comedian Sandy Burns had been a frontrunner in the Southern vaudeville theater movement of the previous decade. According to Jelly Roll Morton, it was Burns who gave him his celebrated nickname, “Jelly Roll.”

**March 20, 1925:** “Midnight Frolic Will Be Laugh Knockout.” “The startling contrasts of ivory against noir, to be seen during the infectious laughs of Emmett Anthony, Sam Russell and Sandy Burns – the trio of colored comedians in the large cast which will... be components of a hilarious showing of the musical comedy ‘Deacon Jones.’

“By request of an overflow crowd that couldn’t press into the building at the last Frolic, the theater is returning the Sandy Burns Musical Comedy Company in a new production. During the last Frolic the comedians ‘stopped the show’ because the white guests of the theater insisted upon repetitions of their incongruities...

“With a chorus comparable in the world of colored stage folk to Mack Sennett’s Bathing Beauties among white artists, the Midnight Frolic... promises to be a knockout.”

**April 11, 1925:** “Lyric Theater Wild Man Tamed When Wife Talks.” “At the crack of the post-Lenten season gun, the Lyric theater... will stage a Midnight Frolic... For the first time since the Frolics were inaugurated, the jollification will be on Saturday night, instead of Friday. The one day delay was decided upon because of Lent... An all star cast, of which Bessie Smith, world famed phonograph record maker, will be the chief luminary, has been engaged especially. Bessie is a caramel heavy of Ethiopia’s stageland, with a voice that drags out the last ounce of enthusiastic applause from white witnesses. Her records are played in nearly every home with a phonograph in the country. Slow starting, enticing, rhythmic music, gathering momentum, climaxing in reverberation.

“Supplementing Bessie Smith, the Lyric will show a galaxy of colored lights of Thespia, among whom is an Eolian femme de Senegambia who almost succeeds in blowing the interior works out of a cornet. Her name is Sophonisba Jackson.”

“A wild man who calmly reaches out to put chains on lightning, who wears a live panther as a watch charm, and who smacks his lips over a meal of railroad spikes, is Big Black Bill Oakley, who will dent the boards at the Lyric... But when his wife speaks – well, that’s something else again.

“The Oakleys are called the ‘Paroxysym Pair’ on account of their ability to throw audiences into fits. They are the colored couple stars of the Ethiopian stage world, a talky, dancy, joky twain who would give a pleasurable thrill to any audience on the white circuits of the country. In darkland they are knockouts.

“Their humorous interpretations of colored life in the South will be added to the jazzmaniac songs of Bessie Smith... The fun... will last long enough so that white persons partaking in it will be able to go to church before they return home.”

**May 1, 1925:** “Shake Hot Dogs Lyric Theater Midnight Show,” “A musical comedy that will make the nerves throb and jump will be presented Friday
night... at the first midnight frolic of the summer season.

“A ‘wake,’ a wonderful dancing chorus, remarkable comedians and jazz orchestration will comprise the bill...

“With a happy-go-lucky lot of fun making negro stage artists ready to ‘shake them dogs ‘til dey’re hot’... a rush is being reported... Ben Bow’s ‘Get Happy’ Musical comedy company, including comedians, dancers, singers and ‘wise crack’ artists of negro stageland, will take the main numbers and will be flanked by a number of vaudeville players.”

Note: “Ben Bow’s ‘Get Happy’ Company” was headed by Southern vaudeville trailblazer William Benbow. Originally from Montgomery, Alabama, Benbow was professionally active before 1900. He was a frequent visitor to New Orleans from his earliest days in the business, and he has been linked to the early careers of both Clarence Williams and Jelly Roll Morton. In 1908 Benbow married Lizzie Miles’ half-sister Edna Landry, who later recorded as Edna Hicks. From the fall of 1914 through the spring of 1915, he managed the Poodle Dog Cabaret in Storyville. Benbow was still blazing trails in the early 1940s, when he reportedly enticed a teenaged Clarence Gatemouth Brown to join him on an ill-fated tour.

May 8, 1925: “Static Tuned Out Of Frolic At Lyric,” “With all the static tuned out of their program, by a series of rehearsals, an all-star troupe of vaudeville colored artists is ready for the special Midnight Frolic... Sharpened to a rah-zer edge and honin’ to go, the darktown Thespians have arranged an extraordinary program full of primal moan songs, vibrations, plantation melodies, broad jokes and shuffle steps.

“Clara Smith, phonograph record star, will vie with Lulu Whidby, saffron queen of dancers, for headline honors. Wiltshire and Enez compose a team rivalling that of Strong and Banks, while ‘Snowball’ and ‘Sleepy’ Harris declare they’ll make the audience howl like coyotes.”

Note: Though she hardly ranked with Clara Smith as a “phonograph record star,” Lulu Whidby was a true race recording pioneer. In April 1921, she waxed a single coupling for the Black Swan label, accompanied by Fletcher Henderson’s Orchestra.

May 29, 1925: “All Shuffling Along To Lyric’s Midnight Show,” “Esther Bigeou, whose voice is known throughout the United States wherever there is a phonograph, ordinarily is the main attraction of a Midnight Frolic at the Lyric theater whenever she is in New Orleans. Friday night she will sing as a divertissement [sic] while the Shuffle Along company, which ran for three years consecutively in New York, is changing scenes.

“Three famous comedians, Amon Davis, Marcus Slayter and Quintard Miller – who drew the major share of laughs in the New York production, will be the principals in the Frolic. Practically every colored girl in the Broadway chorus also will be seen for the first time in New Orleans.

“Shuffle Along was unique in the annals of musical comedy in this country, in that it was the first and almost the only production written and staged by colored artists which met with unqualified success before white audiences.

“Flournoy Miller, the writer of the comedy, was told by David Belasco
when it was produced: ‘This is the best musical comedy of the year.’

“When the company took the road the Lyric theater immediately obtained a special contract for a Midnight Frolic for an invited white audience.”

**June 5, 1925:** “‘Runnin’ Wild’ At The Lyric’s Midnight Fete,” “A fast stepping and sweet singing chorus will open up the fireworks at the Lyric theater Midnight Frolic... preliminary to the production of the big New York musical comedy, ‘Runnin’ Wild.’

“‘Runnin’ Wild’ was played at the Colonial Theater in New York for two years. ‘It was the speediest, cleanest colored show in the big port last year,’ said John Robichaux, whose orchestra will furnish the music...

“The Frolic Friday is being given because the theater accidentally gained information that the ‘Runnin’ Wild’ company was without an engagement for the night. A contract was wired at once and accepted. The Frolic will be given to demonstrate to white persons the artistic abilities of colored actors.”

**August 21, 1925:** “Blues’ Mother To Appear At Lyric Frolic.” “‘Ma’ Rainey, the mother of blue singing and the maker of phonograph records interpreting these rhythmic elementals for the colored race arrived in New Orleans 1925 with her six piece ‘Wildcat Jazz band’ to rehearse for the first Midnight Frolic of the season...

“A choice troupe of colored vaudeville artists will furnish amusement... Dancing, talking, kidding, singing and musical negro acts will comprise the entertainment...

“An added attraction has been obtained for the frolic. The Allen Spears company, including six ‘brownskin’

dancers, stopped here enroute to Miami to open a theatre and consented to add to the Friday night fun.

“Other headliners will be ‘Ma’ Rainey, mother of the ‘Blues,’ Fairchild and Scott, hoofers, and Tucker and Gresham, singing and talking colored stars of vaudeville.”

Note: “Hoofers” Fairchild and Scott had worked together as early as 1914, when they were spotted at the Dixie Theater in Atlanta, in a trio performance that included Bessie Smith.

**October 9, 1925:** “Lyric To Show How To Dance The Charleston.” “The original ‘Charleston,’ a dance that was first jigged in the streets of a South Carolina city a decade ago by negro newsboys, will be faithfully reproduced at... the first fall season midnight frolic... The demonstration... will be made by Dudley and Robinson, a gifted negro team which knew the dance years ago and has included it in [their] vaudeville repertoire...

“Delegates to the Episcopal convention and home folks alike are invited... to join the festivity... Usually, only negroes are admitted to the performances but periodically a show is staged for white persons only, so they may observe the progress of the colored man and woman in acting, dancing and vocal and instrumental music...

“The headliner of the frolic will be Bessie Smith, ‘Empress of Blues,’ whose phonograph records are being played throughout the world... and with her will be a 7 piece colored jazz band, sing and talk teams, and variety players.”

**November 5, 1925:** “Champion Of Charleston At Midnight Show,” “Fifteen
dancing girls will make the floor vibrate like the tympanum of a telephone receiver at the Lyric theater Friday night... Leading the dusky dancers and timing their movements in stop watch synchronization will be Melrose Brooks.

"Brooks is... a nimble Carolina colored lad with the rhythm of old Africa in his soul... The same variegated, grotesque, body vibrations that won young Brooks $1,000 prize as the best Charleston dancer in the country – steps he later repeated at the Ritz Carlton Hotel in New York City for the entertainment and education of the crème de la crème of New York society – will be repeated at the frolic. The ordinary Charleston dancer has a repertoire of only 15 steps. Brooks since earliest boyhood has been developing his gyrations along city curbs and later on the stage until they include more than 100...

"The Frolic will be the most replete with talent of any given for a year. One of the stars will be Amon Davis, who was the understudy for Williams of Williams and Walker. Another will be Quintard Miller, a member of the theatrical family of Miller and Lyles, now leading George White’s Scandals in New York City. Still another is Josephine Leggett, who was recently presented in Memphis with a Hudson Supersix for her pre-eminence as a ‘Golden Brown’ beauty...

“Ted McDonald, with the original Shuffle Along company, Amos [sic] Davis... Josephine Leggett, known as the ‘golden brown beauty’ of the stage and a number of talented chorus girls under the direction of Quintard Miller are in the cast.”

Note: "Golden Brown beauty” Josephine Leggett was probably a native New Orleanian. Her stage career was underway by March 1917 when she appeared at the Iroquois Theater in a
team act with Clarence Williams, singing Williams’ latest sheet music hits. She broke with Williams later that fall to join sister Lena Leggett and her partner David Jones, a future namesake of the the legendary Jones and Collins Astoria Hot Eight, at the 91 Theater in Atlanta, in what was billed as the Jones Leggett Trio. 21

November 20, 1925: “Lyric Frolic For Hotel Greeters,” “Combining the most talented negro entertainers in the country for one evening, the Lyric theater will give a special Midnight Frolic for the Hotel Greeters of Louisiana.

“Dark skinned pianists and drummers, Charleston dancers and jokers, dialoguists and soloists will strut before a white audience... The performance is being given at the request of the Hotel Greeters, who will use the proceeds to buy a part of a dairy herd for their home for disabled workers at Denver, Colo.

“Broad fun of the Afro-American variety will characterize the shindig, which will be typical of the occasional shows given by the big negro theater for white audiences only.

“Sledge and Sledge, an appropriately named pair of dark musicians, will hammer out breath taking harmony...

“Every place these two have appeared they have stopped the show,” said manager Maurice Boudreaux. ‘Nobody can follow them. Every one in New Orleans goes wild over the pianist and drummer in the theater orchestra, but these two have them beat...

“In addition to the headlining Sledges, a talented coterie of colored entertainers will produce enough typical negro humor and dancing to shake the sides of the audience. There will be a male quartet, abetted in volume by a harmony chorus, Charleston dancers, soft shoe
and hard shoe shufflers and cloggers, jokers and acrobats.”

December 4, 1925. “Lyric Theater To Be Shaken By Jazz Tremors,” “With jazz vibrations making the rafters tremble the Midnight Frolic... will get under way... Tourists and residents will mingle at the Frolic where dark skinned Thespians will stage their drolleries for a white audience...

“One of the most talented group of colored stars ever assembled for a Frolic will entertain. Among them are Esther Bigeou, nationally known singer of ‘blues,’ whose phonograph records are played throughout the country; Butterbeans and Susie, also record makers; ‘Bozo’ Nickerson with a chorus of Charleston dancers; Anna White, a lone lyric chanteuse; Thomas and Preer, formerly of the famed Lafayette players; Dursoh and Gentry, Willie Jackson and others.”

Whites demanded complete racial segregation, but they could not resist the allure of race entertainment. Midnight Frolics were the dominant society’s solution to this thorny contradiction of Jim Crow living. By the end of 1925, Midnight Frolics were a solid institution, not only in New Orleans, but throughout the southern reaches of the TOBA network. In New Orleans, the Lyric Theater was placing the best that African American popular entertainment had to offer at the disposal of white frolickers. Amidst such “jollification,” no one could have guessed at the end of 1925 that the Lyric Theater had but two more years to live. The final years of Midnight Frolics at the Lyric will be chronicled in the next edition of The Jazz Archivist.

Lynn Abbott

Endnotes


2 Information on Midnight Frolics in Memphis can be found in Paul R. Coppick, Memphis Memoirs (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1980), pp. 211-216.


4 “Catering to the Amusement of the Nation’s Negroes Is Big Undertaking,” New Orleans Times Picayune, March 5, 1922.


6 See ad for Margaret M. Maurice in 1912 edition of Woods Directory. Local city directory listings suggest Margaret and then-husband Raoul J. Maurice parted ways around 1920. Apparently, she remarried cornetist Andrew Kimble, and they left the Lyric Theater Orchestra together in the summer of 1926. Cornetist Charlie Love recalled in a Hogan Jazz Archive interview of January 16, 1960, that when he arrived in New Orleans from Shreveport (in 1926), “Andrew Kimble was playing at the Lyric Theater with John Robichaux. And John told me Kimble was going to leave, you know. He said, ‘The theater’s closed now,’ said, ‘Kimble’s going to leave, and... I’d like to get you to play
with me in the theater when it opens.’ [I] said, ‘When it’s going to open?’ [Robichaux] said, ‘Well, I don’t know exactly, maybe three or four weeks, after the repairs and everything,’ said, ‘I got Big Eye Louis [Nelson] going to play clarinet with me, and you and him ought to work good together.’ So, I taken the job... Picou was on that job, playing alto sax and clarinet. So, the union, they got up a union [Musicians Local 496], and Picou didn’t want to get in there, you see, so they sent and got me and Louis, then me and Louis was working together. We had a girl playing piano; she was a very good musician, called May Neely [sic]. I told [Robichaux] about her, you know, and he placed her in the place of Miss Margaret; she was a good piano player, too, Miss Margaret, Kimble’s wife... Her and Kimble taken this job, went to work [in Hot Springs, Arkansas].” Contemporaneous press reports confirm that the Lyric was closed for repairs during the summer of 1926. The correct spelling of Andrew Kimble’s last name is indicated by a note he appears to have written and signed on the back of the first cornet part of the orchestration of “Cotton Pickers Ball” in the John Robichaux Collection at Hogan Jazz Archive: “Kindly send one cup of coffee by bearer and oblige. A. H. [?] Kimble, Cornet, Lyric Orchestra.” Soards’ 1924 New Orleans City Directory verifies, “Kimble Andrew, musician Lyric Theatre, r7701 Oak” and, “Maurice Margt, musician Lyric Theatre, r2530 Cadiz.” It seems Margaret and Andrew Kimble returned to New Orleans some time before 1940, when Polk’s New Orleans City Directory listed, “Kimble Andrew (Margt), musician, r 3313 Baronne.” In 1942, only Margaret was listed, at the same address, as “Kimble Margt M, maid.”

7 The 1926 edition of Soards’ New Orleans City Directory lists: “Gillian Chas W, musician Lyric Theatre, h1676 N Claibourne.”

8 The Freeman of May 26, 1917, noted: “King Phillips, the clarinet specialist of Memphis, Tenn., has arrived in Chicago to reside. He has joined Chas. Gillian’s orchestra to play at a town café.”


10 “Negro Jazzers Stir WGV Fans,” New Orleans Item, April 22, 1922. This article was reproduced in the Chicago Defender of April 29, 1922, under the headline “Ethel Radiates,” and prefaced by the observation that Waters had “the distinction of being the first of her Race to do a real ‘radio’ stunt.” However, it was noted in the Item of April 20, 1922, that a “Darkey Quartet,” the male student quartet of Straight University, had sung on the Wednesday night broadcast, two nights before Waters. An early assessment of Ethel Waters’ WGV broadcast - Walter C. Allen, “Another New Orleans First,” The Second Line, vol. 15, no. 5-6 (May-June 1964) - quotes from the April 26, 1922, edition of Phonograph & Talking Machine to confirm that the band that accompanied her on the broadcast was led by Fletcher Henderson. It follows that Henderson also accompanied her at the Midnight Frolic.
Copies of all contemporaneous news reports mined for this article are on file at the Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.


For more on Charles Anderson see Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, “America’s Blue Yodel,” Musical Traditions, no. 11 (late 1993), pp. 2-11.


Benbow’s connection with Gatemouth Brown is noted in Sheldon Harris, Blues Who’s Who (New York: Da Capo, 1979), pp. 76-78. Also see Jas Obrecht, “Clarence Gatemouth Brown: 40 Years on the Road as Picker, Fiddler, Bluesman, Jazzman,” Guitar Player, vol. 13, no. 5 (May 1979).

For a sketch of Bessie Smith’s pre-1920 career, drawn from contemporaneous black press reports, see Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, “Bessie Smith: The Early Years,” Blues & Rhythm, no. 70 (June 1992), pp. 8-11.


Acknowledgements:

The author would like to thank the staff of the Amistad Research Center for making it possible to take digital shots of advertisements from newspapers in their collection for use in this article. Thanks also to Doug Seroff, Bruce Boyd Raeburn, Alma Williams Freeman, and Eric Wedig and the staff of Microfilms in the Howard-Tilton Memorial Library for their assistance.
Blanche Thomas: New Orleans Songstress

"Blanche Thomas came on to sing, opening with 'Darktown Strutters Ball.' Ms. Thomas, for some reason, hasn't achieved the acclaim of a few other local singers, which is a pity — she is exceptional. With her deep, resonant and throaty voice and great stage presence, she rightfully made a big hit with the audience. 'You Gotta See Mama Every Night' was another crowd pleaser. It also featured pianist Jeanette Kimball, who has chops as strong as tempered steel. 'Just a Closer Walk' was masterful; Blanche Thomas reaching the gospel roots of the blues. With [Jack] Willis providing beautiful, nearly boppish trumpet fills which fit surprisingly well and were executed with a gorgeous tone, it left the audience clamoring for more, and Ms. Thomas roared into 'Bill Bailey,' the band blowing soft riffs behind her..."

The above write-up by Dan Morgenstern and Paul Lentz was published in Down Beat magazine;¹ it is probably Blanche Thomas' greatest ever in the major music press. It was written after her appearance at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival in 1972. She sang in front of Papa French’s Original Tuxedo Jazz Band with Jack Willis and Dave Bartholomew, trumpets; "Cornbread" Thomas, clarinet; Wendell Eugene, trombone; Placidé Adams, bass; and probably Louis Barbarin, drums. They played on a Mississippi River
cruise aboard the S. S. President and shared the band duties with the World’s Greatest Jazz Band.

Around five years later, Blanche was fighting a gradually encroaching cancer, and that’s what killed her on April 21, 1977. When death arrived, she was dressed “all in pink from her head to her toes – she even had on her little pink Communion cap,” said her daughter Betty Newton. Newton didn’t allow a traditional jazz funeral because “my mamma never discussed it at all.” And the officiating minister emphatically rejected the consideration of one involving “his church.” However, after the dismissal services, Harold Dejan’s Olympia Brass Band played a couple of gospel items softly, outside of the church. Just prior to her death, plans were announced for a special musical tribute to be held May 15 in New Orleans. The benefit was to feature many New Orleans jazzmen, with the proceeds slated to pay for her substantial medical expenses. It is not known if the benefit occurred.

Blanche Thomas was born October 5, 1922, in Orleans Parish, and she grew up singing. Her father, Sam Thomas, was a musician. According to Blanche, in “the early days” he played bass and trumpet with Kid Howard and Jim Robinson. Although I did a search in an attempt to find the name Sam Thomas in the common literature concerning New Orleans Jazz, I have failed to find the name. Her mother was Malvina Stripling.

In the early 1930s, on 235 South Rampart Street, stood the Tick Tock Roof Garden, which later featured such headliners as Lizzie Miles, Ella Fitzgerald, and the trumpeter Don Albert. Blanche made her first public appearance there at age fourteen, as part of the Kiddies Revue. The Depression was a shaping force in Blanche’s early life, and, while in school, she worked as a part-time waitress at the Pelican. There she heard music every night and no doubt waited for her first big chance to perform. Blanche’s first big audience was at a USO engagement in a concentration camp in Texas, before 500 Japanese inmates. In the mid-1940s she toured with Dodison’s World Circus, working tent shows in the South. As the war went on, she came back to New Orleans and settled down, working the night clubs with groups that included, among others, Alvin Alcorn, Louis Cottrell, Joe Robichaux, Sidney Desvigne, and Dave Bartholomew.

When she finally left school, Blanche sang at the Club Bali at 426 Bourbon Street, with guitarist Adam Lambert’s Six Brown Cats. The band probably included Thomas Jefferson, trumpet; Phamous Lambert, piano; Otis Ducker or Stewart Davis, bass; and Stanley Williams, drums. While on tour in 1944, Jefferson was replaced by Miles Davis, just eighteen years old. Davis later described the Lambert band as in the “modern swing style.” It’s unlikely that Blanche was with the band when it featured Davis. This episode in her career ended with the burning of the Club Bali, a devastating fire in which the musicians lost all their instruments.

On July 3, 1954, Blanche made her debut as a recording artist for the Imperial label, backed by Dave Bartholomew’s band. Her recording of “You Ain’t So Such A Much” was backed only by the guitarist, Ernest McLean, and a rhythm section. McLean played a fine solo, and the cut became a regional hit. (McLean is the son of the late Richard McLean, who was Paul Barbarin’s bass player in the
Thorton also made visits, so it’s likely that she and Blanche actually met.

Robert “Catman” Caffrey, whose “sidelines included MC’ing” at the Dew Drop, recalls the atmosphere of the place:

“There were two major clubs in New Orleans during the early 1950s, they were the Dew Drop and the Tijuana. The Dew Drop was the up-market place – it had a nightclub atmosphere. People would dress. In fact there was a time when Frank [Painia, the proprietor] didn’t allow you to enter unless you were dressed. This was such a different era, in that era people dressed all the time, they were not wild, but they were a groovy crowd and they understood what was going on. Frank got the people automatically because they knew no matter who the stars were, they would be at the Dew Drop... The shows were terrific – it was all day and an all night thing, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, after that they would rest, but that weekend was terrifying, it was around the clock, it was grind, there was no resting.

You started at twelve midnight, and you are supposed to get off at 4.30 really, but that never happened because the average musician got off from Bourbon Street and got there at two or three. The night’s entertainment always consisted of a show. The show would start off with an MC, and he would be capable of doing jokes or singing, guys like Harold ‘Chuck’ Badie or Tex Stephens. Then a shake dancer would be second, or else you’d have a tap dancer like Streamline Harris. After that the feature would come on, and there was always a fight who was gonna close the show. Maybe Joe Tex, Joe Turner, the big acts would come on at the end, but we would stay after the show was over, then the guys would come on and jam.
until 10 o’clock in the morning. The Dew Drop had no clocks inside, it was always dark at the front, so you don’t really realise that it was daylight outside."

The bass player on “You Ain’t So Such A Much” was Frank Fields, who was to record with Blanche in the 1960s as well. Bartholomew’s drummer was Earl Palmer (born 1924). In his autobiography Palmer states that:

“Blanche Thomas was the first chick I had anything to do with. I was about twelve, she was three or four years older and lived on Dumaine Street, between Claiborne and Robertson. It was the kind of thing where the grownsups are gone and you’re in the house. Blanche was a very forward girl. She dared me. “You don’t know how to do nothing.” Being a young, feisty dude, I said, “Yes I do!” You know, the kind of bragadocio attitude. “I bet you never had a girl.” “Sure I did!” “Aw, you don’t know what to do.” I had sensed this was going to be the time. But I still wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d slapped me and said, “Get the hell away from here!” I was kissing on her and feeling on her and I told her I was going to put it in her… Next thing you know, that’s just what I did. I remember thinking, “Jesus, I really don’t know how to do this!” All I could think afterwards was, “I should have done this earlier!”

During the 1950s Blanche also performed at trumpet player Leon Prima’s 500 Club, at Bourbon and St. Louis streets. After her engagement with Bartholomew at the Dew Drop Inn, she moved to the Mardi Gras Lounge at 333 Bourbon Street. It was the white clarinet virtuoso Sid Davilla who was the owner, and he used to sit in with the bands as well. Blanche said, “This was THE place to work.” Another great New Orleans female singer who performed there was Lizzie Miles. Freddie Kohlman heard Blanche at the Mardi Gras Lounge, and Freddie subsequently became the drummer at Jazz, Ltd. in Chicago. Kohlman recommended Blanche to the owners, Ruth and Bill Reinhard. Blanche sang in the Windy City for two years, and she also worked at the Show Boat and the Pick Collier Club in that City. She worked with tenor and clarinet player Franz Jackson’s Band at his Red Arrow Club in Chicago in 1962, as well. And she returned to the Windy City in 1964 for an engagement with piano player Art Hodes at the Showboat Sari-S. There’s a rumor that Blanche appeared with Elvis Presley in the 1958 film “King Creole,” and also performed with Presley on Dave Garroway’s “Today” show, on NBC-TV, in 1961. Incidentally, a short sequence of “King Creole” was shot in the courtyard of Preservation Hall. It’s the part where Presley walks down an outdoor stair to the courtyard.

In 1958 Blanche recorded with New Orleans trumpet player Wallace Davenport. The result was a 45rpm record on Davenport’s small Ponchartrain label. The band consisted of Davenport with Nat Perilli, tenor sax; Ed Frank, organ and arranger; Richard Payne, bass; and Ed Blackwell, drums. Blanche sang the lovely ballad “This Love of Mine” from 1941, with words by Frank Sinatra. Drummer Ed Blackwell was soon to gain fame with Ornette Coleman’s avant-garde group.

It was the great drummer Paul Barbarin who introduced Blanche to the traditional jazz world. The occasion was the New Orleans Jazz Club’s eleventh anniversary concert, held at the Municipal Auditorium on October 26, 1959. Barbarin had added Blanche to his
“All Stars,” and it was the Barbarin Band that opened the show. The other acts were Chris Barber’s band with Ottilie Patterson (first U.S. tour) and Pete Fountain’s band. The concert was recorded, but so far Blanche’s contributions remain unissued. New Orleans Jazz Club member Helen Arlt stated that, “I’ll never forget her. Blanche came on stage in her shiny lime green, tight fitting dress. Paul had boasted of Blanche as a ‘crowd charmer.’ How right he was. Before she was half way through her opening number, there was a fluttering through the audience, signifying its complete approval of the robust gal on the stage.”

In the early 1960s Blanche made a couple of recordings with the Paul Barbarin band for the Southland label, and she was with this band when they crossed the Pacific in 1967 to entertain the U.S. troops in South Vietnam and Thailand. None other than General Westmoreland presented Blanche and the Barbarin band during this U.S.O. tour, and Blanche received a green beret as a souvenir.

Of Blanche’s recordings with Barbarin, I have a certain fondness for her 1961 rendition of “Fine And Mellow” (“New Orleans Creole Band,” GHB 143), a twelve bar blues supported by the ingenious piano playing of Lester Santiago. “Fine And Mellow” is often associated with Billie Holiday, who recorded it first in April 1939, but it was written by Alberta Hunter, who recorded it in August of that same year.

Around 1965, Al Clarke’s Nobility label did a session that is one of Blanche’s best efforts. Although the repertoire may have been hackneyed, new life was put into the tunes through the very effective arrangements by the wonderful trombonist Waldren “Frog” Joseph. The band was led by Albert “Papa” French, and the personnel included Alvin Alcorn, Joseph “Cornbread” Thomas, Jeanette Kimball, Frank Fields and Louis Barbarin. The session was cut by the legendary Cosimo Matassa at his 525 Governor Nicholls Street studio.

In the fall of 1968 trombonist Santo Pecora organized an all-star group for the annual “Dixieland at Disneyland” concert at Disneyland Park in Anaheim, California. The band included Blanche with Thomas Jefferson, trumpet; Harry Shields, clarinet; Pete Monteleone, piano; Emanuel Sayles, banjo; Milton Stevens, bass; and Freddie Kohlman, drums.

From around 1970 there’s a mysterious Blanche Thomas “live” version of “Bill Bailey,” produced and released by the “Louisiana Tourist Development Commission” on the Bourbon Street label. The liner notes state that the track is from “Nobility N-
703” (Louis Cottrell and His New Orleans Jazz Band, November 1964), but that’s clearly not the case. The band behind Blanche on this version of “Bill Bailey” is Louis Cottrell’s, with what sounds like Teddy Riley, trumpet; “Frog” Joseph, trombone; probably Walter Lewis, piano; possibly Placide Adams, bass; and Freddie Kohlman, drums. The track is not listed in the main traditional jazz discographies, but it sounds as if it’s a Dixieland Hall recording, possibly from an unknown session for Nobility. The year 1970 found Blanche singing with the Al Hirt Band, doing local club dates in St. Louis.

During the 1960s and 70s Blanche was a constant attraction at Dixieland Hall and later at Heritage Hall and some other venues in New Orleans. She was featured when Louis Cottrell’s band did a concert at Carnegie Hall in New York on February 12, 1974. The show was recorded for the small VIKO label.

From the early 1970s there’s an interesting “45” on the Capricorn label of “Bald Headed Beulah”/“Why Don’t You All Go To New Orleans.” The label lists one Marge Baird as composer of both tunes. Blanche is the vocalist on “Bald Headed Beulah,” a swinging shuffle tune. Behind her is Papa French’s band with Jack Willis, “Cornbread” Thomas, Homer Eugene, Jeanette Kimball, Frank Fields and Louis Barbarin.

In the summer of 1974 Blanche made her initial visit to Europe, appearing at the “Grand Parade du Jazz” in Nice, France. She was backed by the very fine band of Louis Cottrell, with Teddy Riley, “Frog” Joseph, Walter Lewis, Placide Adams and Freddie Kohlman. The former Ellington and Louis Armstrong clarinet man, Barney Bigard, was an added attraction. It’s a joy to hear how Kohlman propelled that band. There is a private recording of the concert, and a Rarities label LP was issued containing seven items, including two vocals by Blanche: “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” and “Bill Bailey.” Blanche, in her second chorus, sang, “A hard man is good to find!” There are at least two Blanche Thomas recordings of that song, but on the studio recording with the Last Straws from the early 1970s, she didn’t sing the line, “A hard man…” There are twenty-six unissued tracks from the Nice concert in the can, including two with vocals by Blanche.

“A Good Man...” was written in 1918 by the black composer Eddie Green, and it became a vaudeville chestnut during the 1920s. In 1927 it was immortalized on a Bessie Smith recording. The song was also cut by the great Lizzie Miles in 1928, and again in 1952, and possibly it was Lizzie who inspired Blanche to pick it up. In 1959, Big Maybelle (Mabel Smith, 1924-1972) recorded an r&b interpretation. Obviously, Blanche found a “good man” whom she married, but I only know his surname as Collins.

Blanche returned to the “Old World” in the fall of 1975, and yours truly caught her at a November concert in Stockholm. She was then a part of Dick Hyman’s New York Repertory Company’s multimedia show, “The Musical Life of Louis Armstrong.” She sang “Cake Walking Babies,” “St. Louis Blues” and “Nobody Wants You When You’re Down And Out” as a substitute for Carrie Smith. New Orleans trumpet player Joe Newman did the customary “call and response” to her vocals on “St. Louis Blues” and “Nobody Wants You.” The New York Repertory Company did at least two performances in Sweden, and they performed in many European countries, as well. Blanche’s vocals at
the show in Stockholm weren’t well received. One of the reviewers in the *Orkester Journalen* compared her to Bessie Smith, and I find that ridiculous. (What’s the point of comparing Louis Armstrong to, say, Percy Humphrey?) Blanche Thomas, like Bessie Smith, had a superb sense of time. Her vocals were more positively judged by reviewer Bo Sherman of the same magazine. In his review of her appearance at the Jazz Festival in Umea on October 25, 1975, Sherman stated: “Although she is not among the top class vocalists,” he appreciated her singing and “vaudeville manners,” calling her a “stage personality,” etc.

Besides the November 1975 Stockholm concert, I also heard Blanche at the Dixieland Hall at 522 Bourbon Street in the fall of 1966 and again in 1969. Of her recorded legacy (about thirty-one tracks), very little is reissued on CD. In fact, in my collection I have only one tune, her fine “You Ain’t So Such A Much.” This track is included on “Spirit of New Orleans: The Genius of Dave Bartholomew” (EMI), a double CD of Imperial label recordings.

Below is trumpet player Clive Wilson’s view of Blanche Thomas:

“Blanche was a good all around singer, though you didn’t hear her sing many standards and ballads in Dixieland Hall. You had to hear her sing at a private job to know what she could do. She was a great performer on stage, very professional in the old tradition of Black clubs and shows. She reminds me a lot of Della Reese, or vice versa, both in her singing and stage presentation.”

Blanche Thomas is buried in Holt Cemetery. Besides her daughter, she is survived by a son, one brother and four sisters, and several grandchildren. In spite of her importance to New Orleans music, my search for Blanche Thomas items on the internet yielded very little. One site was advertising a copy of her Nobility LP for sale, but there was no information whatsoever on her career or her contributions to New Orleans music.

**Per Oldaus**

**Sources:**


Endnote


2 “USO” (United Service Organizations) is a private, non-profit, independent agency providing welfare, social and spiritual services, as well as recreation and entertainment for members of the U.S. armed forces, at home and overseas.

3 The record label credits Dave Bartholomew as the composer, but during a conversation with Lars Edegran in November 2002, Bartholomew revealed that it was Blanche who wrote the song.


6 Leon Prima was the older brother of Louis.

7 Four tracks with the Barbarin outfit minus Blanche were issued on 504 CD 48.

8 Helen Arlt, liner notes, “Blanche Thomas Meets the Last Straws,” Shalom SH-16.

9 Lizzie Miles, Conquerer 7185, 1928; Lizzie Miles with Sharkey Bonano and His Kings of Dixieland, Capitol LP T-792, 1952.

Grateful acknowledgements:


Curator’s Commentary

Delighted (and relieved) as always to get another issue of the newsletter out, and to remind Friends of the Jazz Archive to make annual checks payable to Hogan Jazz Archive in the amount of $25. We are also pleased to announce that one of our contributors from last issue, Matt Sakakeeny, has entered the Ph.D. program in Ethnomusicology at Columbia University, and that another, Evan Christopher, has matriculated to the Musicology Masters program in New Orleans Music Studies at Tulane. We wish Matt and Evan success with their academic careers and look forward to more good work from them in the future.

Lynn Abbott’s piece in the current issue is the first of a two-parter, exploring the press surrounding the Midnight Frolics at the Lyric Theater, a phenomenon reflecting the vagaries of segregation and musical performance in New Orleans in the 1920s. Per Oldaeus provides a personal perspective on the contributions of Blanche Thomas, a singer whose legacy should not be forgotten.

The most exciting news to convey for 2003 is the beginning of an effort to make digital transfers of the oral history open reel analog tapes, a preservation move which is necessary to ensure continued shelf life of the audio interviews. The funding has been generously provided by The New Orleans Jazz Commission, the advisory body of the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, a facility of the National Park Service. Transfers to CDR and MP3 files on DVD have been done for 231 reels (about 10% of the collection) by Parker Dinkins of Master Digital Corporation, a local vendor. Plans are currently underway to place the MP3 files on a Tulane University server to make them available via links to the Archive’s oral history index on its homepage. Meanwhile, thanks to the generosity of patron Phil Wilking, an oral history work station has been donated to the Archive to enable playing of the MP3 files on a dedicated PC. Although it will probably take several years to accomplish the transfer of the more than 2,000 oral history audio tapes at the Archive, the initial subvention from the Jazz Commission (with another on the way) not only begins the important process of preservation of this unique material but also promises enhanced accessibility via internet delivery, making these life stories available to jazz scholars throughout the world, as well as to students in Orleans Parish public schools, visitors to the NOJNHP visitor center, and, indeed, to anyone with a PC. The MP3 files will be for listening purposes only and will not be subject to download. The Archive also hopes to eventually place the written transcripts on line, with keyword searching capability.

It is also my pleasure to gratefully acknowledge the service of Jens Lindgren, an intern from the Svenskt Visakiv in Stockholm who did two tours of duty with the Hogan Jazz Archive in 2002. His assistance with the processing of serials from the Richard B. Allen
collection was invaluable, and the bonhomie and generosity of spirit that he regularly applies to everything he does was appreciated by staff and patrons alike. Jens was most recently back in New Orleans last April-May as a trombonist with Kustbandet, a band with which he has had an abiding association covering more than three decades. Kustbandet was booked at New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival this year, where it was a sensation, and also thrilled crowds at the Palm Court Jazz Café on Decatur Street in the French Quarter. Jens also found the time to set up a serials exchange whereby the Hogan Jazz Archive was able to fill gaps in its run of Orkester Journalen in exchange for vintage duplicate Down Beats for the Swedish Jazz Archive. Needless to say, we look forward to Jens’ next visit.

Finally, as the Curator of the Hogan Jazz Archive I accepted a Danny Barker Estate “Keeping the Music Alive” Award from Sylvia Barker (Danny and Blue Lu’s daughter) at a luncheon held at Dooky Chase’s restaurant on November 23. In presenting the award, Sylvia spoke of the gracious reception she and members of her family had received at the Hogan Jazz Archive, and I added that Danny had maintained a life-long interest in jazz history which made him a frequent visitor to the Archive—always ready to dig a little deeper into the history, even though he knew (and had lived) so much of it. I consider this award to be a testament to the dedication and diligence of Mrs. Alma Williams Freeman and Lynn Abbott, whose knowledge of the collection and level of excellence in serving patrons would be hard to surpass. Other recipients of Danny Barker Estate awards were attorney Lolis Elie, Sr., writer Jason Berry, photographers Michael P. Smith, Syndey Byrd, and Erick Waters, Sylvester Francis of the Backstreet Cultural Museum, guitarist Steve Masakowski, record producer Carlo Ditta, photographer and communications specialist Pat Jolly, Father Jerome LeDoux of St. Augustine Church, arts promoter Drex Brumfield, thespians Chacula Cha Jua and Adella Gautier, storyteller Angela Davis, artist Claire Foster Burnett, and nurse Carolyn Graetz. Special thanks to Sylvia Barker for an award that really matters to us and for sharing her wonderful stories, including Danny’s hitherto unpublished “David and his Fifteen Virgin Sisters and the Black Sheep Jazzabelle,” which definitively clears up the question of how jazz came to be. At last! Now we can all move on.

Bruce Boyd Raeburn