The Economy Society and Community Support for Jazz

There are almost one hundred oral history interviews at the Hogan Jazz Archive that mention early jazz activity at Economy Hall. They range from Captain Verne Streckfus, who claims to have launched the “traveling” phase of Louis Armstrong’s music career by recruiting him for the Streckfus riverboats from a regular Monday night job with Kid Ory at Economy Hall, to bassist George “Pops” Foster, who compared playing Economy Hall to performing at New York City’s famed Carnegie Hall. Many of the New Orleans jazz musicians interviewed talked about Economy Hall’s lavish banquets (pronounced “bon-kays”), renowned all night soirees dansantes.
(dances that ran from 8 p.m. to 4 a.m.), and the myriad of dance bands that performed there, including Ory’s Creole Jazz Band, Manuel Perez’s Imperial, the Olympia, Buddy Petite, and Joe Oliver.¹

There are good reasons why the Economy Hall is remembered and revered so widely today. Like any good building, it was laid on a strong foundation. Jazz was the top story -- the most recent addition to Economy Hall-- but the real foundation for the Economy Hall was the benevolent society that provided the location, the organizational structure, and the community in which jazz could flourish in the 20th century.

Economy Hall, at 1422 Ursulines Street, is listed on the soirée posters of the jazz age and the Sanborn Fire Insurance map of 1885-1893.² But this was actually the second building owned by the Economy Society (Société d’Economie et d’Assistance Mutuelle), of which there were ultimately three. The first meeting hall was across the street from 1422 (at what would today be 1423 Ursulines), and the third was next to the Hall at 1428 Ursulines. The 1422 address has become famous as the renowned jazz hall, but the first is worth noting as a testament to the enduring presence of the benevolent association and a community that existed to support new music even before jazz.³

The Société d’Economie et d’Assistance Mutuelle was formed in New Orleans in January 1836 with a membership of fifteen free men of color. During its one hundred year tenure in the Tremé neighborhood of New Orleans, however, the membership grew to over one hundred sixty members. In the 1870s, for example, there were 167 men of color at the regular bi-monthly meetings in Economy Hall. Bi-monthly (and sometimes weekly) meetings continued until at least 1935.

Throughout the 19th century, men joined the organization from the faubourgs of Tremé and the Marigny, both abutting the area now called the French Quarter. But men joined also from other parts of the city of New Orleans, including Algiers, across the Mississippi River.

The Economy Society’s first hall was purchased just as soon as the organization began. The organization’s founders met at a property on Ursulines Street between Villere and Marais. A building was already standing at the time of this first meeting.

The purchase of the first hall was notarized as a private transaction between three men of color: Pierre Crocker, Manuel Moreau, and Pierre Duhart. It appears in the notary books as one of the thousands of transactions of free men of color who were somewhere between 28 percent of the population in 1810 and 18.8 percent in 1840. During these years, they had large real estate enterprises in the suburbs of the old city of New Orleans. They developed and largely populated the Faubourgs Tremé


³To determine the 1423 address, I examined all of the lots on the 1400 block of Ursulines Street

in the New Orleans Conveyance office with the record of sale in the Notarial Archives. The sale of the first Economy property is before Louis T. Caire, 25 February 1836.
(then with two accents Trémé) and Marigny, as noted in the New Orleans Architecture series “The Creole Faubourgs.”

The Société d’Economie does not get on the record publically until the 1850s when it made its initial attempt at incorporation. It was listed as a corporation in a real estate transaction in August 1853. But because the state laws of the 1850s disenfranchised organizations composed of people of color, the incorporation may not have stuck. The Economy Society is incorporated again as a charitable institution on June 4, 1874, under Governor Pitt Kellogg.

The society member who purchased the first hall, Pierre Duhart, writes a disclaimer which is annexed to the Société d’Economie’s minute books. “The property that I have acquired from Pierre Crocker for the sum of fourteen hundred fifty piastres payable in 12 months does not belong to me. It belongs to a society entitled the Economy Society of which I am a member and which I represented in this transaction.”

It is worth noting that the Economy Society’s minutes are kept in French until the second decade of the 20th century. While there are various English words inserted into the minutes from the 1870s onward, and the organization’s constitution is translated into English and French in 1874, only by February 1914 is English used exclusively.

The Economy Hall of the 20th century is known for its great dances, where jazz musicians played. This tradition of giving dances began very early on.

In January 1841, the Economy Society gave a ball with the proceeds going to the “Dames de la Charité”. The soiree was held at the Washington ballroom (“La Salle Washington”) on St. Philip Street and netted a profit of 369 piastres. (Income was 531 piastres and costs were 162 piastres. No description was given of the names of musicians or costs, usually liquor and food.)

Yet, even before this ball, the Economy Society was thinking of building its own ballroom. The members had a plan drawn and a got an estimate for the work. But the society did not approve a motion in the minutes to build the addition, citing the financial strain and inconvenience that construction would create for the organization. They tabled the project until a time when more land could be purchased that would easily accommodate the kind of structure

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5The land for the Economy Hall was purchased from a free woman of color Elizabeth Conty on July 27, 1853. Purchase of Conty property was registered August 20, 1853. In the New Orleans conveyance office this is listed as COB 61/245.

6Sale before A.E. Bienvenu July 20, 1853 between Elizabeth Conty, fil., and Societe d’Economie et d’Assistance Mutuelle. For free people and laws see Imperfect Equality; and Constitution and bylaws of the Economy Society are in the Tulane University library.


8Economy Minutes 1836-1935. Private collection.

they wanted. That time came in July 1853 when the society purchased the lot across from their meeting hall from a free woman of color named Elizabeth Conty. Then they tapped one of their members to do the construction. William Belley received detailed plans from the society and began construction in 1856, finishing the work in 1857.

The Economy Hall was a large, two-story building that towered over the neighborhood of small single and double shotgun houses. It had a large ballroom, an auditorium, and several meeting halls. There was a separate kitchen building and a fence at the front of the property. On the hall itself was a copper cornice and a beehive for decoration, which was the symbol of the organization. It was the site of banquets, dances, and political rallies from the time it opened. The inauguration of the Economy Hall on December 20, 1857 was a grand event. Planning for the inauguration included committees named to watch the doors, invite others, and to serve drinks.

François Boisdoré, a member active in the negro suffrage movement and a second generation Economy member, was named as orator of the day. Individual members of the “Société Philharmonique” which no longer existed as a group were invited to play. The minutes explain “...mais qu’en s’adressant une letter à M. Liauteau. Il pourra réunir des amateurs qui executeront quelques morceaux pour la circumstance.” (“They asked Monsieur Liauteau to reunite some amateurs to execute a few morsels for the occasion.”) Within the next decade,

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10 Economy minutes Sept. 3, 1838, and June 1841.
11 Sale before A.E. Bienvenu July 20, 1853 between Elizabeth Conty, fel, and Societe d’Economie et d’Assistance Mutuelle.
12 William Belley contract before Notary Lisbony Vol. 18, Sept. 4, 1856.
13 Belly contract and Economy Minutes, May 4, 1857.
14 Minutes Feb. 4, 1837; Dec. 1, 1857.
musicians and composers Eugene Victor Macarty and Basile Barés played in concert in Economy Hall.\textsuperscript{15}

The organization of the Economy Society provided the framework for the hall’s musical reputation. From its earliest years, the Société d’Économie had a hierarchy of president, vice-president, treasurer, secretary and librarian. It also had committees of purchase, finance, library, assistance, balls, and, by the 1850s, vigilance.

The balls committee consisted of usually three to five members, and included the “gardien” (later translated as janitor). In the beginning, the “gardien” and “gardienne” lived at the property (often with family), and took care of opening and closing the hall for meetings and dances. The balls committee gave reports sometimes twice a month, as did all the committees. In 1872, the balls committee’s book (which still survives) listed the following expenses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expenses</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To Print Invitations</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for police for the ball of Jan 1st</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for six musicians</td>
<td>32.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>two men at the buvette (bar)</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one employee at the department of hats</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A chandelier for the ticket office</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 envelopes for</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{15}Minutes Dec. 1, 1857; There was a poet with a similar name mentioned in Desdunes’ Our People and Our History (1911). For more information on Creole of color composers, see Lester Sullivan, “Composers of Color of Nineteenth Century New Orleans: The History Behind the Music,” Black Music Research Journal, vol. 8, no. 1 (1988), 51-82.

invitations .................. .70

There are other expenses listed, for example, the cost of oranges and the hat check. This ball cost the members $53.50.\textsuperscript{16} In current costs, that would be $737.00. So one can see that while later references to Economy Hall by musicians describe it as “Cheapskate Hall,” at this point in history the term did not apply.\textsuperscript{17} Unfortunately, only the musicians’ payment, but not their names, was listed in the ball reports.

With regard to the structure of the organization, the society was considered a mother and its members were brothers. So there was an assumed equality among members. The “gardien” held a position of respect equal to that of the president. Members who were disrespectful to each other or to the chair were fined. There was a free exchange of discussion about values and openness about the family conditions, especially with regard to travel, illnesses, births and deaths.

Open discussion also characterized the activities in Economy Hall. It was the site in the 1850s and 1860s of numerous meetings for political and social equality, and for suffrage. During this period Economy members worked actively with Unionists and with African Methodist Episcopal ministers.\textsuperscript{18} We can assume that members who were

\textsuperscript{16}Book No. 23 Livre de Caisse du Comité des Bals 1872. Private collection New Orleans.

\textsuperscript{17}Al Rose and Edmond Souchon, New Orleans Jazz: A Family Album. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967).

\textsuperscript{18}See Caryn Cossé Bell, Revolution, Romanticism and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997) for the activities of the community of free people of color.
socially, politically, and religiously open were not narrow-minded with regard to their musical tastes.

The Economy Hall became a launching pad for all the kinds of events that are generally touted as the roots of jazz--parades, funerals, and dances. The membership of the Economy Society was small and selective at the very beginning in 1836 but it grew to encompass a wider range of men of African descent throughout the city.

The 1836 membership included businessmen (primarily entrepreneurs) and internationally traveled men of wealth. Later membership included journeymen and teachers, funeral home entrepreneurs, and clerks. They were classically educated and literate, as evidenced by the discourse in their minutes and by an account from the New Orleans Times: “A meeting of free colored citizens was held at Economy Hall last night to consider measures for securing the rights of franchise to that class of citizens...(the first speaker was followed by) François Boisdoré, whose maiden speech we give entire as specimen of the eloquence of the colored citizens of New Orleans.”

Boisdoré endorsed the immediate abolition of slavery and suffrage for free men of color. He also noted that some Irish and German immigrants “who cannot write their names” are registered to vote, while at the meeting in Economy Hall “There are no such men here; you can all at least read and write and can appreciate the right of suffrage.”

If Boisdoré’s comments and those of the New Orleans Times seem overly generous in praise of all the “colored citizens,” we note that Boisdoré’s spontaneous speech was indicative of the dialogue that persists in the pages of the Economy Society minutes from its first day and throughout the 19th century. Only at the end of the 19th century and in the 20th century does the rhetoric become inelegant.

At least one of the causes for this change was the white backlash against Reconstruction which, via terrorism and then legislation, systematically ended financial mobility and access to integrated social, cultural, and educational venues for descendants of Africans.

In plain terms, this meant that men like those in the Economy Society were at once segregated from participating in the financial life of New Orleans, in which their ancestors had taken part since before the Louisiana Purchase, and were further expected to support their own institutions without this influx of

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19 New Orleans Times, Nov. 6, 1863.

20 New Orleans Times, Nov. 6, 1863.

21 The author has read the minutes of the Economy Society from 1836 to 1935, and is completing a book about the subject.
money. This history is relevant to the creation of the Economy Hall community that supported jazz. At various times, the members of the Economy Society were classified as “free people of color,” “colored,” and “Negro,” depending on the nomenclature of the decade. They appear to have been uniformly African descendants intermixed with any number of European and, later, Mexican ethnicities. The *Daily Picayune* newspaper described the society in an article about philanthropy after a flood: “It is one of the special privileges of this association that its services are frequently employed in behalf of patriotic and benevolent movements...The Economy Society, which has for several years been established on Ursulines Street, in the Second District of this city, is composed of some of our oldest and most respected citizens.”

Early on, the society supported music through concerts by Eugene Victor Macarthy, Basile Barés, and Edmund Dédé -- all men of African descent (although of differing skin tone). Notably, Barés and Macarthy played for an event in 1865 to fund the Freedmen’s Aid Association. In the Economy Hall, balls were held for Universal Suffrage, including those for children. “The cause of universal suffrage is every day becoming more popular with the young people of our city. Two balls will be given today, at Economy Hall, in behalf of the favorite cause. One will be a children’s ball, which will be given at four o’clock and last till eight. Then young men and young ladies will come out in their best attires, in their gay and glittering dresses, and their quadrilles and waltzes will last till morning.”

The same month, a protestant minister offered entertainment in a series of tableaus at the Hall called “exhibitions.” On one night were scenes from the war and the next night “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” The *Tribune* said, “There was a time when these exhibitions were exclusively in the hands of white men. Let us patronize every gentleman of every ability and talent, without discrimination of color. Our friends of all classes are invited to attend.”

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22Economy minutes, Jan 24, 1836; Jun 15, 1874; May 1, 1895; New Orleans Times-Picayune April 25, 1874.

23New Orleans Tribune, March 28, 1865 and April 6, 1865.


26Economy Minutes, March 21, 1865.
Possibly beginning with the model of 18th century France, in which craft societies created journeymen “families,” the Economy Society, impacted by racism in the United States, formed a community of strong bonds with African ancestry and open-mindedness as common denominators. Paradoxically, owing to their separation from “white” society in New Orleans and their constant legal and political battles for equality, with support rallied often in Economy Hall, the association was at the same time privileged as an elite and oppressed.

This perspective, along with the liberal dialectics of Economy Hall, could account for later social and musical developments, in particular their openness to the African influences that inspired the blue tones and ragging of jazz. Actually, in 1875, the resolution was first put forth in a meeting that a brass band should be hired for celebrations, funerals and other “sortees.” Specifically, the minutes say that the Economy wishes to work in coordination with the actions of other societies and corporations. In doing so, it should have "A banner under which the members should line up -- an American flag to represent the nationality; and a body of musicians at the head for the outings as a body, for celebrations of anniversaries, funerals or other outings."

William Schaefer and Richard B. Allen in *Brass Bands and New Orleans Jazz* explain that the black brass band was a visible demonstration, especially during Reconstruction, of black men asking America to make good on its promises. Hence, the Society carrying the American flag on all of its outings.

In any case, in 1875, the Economy Society resolves that "a committee is named to negotiate with the chef de Musiciens (brass band) and report to the Society the result of their steps, as long as the sum demanded does not exceed $20 for the funeral and $50 for other solemnities." In 1880, there is another discussion about having a band of music for the "enterrements." A motion is
made that henceforth and after that night, the Society would have music or a Brass Band (this is written in English) to conduct to their last home the bodies of the deceased members." The motion was seconded by two brothers, who "propose la suppression du mot musique." They want to take out the word "musique" so that the words "brass band" stand alone. My theory is that they were very specifically requesting a new sound.

There was a great debate on this at the meeting. The gist of it was that the secretary wanted the words "brass band" translated to him in French so that he could put it correctly into the minutes. He was given no accurate translation -- and as much we wish for it, there is no list of the suggestions that he rejected -- so he is told he can write this in English. In fact, there was a vote taken on whether the words "brass band" could be written that way. The words "brass band" in English won 26 to 11.

In fact, the Economy Society in the 1880s joined many organizations in marching to the tune of brass bands, and one later president, Myrtil Piron, was the uncle of the composer, violinist, and "society" jazz band leader Armand Piron. By the late 1890s, the Economy Hall had existed almost 40 years and the tradition of dancing at the invitation of the Economy brothers had gone on for at least one decade longer. In the 20th century, the Economy Hall hosted dances with Piron's orchestra, Kid Ory, and almost one hundred other musicians. The dances were crowded and famous throughout New Orleans. One knows now that these dances followed a reputation that had been long established.

The members of the Economy Society created community to support one another in every generation: they pooled funds and held soirees through the difficult 1830s when the state created laws to eliminate the gains of free men of color. They danced and "bon-kayed" in the 1850s when men of color joined with white radicals for suffrage, and during the mutual aid movements of the 1860s and 1870s. This community marched in the 1880s, to the tunes of brass bands and along with other societies, through New Orleans. A strong community of extended family and friends was already in place in the 1890s when African descendants were uniformly segregated and financially isolated. So the cousins, uncles and friends of the Pirons, Dejans, Pavegeaus, Gaspards -- all family names found in Economy Hall -- took care of each other through dinners and dances. Many came to earn a living in the form of a packed house because of this supportive audience, ready to respond to the call of the musicians who came to the stage of Economy Hall. Then, jazz began to raise the roof, and consequently opportunities for New Orleans musicians, as it spread into the wider world, changing perceptions of American music forever. Later, the Hall became a church and was eventually demolished in 1965 after severe damage to the building during Hurricane Betsy, but its spirit lives on in the Economy Hall traditional jazz tent at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival.

Fatima Shaik

Photographs of Economy Hall were taken by William Russell.
Revisiting St. Philip Church of God in Christ

The Power House! That is what the nondescript little building at 1309 St. Philip Street in New Orleans was called by local members of the Church of God in Christ in the 1950s. They declared that the power of God was "so great there until you wouldn’t hear of anybody dying. You had to be old, look like, to die in those days...Elder Evans would pray for you and you would definitely get well." This modest church was the setting of many miraculous healings and also the scene of some soul-rendering musical performances.

New Orleans has long been a hub of musical activities and is widely known as the home of jazz, America’s music. In a city rich in diverse musical tastes it is not surprising that church music was and continues to be of monumental importance in both secular and religious venues. When Richard B. Allen came to New Orleans on a weekend pass from the navy base on the Gulf Coast in 1945, seeking the National Jazz Foundation where he could hear live traditional jazz music, little did he know that in due course he would be instrumental in the founding of the Archive of New Orleans Jazz at Tulane University (later renamed the William Ransom Hogan Archive of Jazz), a primary resource for New Orleans jazz research. Indeed, as a brief examination of the Archive’s holdings will verify, his search was not limited to jazz. Dick’s interests in music and world affairs in general are a lesson in diversity. Just mention to him the name of any town—globally—and it is bound to strike up a game of trivial pursuit. In doing the groundwork necessary for the establishment of the Archive, Dick would meticulously research his subjects before heading out on an interview and would willingly go wherever a musician or his music could be found. On occasion, Dick would venture into a church service, tape recorder in hand, to capture the sound of musicians performing in religious settings, but otherwise known for particular jazz beats. One such outing took him to the Algiers Church of God in Christ where he and Harry Oster recorded the former brass band snare and bass drummer Remus Matthews during a Communion service in 1953. In his heyday, Matthews played with numerous brass bands, including the Excelsior, Henry Allen, the Tulane Brass Band, the Tuxedo, Henry Rena, and the Eureka. The trumpeter and band leader Kid Thomas Valentine said that on the way home after playing one last parade for a Carnival club with John Casimir’s Young Tuxedo Brass Band, Matthews told him that he was going to get out of music and join the church because the other band members argued too much and he was too old to go to the penitentiary. True to his words, Matthews quit the band and joined the Algiers Church of God in Christ, where Elder Robert Jones was his pastor. Matthews’ rousing drum solo from this service can be heard on the CD that accompanies the book, Fallen Heroes by Richard Knowles.

Uncertain dates in 1956 found Dick at St. Philip Street Church of God in Christ along with the New York-based artist

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1 Stella Rochon interview by Alma Williams Freeman and Deacon Warren Smith, August 23, 2004, tape 1, side A, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.

2 Kid Thomas Valentine interview by Barry Martyn, March 21, 1964, reel I, page 3, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.
and photographer Ralston Crawford in pursuit of Sidney “Jim Little” Brown, bassist of the famed Sam Morgan Jazz Band that recorded in 1927. This band was the first jazz band to record spirituals with dance rhythms, which was done at the insistence of Columbia’s recording director. Born July 19, 1894 in Deer Range, Louisiana (near Magnolia Plantation), Sidney Brown was the nephew of the trombonist Nathan “Jim Crow” Robinson, who was the brother of Brown’s mother. His grandfather, George Robinson, gave them nicknames, calling his uncle “Jim Crow” and Brown “Jim Little” to distinguish between the two. Brown learned to play violin, mandolin, and guitar “by head” while still living on the plantation, and he sometimes performed with a group that played there on weekends. When he moved to New Orleans around 1912-1913, he began playing violin in Sam Morgan’s six-piece Magnolia Band. But he did not consider himself a legitimate musician until he learned string bass and tuba from Charles “Sunny” Henry and started to play with Sam Morgan “for true” (as he put it), remaining with him until Morgan became crippled.\(^3\) Other bands with which he was associated included the Golden Leaf Band and the Tuxedo Brass Band.

At the time the church photographs were taken, Brown had largely given up performing secular music in favor of playing for religious services at St. Philip Street Church of God in Christ under the leadership of the pastor, Superintendent Henry M. Evans. Superintendent Evans and Missionary Stella Brumfield Rochon, a former

\(^3\) Sidney Brown interview by William Russell and Ralph Collins, May 27, 1960, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.
member of this church, remember Brother Brown, as fellow church members called him, as a very dynamic bass player. He was a faithful member who was anointed to play the gospel beat and who was devoted to playing for the church. In fact, Superintendent Evans remembers Brown stating that no amount of money would entice him to play secular music again. Brown’s wife, Ernestine, who was a member of the church first, went to Superintendent Evans seeking prayer when her husband became ill and started having problems with his leg. He describes what happened: “This was on a Thursday. When I went to their house, which was down the block from the church, I saw that his leg looked as though it was going to rot off. I prayed for him, and he came to the church that Sunday to show that his leg had healed. No evidence at all of a sore. He joined St. Philip Church and stayed there until his death. I was in Memphis at the Holy Convocation, but when I got the news of his death, I took a plane back home to New Orleans, had a funeral, buried him, and returned to Memphis for the rest of the Convocation. It was as simple as that.”

In a recent conversation, Dick Allen recalled that the congregation warmly welcomed him and Ralston Crawford and that the music played at the church service was “very exciting.” Review of the photographs indicates that Crawford visited the church on at least two occasions. During his many pilgrimages to New Orleans from the 1940s until his death in 1978, Crawford effectively documented the city’s social and cultural milieu. He took many photographs during these visits, several hundred of which comprise the Ralston Crawford Collection at the Hogan Jazz Archive. Although none of the shots of Sidney Brown taken inside the church are included in this collection, there is an image of him seated between his uncle Jim Robinson and drummer Eugene Jones that was made on the same day as one of the church visits. Crawford’s photographs of music within the church reveal the importance of its role in the worship service. The power of music is apparent in the expressions of adulation on the faces of the congregation as they respond to the musical medley. The guitarist pictured is Brother Octave Delmont, a quiet man who lived alone. (Although Delores Evans mentioned that he had a daughter, Octavia.) Superintendent Evans does not remember anything remarkable about his guitar playing but recalls that he once decided to stop coming to church. When called upon for an explanation, Brother Delmont stated that he was getting the Word by listening to radio sermons. Evans cautioned him that radio sermons “are not sufficient enough for your soul,” so Brother Delmont returned to the church and remained faithful until his death. Evan’s daughter Delores relates the story of when Hurricane Betsy came in 1965 and Brother Delmont’s house was flooded. He was so distraught that he just stood against the wall of his house, water up to his chest, until Superintendent Evans found him. He died soon afterwards.

The bass drummer, Brother Ernest Matthews (seen on p. 16 enraptured in the Spirit while playing his drum) was so dedicated to the teachings of holiness that when he got married, instead of

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5 Delores Evans telephone interview with Alma Williams Freeman, September 23, 2004.
going on a honeymoon, he and his new bride went on a three-day consecration before consummating their marriage. He became a preacher and left New Orleans to go to Syracuse, New York, where he served as pastor over two churches. He would return occasionally to conduct revivals in the area and had told Superintendent Evans that he wanted to come back to New Orleans for good, but became ill and died before this could happen.

The first pastor at the Power House was Elder E. D. Robinson, who came to St. Philip Street Church of God in Christ after serving for a period at Allen Street Church of God in Christ (2229 Allen Street). During his tenure at the church Elder Robinson and the congregation were not in a position to purchase the building. Elder Robinson later moved to California, where he died. In 1944, the Overseer of the Louisiana Churches of God in Christ at that time, Bishop James Feltus, Sr., offered the church to his son, Elder James Feltus, Jr., who was then pastor at St. Bernard Church of God in Christ. He did not know if he could serve as pastor over two churches in the city, so he recommended a reluctant Elder Henry M. Evans for the position. Evans had been a traveling evangelist, fulfilling preaching engagements in Texas, New York, and other places, traveling by train, having what he considered to be a “big time,” and he adamantly declared that he had no desire to pastor a church. Bishop Feltus had previously asked him to serve as pastor over two other churches, so when he refused the offer of the St. Philip Street church, Feltus stated that this would be the last time such an offer would be made. Evans immediately changed his mind, fell to his knees, and accepted the position as pastor, agreeing to start serving that night. Today he continues in that position but has also added administrative responsibilities as Superintendent of District No. 1 Eastern Louisiana Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction No. 1.

The building was a little 18 x 24 foot shop owned by the City of New Orleans when Evans took it over in the early 1940s. According to Orleans Parish Conveyance Office records (Book 563, folder F105), Elder Henry Milton Evans purchased the property at a Sheriff’s auction (sale no. 1887) held in New Orleans on March 11, 1949. The property had been confiscated from Mrs. Raoul J. Llopis due to unpaid taxes for the year 1934.6 Superintendent Benson Magee, a former St. Philip Church of God in Christ member, remembered that before the building was used as a church it had been a funeral home, and, indeed, the Llopis family had been in the funeral business in New Orleans for a number of years. In an interview conducted on February 20, 2004, Bishop James Feltus said that he had solicited a friend, J. M. Cortinas, a real estate broker, for assistance in acquiring the building at auction. According to Feltus, the only other potential buyer was an indigent man who had been living in the back of the building free of charge. The bidding started at $600 and when it reached $1500 “the people told him you can’t outbid a millionaire,” so Cortinas purchased the building for the church.7 Orleans Parish mortgage records show

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7 Bishop James Feltus, Jr., Mother Hazel Feltus, and Deacon Carey Dennis interview by Alma Williams Freeman, Deacon Warren Smith, and Lynn Abbott, February 20, 2004, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.
that Evans, using the property as collateral, received a $750 mortgage in favor of Joseph M. Cortinas on July 26, 1949, probably to facilitate renovations on the building. Superintendent Evans made several improvements to the building, adding a brick façade and double glass doors. At one point Bishop James Feltus, Jr. persuaded Evans and his congregation to acquire a larger edifice, at 1621 South Rampart Street, a property that had previously been occupied by Elder Lucien H. Treadwell of the Triumph Church of God in Christ of Faith Tabernacle, but this building proved to be in such a state of disrepair that they had to spend money to have it renovated. Elder Evans was told by someone that $250,000 in gold coins had been buried in back of the church by the toilet by, he thinks, whoever owned the place before Elder Treadwell. He was given the exact location of the treasure but had to leave town for a funeral that day. When he and his brother-in-law, Percy Lacey, set out to search for the money before dawn the next morning, they found boards taken up near the bathroom and a freshly dug hole in the ground. The congregation returned to St. Philip Street and the Rampart Street building was put up for sale.

Stella Rochon (pictured standing fifth from the right in a maternity smock, eyes closed, arms uplifted) recounts that when she joined the St. Philip Church of God in Christ in September 1946, there was so much love there that it literally drew her into the church. Even before she heard her first sermon there, she was made to feel as though she was a part of the family at this closely-knit church. Hearing the Word of God from Elder Evans pricked her heart: she was saved and received the Holy Ghost under his administration. After her marriage to Ferdinand F. Rochon, Jr. (who also

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8 Superintendent Henry M. Evans telephone interview by Alma Williams Freeman, September 10, 2004.
became a pastor at Church of God in Christ in 1951, she was unable to bear children until after Elder Evans prayed for her. Her first two pregnancies ended in miscarriages. She became so ill during the eighth month of her next pregnancy that she was admitted to Charity Hospital. The doctor did not expect her to survive and asked that her family be brought in. Once word reached Elder Evans about her condition, he came, prayed for her, and her body was healed. She went on to have three more children. Elder Evans said that when he was a little boy in Centreville, Mississippi, while walking past a cemetery late at night he prayed that the Lord would spare his ailing mother and allow her to live a long time. Because of his sincere prayer, his mother was healed and the Lord gave him the gift of healing from that point on.

Superintendent Benson Magee, who now serves as administrative assistant to Bishop Joseph Anthony Thompson, Prelate of Eastern Louisiana Jurisdiction No. 2, helped in identifying some of the people in the Ralston Crawford photographs. He has been affiliated with the Church of God in Christ as far back as he can remember. He went to elementary school in Washington Parish and remembers being teased for being a part of the holiness movement. As it happened all across America, people would come to holiness churches to hear the singing and watch the anointed dancing, but they usually looked upon it as something strange. During recess at school, children would make fun of what they had seen by imitating the dances, wallowing on the ground, and kicking their legs in the air as though they were under the anointing spirit of the Holy Ghost. Superintendent Magee, who had received the Holy Ghost as a young boy, would not let this deter him. He endured the teasing and became even stronger in
Photographs by Ralston Crawford in the 1950s (above) and John McCusker in 2004 (right) illustrate the way music brings members of COGIC together. Bro. Delmont is on guitar and Bro. E. Matthews is on bass drum (top). Page 17 at lower right is Supt. Henry Evans (far right) holding microphone, with Delores Evans on organ.
his conviction to holiness, holding on to the song that is still his favorite, “I Shall Not Be Moved.” God called upon him to preach at the age of eighteen, but it was not until he came to St. Philip Street Church of God in Christ that he heeded the call some twenty-two years later. He did not want to become a preacher and fled to New Orleans, even trying to dabble in the nightlife for a night. But at the nightclub he could not enjoy himself because he felt as though the eyes of his mother and the church leaders he left behind were watching him. He left and never went back into a club. He joined the St. Philip Church of God in Christ but still avoided the call to preach, although he “had been jack legging for a long time, you know, get up and conduct the testimony service...and would testify. I would get my little sermon in and go on and sit down and would have no obligations—as far as being a minister.” During a service at St. Philip, one of the missionaries was teaching a lesson but decided to sit down when she noticed that something was happening to Brother Magee. “So when I jumped up, I wasn’t intending to say it, but...it came out. ‘The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me—He has anointed me [to preach].’ And I said to myself, ‘Oh, look what I have done.’ Couldn’t take it back.” He stayed at St. Philip until God called him to start his own church, House of Faith Church of God in Christ. As a testimony to his faithfulness to his convictions, Superintendent Magee states, “that what I am—I AM Church of God in Christ.”

When she was single, Missionary Mary Simmons Eaton used to help Superintendent Evans’s wife, Mildred, around the house. Much to her chagrin, Superintendent Evans would tease her about never seeing her with a boyfriend, and she finally had to admit that she did not have one. Evans prophesied to her that she would not only get a boyfriend but that she would also get married and have twins within a nine-month span. The twins, he told her, would be as different as Jacob and Esau. Within two to three days she met a young man, Neely Simmons, who had just returned home from the Army, married him, and gave birth to twins nine months later. Elder Evans was out of town when Neely Simmons became ill. He had traveled to Detroit, but as soon as he arrived he told his son that he must return home because the Spirit of the Lord had told him that Simmons was sick. When he had flown back as far as Memphis he telephoned Missionary Simmons to find out how her husband was feeling. She was surprised by the call but told him that her husband had been hospitalized. Upon reaching New Orleans, Evans drove directly to the hospital to see him. Unfortunately, Simmons never recovered.

The Ralston Crawford Collection has been in the Hogan Jazz Archive for more than forty years, but there is still much research to be done to fully illuminate the stories contained in these images. This essay provides a preliminary report on an ongoing oral history project undertaken by the author and Lynn Abbott for the Hogan Jazz Archive—a series of interviews with members of

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10 Ibid.
11 Superintendent Henry M. Evans interview by Alma Williams Freeman and Lynn Abbott, December 17, 2003, tape 1, side B, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.

“Dig This Mayor”: An Unpublished Louis Armstrong Letter

On February 25, 1949, Louis Armstrong achieved one of his lifelong ambitions—to be king of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club’s Mardi Gras parade. During his royal stay in New Orleans, Armstrong played a concert at the Booker T. Washington Auditorium. Leonard Feather recalled the audience being segregated but Armstrong and Jack Teagarden sang a duet “radiating interracial brotherhood.” Mayor deLesseps Morrison was on hand at the concert to present Armstrong with the key to the city and an honorary citizenship certificate.1 On the day before Mardi Gras, Morrison met with Armstrong in City Hall. Armstrong described the enjoyable time to Betty Jane Holder in 1952, “we really did pitch a boogie woogie...The Mayor and I killed ‘em.”

1 Leonard Feather, From Satchmo to Miles (New York: DaCapo Press, 1984/orig. pub. 1972), p. 28. Morrison (1912-1964) had been elected mayor in 1946 on a reform ticket. He served as mayor until 1961, ran unsuccessfully several times for the Louisiana governorship, and was serving as the United States ambassador to the Organization of American States at the time of his death. For a detailed evaluation of Morrison, see Edward F. Haas, DeLesseps S. Morrison and the Image of Reform (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974).
Hotel Flamingo  
Las Vegas, Nevada  
March, 17th, 1949.

Mayor deLesseps S. Morrison.  
City Hall  
New Orleans, La.

Mary had a little bear  
The bear was mighty fine  
Everywhere 'Mary went  
'You'd see her bear behind.  

Dear Mayor:  

'Gee--I've been trying my best to get this chance, to drop a few lines and thank you for your very fine hospitality shown me and my boy 'Stuff' and Bozo (which is your boy also)....Bozo talks about you from morning until night.....I shall never forget those moments we spent in your office in the presence of all those news paper people, etc.....And you were 'so fine to us all.....Gee....

I am just now getting myself together again after the big day down there (mardigras day)...I was so 'beat for my youth when I left New Orleans until—I slept all the way to Jackson Miss, where we played a dance the very next night after mardigras......Then continued 'one nighters to Tulsa Okla—Dallas Tex—then Las Vegas—here at this fine Flamingo Hotel......And these people here are real appreciative also....And honest Mayor—I see so much money shot across the table here until I kinda' get swimming in the head.....Thank God....Because I never was lucky in gambling.....Even when I used to sell news papers...We used to play a little African Golf (shoot craps for pennies) in which once or Twice I surprised Mary ann (my mother) with a whole 'sack of pennie But I've found out

Armstrong recalled Morrison as a “sharp” man.\(^2\)

After the Mardi Gras parade and celebration, Armstrong and his band left for a series of engagements that ended in Las Vegas. Satchmo then wrote to Morrison expressing his gratitude for the honors. Armstrong’s letter is archived in the David McGuire Collection in the Special Collections Divison, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. McGuire was Morrison’s long time political aide.\(^3\)

\(^2\) Armstrong to Holder in Louis Armstrong in his Own Words, edited by Thomas Brothers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 155. The letter is a long description of Armstrong’s memories of his reign as King Zulu.

\(^3\) Original spelling and punctuation have been retained. McGuire Collection #271, folder 5, box 3.
since then that a person cannot work and gamble too...So I-just ‘swollow best from now onn.....Tee Hee...

Dig this Mayor—there was a guy who went into this swell restaurant and all he would ever order would be ‘HAMBERGERS’....This alone used to make his waitress so angry...She also said—when this guy come in here next time—I’m going to ‘scratch’ Hamberger off the Menu..........’Sho-Nuff—this guy came into the restaurant within a few days—and right away the waitress kept her promise an-scratched hamberger off the menu...So he taken his regular seat and immediately the waitress went over to him nad [and] said—Good evening Sir, I’ve just ‘Scratched’ what you like...The fellow answered and said—‘Oh ‘that’s,alright—just ‘wash your hands and bring me a ‘Hamberger”.....Ump.....

Well Mr Mayor—(Gee) I just ‘love,s that name.....I would say more...But owing to the fact tha you are a very busy man..I’ll do like the farmer did the potatoe—I’ll ‘Plant’you now—and ‘Dig you later...Savy?...Give my regards to your staff in your office...They’re also a bunch of fine people....So my friend I’ll’cutout now saying thanks again and God Bless Ya...

Am Redbeans and Ricely Yours,

Louis Armstrong

Meeting the mayor of his home town and receiving tokens of the city’s affection deeply moved Armstrong. Among his early memories of the Zulu parade was recognition of the club by the Mayor: “The day the king ride in the parade, his float would pass City Hall...That’s where they usually build a reviewers stand....

The Mayor would invite his choice guests to sit there with him and ‘dig the king on his float.”4 The mayor recognizing a black organization, especially a working-class black group like Zulu, in any manner in the early 1900s was rare, and Armstrong obviously saw the club’s parade in front of the Mayor and his “choice guests” as a rare honor. Receiving awards from Morrison marked an arrival in the musician’s life he probably never expected.

While it is tempting to view the bawdy jokes in the letter as Satchmo jiving a powerful white man, Armstrong affected no style in his letter to Morrison. Indeed, Armstrong wrote Morrison in exactly the same manner he wrote to anyone. Details of his schedule and double entendres abound in all his letters. The play on “Mary Had A Little Lamb” also appears in a letter to Leonard Feather from the same time frame—the joke must have been a favorite of Armstrong’s as it continued to surface from time to time.5 The letter truly reveals the democratic and humble nature of Louis Armstrong, who spoke the same to high and low, asking only that they “dig this.”

Kevin Fontenot

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4 Feather, p. 27.
5 ibid., 26. The poem appears again in a letter to Betty Jane Holder on February 9, 1952; see Brothers, p. 151.
"For Ofays Only" An Annotated Calendar of Midnight Frolics at the Lyric Theater, Part II

From 1919 to 1927, the premier platform for African American vaudeville in New Orleans was the Lyric Theater, on the corner of Iberville and Burgundy streets. While the Lyric specialized in black entertainment for black audiences, it was also known for its "Midnight Frolics," late-night shows set aside "for ofays only." In 1923 the Lyric's white owners launched a regular advertising campaign for their Jim Crow Frolics in the mainstream daily *New Orleans States*. Part one of this article makes use of the accumulated ads and announcements to describe, in calendar fashion, the Frolics held between 1923 and 1925. Part two runs from beginning of 1926 to the final Midnight Frolic and to the sudden closing of the Lyric Theater in the fall of 1927.

**January 8, 1926:** "Champion Will Step Charleston At Lyric Show," "Tourists, arriving in New Orleans in droves from the North, are extended an invitation by the Lyric theater to witness its typically southern Midnight Frolic... A brilliant galaxy of dusky stars has been obtained... Clara Smith, phonograph and radio star, will sing in person the negro songs that are being played on rubber discs and are heard in the air over the country.

"Afro-American mimicry, exotic dancing, broad jokes and that appealing minor strain music of the dark vocalists will be furnished by the rest of the cast... Mamie Gentry, renowned as the champion Charleston colored woman dancer of the country, will perform with Clara Smith..."

"Tillman and Grimes, one of the funniest colored male teams on any vaudeville circuit, will be an adjunct to the Smith-Gentry combination. Scott and Scott, a man and girl team of Afro-American jokesters, will also be in the cast... Tourists are being especially invited by the theater so they may gain an impression of the development of theatrical work among the negroes... For nearly two hours, the Carnival spirit will bountantly frisk about on both sides of the proscenium."

**January 22, 1926:** "Charleston At Lyric Theater Midnight Show," "A carnival season Midnight Frolic... will be given... Friday at the Lyric... Charleston dancers, typical plantation song singers, blue song moaners, the champion roller skater of the world and other variety artists will compete against each other to produce the most laughs among the white auditors..."

"Two acts, in which the principals are star record makers for rival phonograph companies, will be on the bill. Clara Smith, who sings for the Columbia company, will try to outvie Butterbeans and Susie, an Okeh record pair, for applause.

"Dan Wiley, champion roller skater, Maxie and Muller, a dancing and singing team, Baby and Bardu Ali, whose toes are gifted with the magic necessary to produce all sorts of Charleston steps, are also in the cast."

Note: During the fall of 1925, a new race newspaper, the *Louisiana Weekly*, made its debut in New Orleans, ending a protracted moratorium on printed news from the local black community. However, the *Weekly* appears to have maintained a certain editorial distance from the Lyric Theater, and it mentioned the Midnight Frolics not at all. It did
publish commercial advertisements for the Lyric, and these ads tend to confirm a general overlap from the theater's regular features to the Midnight Frolics.

**January 29, 1926:** “Charleston Will be Danced By 12 In Midnight Show,” “A dozen colored girls of the much prized ‘high brown’ shade, with ligaments of the same texture as rubber bands, each selected for extraordinary ability to do the Charleston, will dance individually and in chorus... in the Midnight Frolic... The chorus will be led by Bob Bramlet, an eccentric dancer whose repertoire of knee falls, quivers, tumbles and slides has earned him the reputation of having an osseous structure as pliable as molder’s clay, yet as resilient as rubber.

“Local [white] dancers, anxious to observe the latest variations in the Charleston, are invited... to witness the Frolic...

“Mamie Smith, originator of phonograph records of the famous ‘blues’ will be the headliner. An uproariously funny pair of comedians, Dusty Fletcher and Mose Gaston, will assist her. The rest of the bill will consist of a typical negro vaudeville layout, with jokes and songs and dances peculiar to Afro-American talent...

“Residents are mingling with visitors in the rush for invitations to see... a typical southern sans souci affair.”

**February 12, 1926:** “Midnight Frolic For Whites At Lyric Theater,” “Twenty-five laughing, joking, hilarious colored actors with a jazz band and a coterie of gifted Charleston dancers will stage a Midnight Frolic... Maggie Jones, talented shouting star of the Columbia Phonograph Record Company, will add her phonic vibrations to those of the troupe... Every act will be performed by negroes. The veterans have been not more than six years upon the stage. The Lyric began Thespianism among the colored about that long ago and today they have developed to the point where they produce dramatism and vaudeville performances typical of their race... Any tourist is being invited to bring his family to the frolic.”

Note: Maggie Jones, whose given name was Fae Barnes, began her recording career in 1923 with a coupling for Black Swan, featuring “Do It a Long Time, Papa.” She started recording for Columbia in 1924.¹ A note in the Chicago Defender of November 5, 1927, allowed that, “Only a few years ago, Miss Barnes was singing in a church choir down in Hillsboro, Texas.”

**February 19, 1926:** “Charleston On Lyric Midnight Frolic List,” “Aurora Borealis Greeley, mistress of southern symphony, will be one of the principal characters at the Midnight Frolic... ‘Runnin’ Wild,’ a company negro roisterers which has convulsed the North, will be one of a number of acts... Vaudeville acts with typical African swing will abet the comic song troupe. Galli de Gaston, Alice Gorgas, Happy Simpson, Harold Marshall and four of the best saffron Charleston steppers in the country will perform.”

Note: “Runnin’ Wild” was a “road” version of Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles’ 1923 Broadway follow-up to “Shuffle Along.” A Louisiana Weekly entertainment columnist with the pen name “Chili” trumpeted its arrival in his “Folly Column” of January 23, 1926: “Those harping critics who have all along described that the days of originality and unique endeavor in the way of entertainment are over have evidently not bargained on the latest
sensation and triumph, Miller and Lyle’s world-famous ‘RUNNIN’ WILD’, which will soon show at the Lyric.

‘Runnin’ Wild’ is a riot of fun and musical harmony. In its interpretation all the abandon and native humor associated with the Colored race shine forth conspicuously. Moreover, the fun is clean and is presented in a manner that causes roars of laughter. There is something doing to tickle the ‘risibilities’ and to send Mr. Grouch where he is supposed to go.”

March 5, 1926: “Charleston To Be Feature At Lyric Frolic.” “A trio of Charleston dancers who recently won the championship for grotesque stepping, will appear at the Midnight Frolic... This trio was especially employed by the theater as an added number... The Charleston trio consists of Willie Jackson, ‘Little Willie’ [Jackson’s young son], and ‘Little Joe’ [Toye]. Fritz and Jazz Lips, the Lonnie Johnson trio, Jazzbo Williams and Martin and Martin will be among other couples to add to the jollification.”

Note: A Lyric Theater advertisement in the Louisiana Weekly of February 27, 1926, identified the Lonnie Johnson Trio as “Okeh Record Stars.” New Orleans-born singer-guitarist Lonnie Johnson had just begun his long, illustrious recording career in the fall of 1925. Sadly, though Johnson lived and worked until 1970, it seems no in-depth interviews were conducted with this giant of American popular music.

March 19, 1926: “Sparrows To Hop And Flutter At Midnight Show.” “The last Midnight Frolic of the winter season will be presented Friday at the Lyric... All of the incongruities, the lugubrious chants, the rhythmic dancing and the eccentric hopping – including a chorus of dark-skinned girls who are natural exponents of that hyper jazz number, the Charleston – will be presented in the rollicking show... Among the Ethiopian stars who will ‘strut’ are Dusty Brown, Spider Harris [sic], Robert Taylor, Bob Underwood, William Harris, Estelle Taylor, Jimmie Steward and others of note in dark world Thespianism... [The Frolic will begin with] a funny freak dance by Sparrow Harris and his wife... In comparison with the comedy of Sparrow Harris will be that of Dusty Brown, an Ethiopian mime whose evolutions recently convulsed New York audiences.

“Estelle Taylor, the Okeh Record Company’s singer of blues, and Robert Taylor with a sermon on a cornet – a takeoff on an emotional reaction to ministerial shouting – will be among the headliners.

“A fast working, dancing chorus, composed of lithe young colored girls, the wise cracking firm of Underwood and Steward, and a surprise number will complete the Frolic.”

Note: There is no listing for Estelle Taylor in Blues & Gospel Records.

April 16, 1926: “Blue Singers to Contest Honors At Lyric Show.” “A double headline attraction for the first spring Midnight Frolic has been announced... After lengthy negotiations word was received from the laboratories of the Okeh Record company that its star colored singer, Esther Bigeou, would leave Chicago in time to appear in competition with Ida Cox, star singer of the Paramount Record Company... A contest between phonograph record company stars, vaudeville acts performed by the best negro talent available, skits and jazz music,
The Smart Set’s “Famous Golden Brown Beauty Chorus,” *Louisiana Weekly*, April 17, 1926.

Charlestonings and hoedowns – all these will be on the bill... During the past winter the Lyric has been staging Frolics largely for tourists. The first spring jamboree will be for residents of New Orleans.”

**April 23, 1926:** “City Hall Men Aid Frolic For Behrman Fund,” “Active sale of tickets to the Midnight Frolic... for the benefit of the Behrman Playground fund was started Thursday according to William S. Daly, city treasurer.

“Cigar stores and hotels in the business district will each sell a portion of the allotment. Others will be sold at Room Z, city hall, some at the theater, and policemen and firemen will dispose of the rest.

“One of the most rip roaring, fast dancing and broad joking constellations of negro stars ever to shine in New Orleans will appear at the Frolic and will cause the packed house some unusual gyrations of laughter in the opinion of Maurice Boudreaux, manager of the Lyric.

“It will be the best Frolic of the season,’ he said. ‘It is fortunate we were able to get contracts with these stars for the Behrman fund crowd. All the profits will be turned over to the fund.’

“Slowly but surely the fund for the great playground that will be built as a lasting tribute to the late Mayor Behrman is building. Almost at the $30,000 mark now, the city hall committee in charge of the Frolic hopes to send it above that figure Friday night...

“Salem Tutt Whitney and J. Homer Tutt, star comedians of the negro stage world and leaders of the ‘Smarter Set’ company which will headline the Frolic, guarantee to make the audience set the rafters ringing. A chorus of girls who boast they are all ‘the same size and color’ will sing and go through intricate dance steps. Each is an accomplished dancer. Nona Marshall is acclaimed ‘queen of the Charleston’ and Ida Forsyne is billed as ‘the world’s greatest Russian dancer.’”
“L. Bayard Whitney, Clarence Nance, William Taylor and Charles Hawkins each has an eccentric variety act. The ‘Little Giant’ musical company will stage an extravaganza.”

May 7, 1926: “Sensation For Midnight Show For White Folks,” “Following the announcement that the Lyric theater... has engaged four headline acts through accident for a Midnight Frolic Friday night, hundreds of people thronged the newspaper offices, hotels and music stores for free invitations...

‘‘We believe the white people ought to know how negroes have developed their art,’ said Mr. Boudreaux, manager of the Lyric, ‘and that is the reason we are staging the frolic.’

“The ‘baddest man’ in the world is one of the negro stars. His name is Oakley and he says after the Frolic he is going to England to apply for a job as a strikebreaker in the coal mines. He walks barefooted on barbed wire, wears live panthers as watch charms and chews dynamite, but when that gal gives him the ‘mess aroun’ — well, jes’ watch. Davenport and Carr, Okeh Record Company’s comedy-blue stars, Dick and Dick, aces of negro dancers and Criner and Byrd in a dramatic sketch will strut for the Frolic.”

“Although Maurice Boudreaux... has contracted for four of the best negro acts in the country... he announced yesterday the acquisition of a new sensation.

“I have found the best Charleston trio in the country,’ he said... ‘The male member is Sam Cook, a wonder who has not only won 26 prizes but has the distinction of being the only Charleston dancer to appear before the late Mayor Behrman. The two girls who accompany him are great.”

May 28, 1926: “Negro Comedy To Draw Crowd At The Lyric Frolic,” “A performance entitled ‘Shake Your Feet,’ which took the North by storm and last week caused an uproar in Atlanta, will be staged... at the... Midnight Frolic... Not only do the performers shake their feet, but the contagion spreads to the audience until the building vibrates, according to an Atlanta review. Cleo Mitchell, acknowledged the greatest black buck and wing dancer in the country, is the leader of the syncopating, jazz-wild troupe.

“A new wrinkle in stepping called the ‘Flying Charleston’ will be exhibited by Robert Wright, the saffron boy with the educated legs. Susie Wroten does a toe Charleston and the ensemble chimes in with a bombardment of feet on the stage boards... Flying Charleston dances, a sensational drummer, a dancing chorus and variety performers will comprise the Frolic.”

June 4, 1926: “Mirth To Reign At Big Frolic,” “Blues and buffoonery, dialect and dancing, jokes and general jollification will abound Friday night... Coincident with the repeated demand for another frolic, the theater succeeded in contracting with Ethel Waters, acclaimed by every critic of the north as the outstanding exponent of negro songs among colored actresses. With Ethel Waters comes her ‘Vanities’ straight from the Winter Garden of New York... In addition to the outstanding star there will be a coterie of typical negro vaudeville stars, gifted in ultra Charleston dancing, mimicry and in broad Afro-American humor...

“Critics throughout the North, where Ethel Waters has appeared as a headliner in white vaudeville, although she was the only colored person in the troupe,
have acclaimed the star as the most typical representative of the highest development of stage art by the negro."

**June 11, 1926:** “Charleston And Shuffling Star At Lyric Frolic,” “A red hot Midnight Frolic will be presented... during the coolest period of the 24 hours Friday night... Although the theater... did not intend to stage one of these unusual shows this week, it was able to contract with several expert players Wednesday for the demonstration... Among the headliners... are Boisy de Lesses’ [sic, Boisey De Legge] ‘Bandana Girls,’ in a musical comedy of especial appeal to women.

“The New York ‘Speed Limit Excess’ chorus headed by Florence de Legge, a typical darkey comedian named Carviesha, Esther Johnson, the ‘Southern Soubrette,’ and the Black Boy Serenaders, are on the bill. The latter just finished an engagement in New York...

“One of the eccentric players is 62-year-old Gawga Colvert, who has long since parted with both hair and teeth, but who boasts a nimbleness of foot that defies the best of the youngsters. He is a champion Charlestoner and shuffler, who has entertained audiences both white and black for almost a half-century.

“‘Women Do Lie’ is the title of the Midnight Frolic, and the general theme is carried out through the various acts of dancers, singers, a star comedienne, quartets, choruses and tumblers... A bevy of ‘Brownskin Flappers’ — so billed — will wind up the frolic after midnight.”

**June 18, 1926:** “Ebony Follies Acclaimed Best Colored Show,” “Those white persons who miss seeing the [S. H.] Dudley Ebony Follies at the
Midnight Frolic... will lose out on one of the best typical colored shows of the year... There are forty in the production, including a past master at laughmaking, Lonnie Fisher. Contortion and acrobatic dancing as done by the three Georgia Browns furnishes an entertainment thrill that seldom has been duplicated.

“Ozie McPherson, a ‘blues’ singer, will be remembered for her numerous records produced by the Paramount Company. The prima donna, Mme. Tolliver, has been proclaimed throughout the land as a colored singer of pre-eminent ability.

“Two clever dancing boys, Cash and Smith, delight their audiences with seemingly impossible steps. Recently they quit a Broadway success to join the Ebony Follies. A jazz band accompanies the organization, and delights in record-breaking applause.”

Note: Between November 1925 and February 1926, “Ebony Follies” member Ozie McPherson had four records released on Paramount, offering titles like “Standing on the Corner Blues” and “Nobody Rolls Their Jelly Roll Like Mine,” with accompaniment by the likes of Lovie Austin’s Serenaders and Fletcher Henderson’s Orchestra.

July 2, 1926: “New Styles Of Charleston For Midnight Frolic,” “From every section of the country, colored stars are being brought to New Orleans this week for the final Midnight Frolic of the season... Eddie Lemon, star comedian of the ‘Runnin’ Wild’ company, will be the headliner. A large, fast dancing, eccentric chorus of a dozen dark-skinned girls will be another high point of the show.

“Stringbeans’ Price, a dancer of exceptional ability, a silver toned tenor and other gifted colored performers will comprise an exceptional and typical Negro show.

“With knee-falls, new style Charleston, broad humor and jokes the last Frolic of the summer will be the best of the year... Following the Frolic, the theater will close for renovation until September.”

September 10, 1926: “Lyric Theater Opens Midnight Frolic Friday,” “After being closed for the summer for complete redcoration and the installation of a cooling system, the Lyric Theater will reopen for its first midnight show of the season... Negro players will galump across the stage in their characteristic fooleries for the delectation of a white audience...

“With new lighting effects, carpets and paint The Lyric compares favorably with many more portentous playhouses. Manager Maurice Boudreaux announced he had contracted with a number of dusky mimes who will shine like polished ebony at The Frolic...

“Ida Cox, the Paramount Phonograph Record Company’s star singer will vie for headline honors with Charles Anderson, who admits frankly he is the best yodeler in this country. Eleanore Wilson, Richardson and Richardson, Russell and Goins and a number of other sable vaudeville artists will complete the evening’s entertainment.”

Note: A front-page article in the Louisiana Weekly of September 4, 1926, stated that $15,000 had been spent in renovating the Lyric “from front wall to back wall” and including a “new forced air cooling system” and “oilomatic heat.”

**September 24, 1926:** “Lyric Show For Whites Friday Night A Hummer,” “When the second Midnight Frolic of the fall season begins... there will be 28 pairs of educated Negro feet walloping the well propped boards of the stage... Connie’s Inn Frolics, a company of 28 eccentric dark-skinned dervishes, comedians and vaudeville artists from the most popular night club of New York, has been engaged... In the company are numbered 11 outstanding stars of Negro stageland. One of these is Mantan Moreland, the only stage dancer who can combine three separate dance rhythms at the same time. He has evolved a dance in which he combined ‘the ball and jack,’ ‘the shimmy’ and the ‘Eagle Rock’ all at once. “Among the male principals of the company are also Emmett Anthony, star of ‘Broadway Rastus,’ a company that played for three successive years, Sam Cross, Johnny Dancey and Johnny Lee. Women principals include Jenny Dancey, Alto Oats, Billie Young, Nona Marshall and Baby Lee. “The sensation of the Frolic will be a comic reproduction of life in a theatrical booking office. Many vaudeville artists have used this theme for their take-offs, but none has drawn so much fun out of it as the Connie Inn troupe. It is a number that has never been seen before on a New Orleans stage.”
"White persons only will be in the audience to witness this gifted assembly of negroes whirl through new dances, sing new songs and mimic the buffoonery of typical Afro-American jokesters of the plantations and streets... Every variety of Negro act, from the vibratory dances engendered long ages ago in the jungles, to the bizarre gyrations of the now famous ‘Black Bottom’ dance, will be shown... Afro-American burlesque, which doesn’t require a Ph. D. degree to understand, will be one of the highlights."

**October 15, 1926:** “Black Bottom Demonstration At Lyric Show.” “How the famous Black Bottom Dance, which has taken New York and other eastern and northern cities by storm, is really done will be demonstrated by Negro dancers at [the] Midnight Frolic... For several years in the dance halls of New Orleans and on the Negro stage the Black Bottom dance has been a favorite. For some reason it never was taken up by white Terpsichoreans until early this year when Ann Pennington, famous little dancer, stampeded New York audiences by giving it on the stage.

“Lately, it was learned the dance originated in the back o’ town dance halls of New Orleans. Since then, Maurice Boudreaux... has been seeking the most expert Black Bottom exponents in the country and this week was fortunate enough to engage a large group of girls in the Clarence Muse Negro company who are all versed in the intricacies of the shuffling step.

“Additionally, the flying Charleston, other eccentric dances and a varied collection of typical Negro vaudeville acts will be given.”
October 22, 1926: “Lyric Midnight Show On Friday For Fire Chiefs,” “Fire chiefs arriving in New Orleans in droves from all over the country, are extended a public invitation by the Lyric theater... to witness its typically southern Midnight Frolic... A brilliant galaxy of dusky stars has been obtained... Davenport and Carr, phonograph and radio stars, will sing in person the Negro songs that are being played on rubber discs and are heard in the air over the country...

“Davenport and Davenport (otherwise known as Sofa), will be the high yellow headliners. Blue singers and Phil ‘Gentleman’ Giles, a six-foot four-inch freak saffron shuffler, will be highlights of the bill... One of the dark skinned headliners will be Emma Darden, singer of blues, black bottom dancer and yodeler...

“Cook and Robinson, a dancing and singing team of ochre jazz exponents, will vie with the headliners for applause. A surprise ‘number’ – an unknown black Bottom dancer – will be the star attraction.”

November 12, 1926: “Laughs Galore For Lyric Show For Whites Only,” “At the Midnight Frolic for white folks... Billy Benbow’s New York ‘Get Happy’ company of frolicking Negro comedians, chorus girls and songsters promises to make every one in the audience forget his woes, until Sarah Martin, nationally famed phonograph record singer, sings and has the blues on stage. Sarah says white audiences have often heard blue songs but don’t know what they mean because they’ve never seen the ‘blues,’ which are an emotional transport, literally taking possession of the soul, mind and body...

“If Charon were to row the two negro comedians, Strong and Baer, in the sable night across the river Styx, the only ocular evidence of passengers in his boat would be twin sets of gleaming ivories. Yet, so they say themselves, he would laugh himself over the gunwale into the magic waters if they turned loose the battery of darktown comedy on him with which they will broadside the audience... Thevin Everett is a sable midget whose gyrations are as laugh provoking as are those of Strong and Baer. Spicy, snappy Black Bottom dances, individually and in chorus, will be performed... With Thevin Everett in a character role, Margy Cohen and Sarah Martin in songs and dances, a spicy, snappy chorus and a complete vaudeville repertoire, the Frolic will be just that. The players are members of Benbow’s ‘Get Happy’ company, stopping here en route from New York to Havana.”

Note: Quoting an unnamed mainstream press report, the Chicago Defender of November 20, 1926, added a few details: “Stopping in New Orleans en route to Havana, Cuba, for a special vaudeville engagement, the ‘Get Happy’ company of New York, directed by William Benbow, was engaged...for a special midnight frolic... Everyone in the company is Colored, the range of talent including everything from black bottom dancers... to a phonograph record star singer of Negro spirituals.

“Pep, jazz, spice and whole-hearted abandon,” said Maurice Boudreaux, ‘characterize this company...’

“Sarah Martin, the record star, declares that very few white persons know what the word ‘blues’ means, although they have been using the [word] for years. She will not only sing the blues, but will have the blues on the stage.”
December 3, 1926: "Old Black Joe Will Live Again At Lyric Frolic," "Old Black Joe sits in front of a field of cotton that stretches back to a cabin in the distance and strums on his banjo, the chorus coming in soft answer from plantation workers among the bolls, and then all the field hands from pickaninnyes to the aged pickers appear in the smooth rhythm of the Sewanee River dance.

"This typical scene of the plantation days will be one of a large assortment of true Negro acts at the Midnight Frolic..."

"Sam Russell, leading comedian and eccentric dancer of the Levee Lou Company, which will be the main attraction at the frolic will take the role of an old-time Voodoo Man in one number that is a burlesque on native rites that once were performed in Congo Square in New Orleans.

"Bonnabelle Drew, as Levee Lou, soubrette lead, will sing a number of songs and lead a chorus of nimble colored girls in the dances which originated with their race and have taken white people by storm -- the Black Bottom, the Mess Aroun' and the Charleston."

December 10, 1926: "Bessie Smith Is Star Of Lyric Show On Friday," "Bessie Smith, a chocolate mountain of infectious good nature and the outstanding colored stage singer of the country, with a lissome chorus full of electric energy, will be the stellar attraction at the Midnight Frolic... Abetting Bessie Smith in her plot to shake the audience out of its collective seat will be Dina Scott, a brown-skinned comedian; Lee Olson, a diminutive buck and wing dancer; Gertrude Scott, a talented singer and dancer, and other variety players...

"Gill’s De Luxe orchestra, which lately has gained fame at the occasional frolics will play...

"The Harlem Follies, a troupe of 25 fast colored chorus girls, comedians, eccentric dancers and singers have been especially engaged...

"Bessie Smith, star blues singer of the country whose phonograph records are played in every country of the world will appear in person and will sing the typical Negro moans that have made her famous.... Dina Scott, lampooning comedian... Lee Olson and Clarence Smith, novelty performers."

Note: Gill’s De Luxe Orchestra was the replacement band for John Robichaux’s Orchestra, which appears to have abandoned the Lyric during the two-month period in which it was closed for repairs. At the head of Gill’s De Luxe orchestra was trap drummer Charles “Gill” Gillian, a veteran of the early State Street cabaret scene in Chicago. Gillian had worked at the legendary Elite Café as early as 1912, and he was there in 1915 with “Oliver Perry, violinist,” and “Prof. Tony Jackson, pianist.” In 1917, with the jazz craze raging in Chicago, Gillian was leading an eight-piece band at the Belvedere cabaret on the city’s North Side. A writer for the mainstream Chicago-based Ragtime Review had to "hand it to Gill’s Wildfire Eight as being the best ‘Jas’ band we have ever heard... The piano player in this organization is some ‘rag artist,’ while Gill at the Drums and Xylophone is simply in a class all by himself."

Gillian was an eyewitness to the advent of white New Orleans jazz bands on the Chicago cabaret scene, and he managed to infiltrate the March 1917 edition of the Ragtime Review to ask, “What Is a Jass Band?” Bucking

mainstream pronouncements of the day, Gillian explained the Original Dixieland Jazz Band’s popularity in terms of white infatuation with black vernacular music: “In New Orleans the white people wanted that certain rhythm to be played at their dances, and for a while they could not find enough colored musicians to supply their demands. The white musicians at once started to try and play like the ‘Jigs,’ and finally there were many with a good ear and a fair understanding of music to not only equal, but surpass the standard that was required to meet the demands of the dancing public. Still they were known as dance orchestras. A would-be café proprietor, in order to outshine the lesser lights of the cabaret world, went to New Orleans and imported five white boys that were at that time engaged at the Pup Café. They set the town afire with noise and when the smoke cleared away it was found that they could not read, but were a bunch of good fakirs.

“They were heralded as the ‘real Jass band’ playing ‘real southern Jass.’ The ‘real southern Jass’ was nothing more nor less than a few of those darky melodies played as raggy as possible with each man slurring and making as many discords as they could while slipping and sliding to the melody of whatever they were trying to play.”

December 17, 1926: “Negro Actors In Frolic At Lyric,” “A pre-holiday midnight frolic... The Watts and Willis company of negro actors, all shades and degrees of talent and all varieties of vaudeville performance, will be headliners...

“Four hundred pounds of colored prima donna will amble out on the Lyric theater stage... to warble Afro-American lyrics and spirituals to the white audience... She is one of a troupe of negro players who will make the night merry...

“Lillian Snow, snow in name only, is a diminutive colored girl with the voice of a giantess. She and her partner, also Snow, will do a variety of stunts both vocal and violin.

“Watts and Willis, leaders of the troupe, will be headliners. They are called the ‘Southern Nightingales.’ Fred Reed, the Eltinge of the colored stage, will do a ‘Mammy’ act and the comedy four, including Alfonzy Johnson, Billy Igles, Reed and Earnest Henderson, will supply a peppery assortment of fun with the aid of a fast and agile chorus.”

December 24, 1926: “Mamie Smith To Give Famed Song At Lyric Friday,” “I Once Was Yours, I’m Somebody Else’s Now.” Mamie Smith, the first colored woman ever to make a phonograph record, and now the only colored songbird for the Victor company, will warble this current song hit at... the holiday Midnight Frolic...

“Critics throughout the country acclaim Mamie Smith as the most appealing exponent of the blues in the country. Her earnings from phonograph records alone would look like a dazzling sum to many a bank president. She will sing the songs that have made her famous, both those being sold now and the new ones at the Frolic.

“The noted Black Diamond chorus, vivacious and gifted, and a well known colored cast will support the star. Among the performers are Hilda and Peete, formerly of the famous Shuffle Along company; Ethel Williams, the gifted toe dancer for years with Ethel Walters [sic]; Frances Smith, Dusty Fletcher, John Mason and others both comic and straight.”
“After the Christmas trees are set up and the gifts distributed, parents and brothers and sisters will go to the Lyric and listen to the nationally renowned Mamie Smith... the first colored woman to reproduce the catchy negro blue songs on a record.

“Supported by a talented cast of dark skinned vaudeville artists, Mamie will make the Eve of eves merry for hundreds of visitors and residents.”

Note: In connection with Mamie Smith’s current engagement at the Lyric, the *Louisiana Weekly* of December 11, 1926, gave a history of her local appearances:

“This is the third time here in the city for this famous artist. Her first time here she appeared in the old Coliseum boxing arena. This happened because of the fact that at the Lafayette Theatre, where she was to have appeared, she was refused admittance on account of her color. It appeared that when she was booked at this theatre, which was not yet running as a theatre, but was closed, the management did not know that she was colored. When she appeared for her performance they refused to let her appear. She then secured the Coliseum, on Baronne Street.

“Her next appearance was at the Lyric Theatre [during the week of January 25-31, 1926, with a Midnight Frolic on January 29], under the present management.”

**December 31, 1926:** “Lyric Plans Big Show For Whites On Friday Night,”
“Friday night will be the biggest night of the year at the Lyric theater. There will be a special midnight performance of Mamie Smith’s revue when the popular stage and phonograph star will appear in person. In addition there will be special New Year’s Eve features.

“Mamie Smith and her company were here recently and proved one of the most popular attractions of the year... By a fortunate chance in booking arrangements the management was able to bring back the dusky entertainer.”

**January 7, 1927:** “Shufflin’ Sam Of Alabam’ At Lyric Midnight Show,”
“Shufflin’ Sam from Alabam’ hisself will be the darkest center of a deep dyed plot to make the town merry Friday night at the first Midnight Frolic of the New Year... Sam will bellow out Afro-American comedy and weave through the shuffle that has made him famous not only on the colored stages of the country but on many that cater to white audiences...

“A talented troupe of colored variety stars will support Shufflin’ Sam in his midnight revelry, which was requested by a number of white persons who failed to obtain entrance to the theater for the New Year’s Eve Frolic. The old Lyric playhouse on that night was crowded to the doors by merrymakers.

“Tourists here for the winter season are invited to the Frolic, as well as white residents, as it is one of the features unique to New Orleans. The Frolics were originated a few years ago to keep white persons interested in the rapid development of negroes on the stage... [S]ince the establishment of the theater for negroes, they have quickly passed from the crudities of broad burlesques into some of the finer and more delicate forms of mimicry and theatricals. The Lyric was the first theater of its kind to be devoted to them exclusively and is operated entirely by colored persons, although the owners are white...

“‘Gunpowder,’ the most famous mule on any stage in the world, will be one of the rip roaring, red hot performers in the
Midnight Frolic... The mule will produce 800 of the 1,000 laughs that cannot help but volley forth from the exclusively white audience...

“The classiest negro comedians obtainable, including Victor Scott, Slim Evans, Carl Shelton, the Nay brothers and Joe Williams, will be on the stage.

“Peg Beates [sic, Bates], a one-legged dancer who has earned the envied sobriquet of a ‘show stopper’ will cavort. Beates usually has trouble in every theater because he stops the show too long while the audience showers coins upon him.

“Sidney Rink, the best known animal trainer in America, will attend ‘Gunpowder’ upon the boards. Sidney is about 70 years old, although the audience never thinks so because of the falls he takes. Susie Sutton, who has been here with the ‘Follow Me’ company, and with the ‘Bon Ton Revue,’ Harriet Williams, Blish Nay and Bee Haynes, are included among the women stars.

“The company is called ‘The Shufflin’ Sam from Alabam’ Company’ and is said to be the negro counterpart of Abie’s Irish Rose, because it has gone along for four years without an unfilled date.”

Note: Sidney Rink was identified in the Pittsburgh Courier of July 28, 1923, as the “oldest animal trainer of our race that is still actively engaged in the business... He is again presenting ‘Gunpowder,’ his trained mule, for which he is reputed to have several times
declined offers of ten thousand dollars... The old veteran started training animals with the John Robinson shows a long time ago, and remained with them 29 years. Since then, he has been with Sells-Forepaugh, the Al. G. Barnes and John Sparks shows, as well as several others that makes his experiences total more than 40 years.”

January 14, 1927: “Midnight Show Friday Night In Lyric For Whites.” “In response to a united demand on the part of hundreds of theatergoers who were unable to crowd their way into the Lyric theater... last Friday night to witness the Midnight Frolic of the Shufflin’ Sam from Alabam’ company, the management of the theater contracted with the players to remain in New Orleans for a second jamboree this Friday night.

“In addition to ‘Gunpowder,’ the famous stage mule, ‘Peg’ Beates, one-legged negro dancer, and other saffron stars of the Shufflin’ Sam company, the theater has engaged a dark skinned prima donna and the best known sable yodler this side of Sudan.”

Note: In its edition of January 14, 1927, the New Orleans Item identified the Frolic’s added “dark skinned prima donna” and “sable yodeler” as Marie Jones and Clint Jones, respectively. Clint Jones can be heard on Okeh recordings from 1928. On January 12, 1927, two days before the Frolic, “Negro war invalids in the United States Veterans’ hospital in Algiers roasted and laughed and forgot their aches and pains... when the colored stage stars of the Lyric theater... entertained them with a series of antics and mimicries which defied solemnity. The negro players were taken to the hospital in limousines furnished by the Geddes and Moss undertaking firm. White veterans, as well as negro, enjoyed the interlude in the continuous drama of woe across the river.”

January 21, 1927: “Desires of 1927 Lyric Midnight Show.” “The Desires of 1927, the most elaborate and costly negro stage production ever to come to New Orleans, will be presented in a Midnight Frolic... In this production the love of finery of the Afro-American is given complete expression. It is the colored counterpart of Follies of 1927. Gorgeous costumes, unusual eccentric dancing, comedians... and a chorus gifted as only negroes can be in the fast catchy steps of the Black Bottom dance are components of the show... ‘This show is enough to make a bulldog break his chain,’ said Manager Boudreaux...

“Adelaide Hall, a gifted quadroon girl, will be the female star... J. Homer Tutt, famed negro comedian, formerly with the Smarter Set company, will be the male principal. The champion Negro dancer of the country, the ‘Airplane Kid,’ will be among the performers. The chorus of a dozen dark skinned girls will put on ‘The Black Bottom’ and other typical negro dances, including the ‘Mess Aroun’.’...

“Pete’ Nugent, a colored eccentric dancer, who is called ‘the airplane hoofin’, ‘cause he dances wif bofe feet off the groun’, will be one of a number of dark skinned theatrical stars who will shine.”

Note: In 1925 Adelaide Hall toured Europe and Scandinavia with the “Chocolate Kiddies” Revue. In an October 26, 1927, recording session with Duke Ellington and his Orchestra, she laid down the original, classic version of “Creole Love Call.” She continued to record under her own name, as well as
with Art Tatum, Mills Blue Rhythm Band, and Fats Waller.

**January 28, 1927:** “Lyric To Have Another Rip Roaring Nite Show,” “The biggest, fastest, best singing and dancing colored show combination in the world, including 35 people, will stage a rip roaring Midnight Frolic... It is the ‘Miss New York’ company, famous on white circuits in the North, a pot pourri of dancing, a revue of gorgeous costumes, a singing and playing, fantastic jazz orchestra, the only midget soubrette in the world, and a golden brown beauty chorus. Alice Whitman, acknowledged the foremost colored female dancer in the world, is the star of the gifted group. Mattie Whitman, her sister, is a genuine Southern mammy from ‘Gawjia.’ Mert [sic, Alberta “Bert”] Whitman, a male impersonator, Earnest Michaels [sic, Ernest Michall], with his speaking clarinet, and especially Princess Wee Wee, a 23-inch midget, renowned as the most perfect woman of her size in existence, will join in to provide the best frolic of the season.

“In addition to Princess Wee Wee, who imitates famous dancers, there are two other midgets, Pops Whitman and Billy Adams, talented little hoofers. Brevity, variety, spice, not a dull moment, no repetitions. If an elephant were included, the manager says it would be a circus...

“Release a riot of music, season it with dancing and garnish it with song; sprinkle the whole with uproarious comedy and you have a theatrical dish such as the Miss New York company will serve... It’s peppy, spicy varied, live. The jazz band, the Black Bottom and Charleston steepers, the tap dancers and the song birds, the midgets and the impersonators will concoct a medley of rapid fire action with not a dull moment...

“Princess Wee Wee, smallest known perfectly formed woman, 23 inches tall, 26 years old, has a remarkable talent for mimicking famous dancers... Mattie Whitman, a typical Southern mammy, will do a plantation stunt. There will be a singing and playing jazz band, and a fast, snappy chorus of brown girls.”

Note: On March 30, 1927, and again on July 19, 1927, clarinetist Ernest Michall played on jazz recording sessions for the Gennett label. Later that fall, “adopted” Whitman Sister Mattie Dorsey recorded four striking titles for Paramount. Advertised as an “old time star,” Mattie Dorsey had been active in black vaudeville since 1910, and perhaps earlier.6

**February 4, 1927:** “Costliest Negro Show At Lyric For Whites Only,” “The costliest negro show ever to appear in Dixieland will appear... in a Midnight Frolic... It is [Quintard] Miller and [Marcus] Slayer’s ‘Brevities,’ with scenery and costumes by the carload. The troupe of 36 dark-skinned Thespians will stage a frolic unequalled for variety and spice. Andrew Fairchilds, a Pantages circuit star, and Arthur Allen, who tops the bills of the Columbia wheel, are the outstanding comedians.

“A featured dancer in the Dixie to Broadway company which excited New York was Inez Dennis. She will be in the frolic with Slayer, of ‘Shuffle Along’ and ‘Runnin’ Wild’ fame, in eccentric dances.

“May Dix [sic, Diggs], a New Orleans prioress of twist, will give the cycle of the Black Bottom, from its origination in local back o’ the town dance halls to the present stage variations.”
Note: New Orleanian Mae Diggs became a fairly well known singer, dancer and actor of the 1930s and 1940s, "one of the big names in night club business."\(^7\) However, she has slipped from the limelight of popular recollection. A still shot from the 1933 movie "Sing, Sinner Sing," reproduced in Black Beauty, White Heat, shows her at work with Les Hite and his orchestra.\(^8\) At the beginning of 1938, the "deep voiced soubrette" was "the only feminine holdover at the Grand Terrace café" in Chicago, "playing a feature feminine role in the new show with Satchmo."\(^9\) Later that summer, she headlined the floorshow at Chicago’s Swingland Café, in company with Jimmie Noone’s orchestra.\(^10\) On August 15, 1940, she was a participant in the Miss Sepia 1940 Program at the World’s Fair in New York.\(^11\) She was set to succeed Sister Rosetta Tharpe at New York’s Café Society in 1941, when the Chicago Defender published this brief bio:

"Born in New Orleans, Mae has been featured the country over in theatres and night clubs such as: Sebastian’s Cotton club on the coast, the Cotton club on Broadway, the Stork club in Philadelphia, the Tic Toc club in Boston, and the Apollo theatre in Harlem.

In addition to regular appearances on radio and sporadic jobs in the movies such as “San Francisco” with Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy and Jeanette McDonald, Mae writes songs."\(^12\)

February 11, 1927: "Lyric Plans Big Midnight Show for Whites Only," "Few wives get financial profit from their husbands’ mistakes. The wife of the colored dreamer of the empire, Marcus Garvey, the negro who styled himself ‘provisional president of Africa’ and founded the Black Star Steamship Line to take all colored folk in this country back to a kingdom he would set up in Liberia, is an exception.

"Heading the ‘Hey! Hey!’ Theatrical Company of New York, the wife of Garvey arrived this week in New Orleans under special contract to stage a howling burlesque of her husband’s dream of empire at a Midnight Frolic... Marcus, himself, meanwhile is cooling his heels in Atlanta.

“The Garvey troupe includes a talented troupe of dark stars, gifted in dancing, singing and typical negro comedy. The central bit is a burlesque of the Garvey expedition to Africa. Two comedians posing as tramps are thrown out by their wives. They meet a confidence man who tells them to search in primal fields for better halves. They debark for Africa, where their experiences are howlingly funny. A harem scene in Sudan draws a laugh a second. What finally happens is a
surprise that will be given to the white persons who... attend the frolic.

"The comedians, Dusty Fletcher and Sam Davis, and the mimic of Garvey, Sam Manny [sic, Manning], are stars of the show."

Note: The remark about Garvey "cooling his heels in Atlanta" refers to his incarceration at the Federal Penitentiary there. In November 1927, Garvey was transferred to the Immigration Station in New Orleans to await deportation. The Louisiana Weekly of December 3, 1927, editorialized that he had been imprisoned not for what he had been charged with, but for "the fact that he marshaled a mighty minority group... He suffered at the hands of America the same fate that Ghandi has suffered at the hands of England, and that many others... have suffered at the hands of the ruling class because of championing the cause of the minority."

February 18, 1927: "Ptomaine Poison Won't Stop Show for Whites Friday," "The Merry Mac's Merrymakers company of New York arrived in New Orleans intent upon fulfilling a special contract for a Midnight Frolic... The management of the theater sent the troupe at once to a restaurant for luncheon. Within one hour three-fourths of the 40 people were in the hospital with ptomaine poisoning, several being reported on the point of death.

"We cannot guarantee a Frolic this week," protested the faint hearted manager [of Mack's Merry Makers].

"Yes you can," said the manager [of the Lyric Theater]. 'Let's see what you can do!'

'A rehearsal was staged with one-third of the company.

"I had straight men acting as comedians, and dancers doing patter,'

Sam Manning, Pittsburgh Courier, November 13, 1926.

said Maurice Boudreaux, manager. 'It was the best show I ever reviewed.'

"Fortunately, the members of the company revived. The switches of parts may be included in the Frolic..."

"A complete negro jazz band and a chorus of dark skinned girls will be part of the show... Every variety of negro dance and song will be given... Performers are in the Merry Mac Merrymakers' company of New York city, brought to New Orleans especially for the Frolic. The best eccentric dancer ever seen in New Orleans, Henry Williams, who is 'like a cat in the air,' is among the cast. Eddie Matthews, recognized as one of the best comedians in the country, is another of the stars."
“Mary Mack,” for whom the company was named, is the star girl performer of the troupe.

**February 25, 1927:** “Smart Set Will Furnish Lyric Midnight Show,” “L. B. Holtkamp’s smart set, the gayest troupe of rollicking dark boys and girls who have come to New Orleans in a year, were engaged yesterday... to stage a special carnival Midnight Frolic...

“All revelers in the city are invited by the Lyric management to wind up their celebration Friday night by watching the Frolic...

“Strangers, here to witness the carnival and to soak in all the New Orleans atmosphere possible within a few days, are being especially invited to the Frolic, which is unique in the United States.

“One of the ‘wows’ of the show will be the Original Smart Set Beauty Chorus, 14 girls gifted in the rhythms of the Black Bottom and the Mess Aroun’. There are 50 people in the show, the largest number ever to appear on a dark town stage in the South...

“Thelma Lavizzo, one of the greatest Negro women blues singers in the country, was especially engaged yesterday... The star singer will be an added attraction to Holtkamp’s Minstrels, 40 jolly entertainers, including a fast moving ‘brownskin’ chorus.

“The Frolic will be one of the chief diversions Friday night, which is the only off night of Carnival week. Sam Rhodes, a feature ‘preacher’ who burlesques a typical shouter sermon; ‘Bubber’ Haines, the only negro dancer capable of cavorting with a five gallon bucket full of water on his head; and a special jazz band and orchestra will toss in their share of the jamboree.”

**March 4, 1927:** “Broadway Stars For Midnight Show At Lyric,” “Chappie Chappelle and Juanita Stinette, Broadway colored stars, will be the headliners... for the Midnight Frolic... They are the stellar players of the Kentucky Sue Musical Comedy company, to be played in New Orleans for the first time since leaving New York.

“The Kentucky Sue Company is a typical troupe of negro players, gifted in interpreting the music and the comedy of the Old South. Breaking the thread of the harmonious story, several diverteisements will be offered. Among them are the eccentricities of George W. Cooper, Jr., and James Thomas, singing and dancing comedians; the Jackson Trio, including Russell Lee, Elizabeth Kewley and Zachary White; Lovelace and McLane, taking the roles of Aunt Jemima and Old Black Joe; and a chorus called the Kentucky Sue Night Hawks; also a fast stepping darktown chorus...

“Thousands of people in New Orleans who failed to witness the parade of the Zulus, Mardi Gras Day will be given an opportunity to see it at 11:15 o’clock Friday night at the beginning of the Midnight Frolic...

“Tuesday the Lyric management took motion pictures of the grandiose Congo monarch barging into the New Basin Canal. The reel will be shown as an interesting prelude to the premiere of Kentucky Sue... In all his panoply, A. L. Moss, the king, will be pictured to the Frolickers.

“White persons only are especially invited... The doors of the theater will open at 11 p. m., after other theaters have closed for the night. The curtain will rise fifteen minutes later on the Zulu’s screening. The Frolic will last until about 1 a. m.... Eccentric dancers,
a floor burning chorus, singers and typical plantation characters in musical and rhythmic numbers are included in the program."

Note: The earliest known surviving footage of a Zulu parade is from 1929, two years after the footage shown at this Midnight Frolic. Arnold L. Moss, identified as 1927's Zulu King, was in real life the secretary of what was then the Geddes and Moss Undertaking and Embalming Company on Jackson Avenue. The stars of the “Kentucky Sue” Company, Thomas “Chappie” Chappelle and Juanita Stinette, helped pioneer the race recording business in a very personal way. In 1921 they produced several titles on what was apparently their own “Chappelle & Stinette” label. In November 1927, Juanita Stinette Chappelle made a lone recording for Victor, accompanied by Fats Waller on organ.¹³

**March 11, 1927:** “Black Bottom In All Styles For Lyric’s Show,” “A fricassee of fun will be served to the New Orleans gourmets of entertainment... Colored vaudeville stars from every section were selected especially for the Frolic. Billie and Nona... are two dancing and singing girls who will tear down the house with applause. What they leave standing will be hammered earthward by Sledge and Sledge, who will try to provide a little stronger thrill than the anvil chorus.

“‘Two Black Spots,’ otherwise named Chatman and Jones, are saffron Black Bottom prize winners, one from the north and the other from the south of the Mason-Dixon line. Chavers and Chavers are singing and dancing geniuses and Wiley and Wiley are a priest and priestess of the abysmal blues...

“The Black Bottom Dance in all its phases, from the origination of simple gestures to the present intricacies, will be demonstrated... The evolution of the dance will be presented by The Two Black Spots – Chatman and Jones – extraordinary eccentric steppers of the dark stage...

“Good singing, dancing and jazz music feature the bill. The Jackson Trio, including a cornet player, banjo and harmonica, are among the stars. Billie and Nona, two saffron girl singers and dancers, and Wiley and Wiley, who have made many nationally known phonograph records of negro blues, are also in the cast.”

Note: At this point in their career, Arnold and Irene Wiley actually had only one recording to their credit, a 1926 coupling for Okeh.

**March 25, 1927:** “Shuffle Along Is Billed For Midnight Frolic,” “Shuffle Along, the greatest negro musical comedy ever to appear on the boards, will be staged in a Midnight Frolic...

“The comedy is the musical equivalent in popularity of ‘Abie’s Irish Rose.’ It played two years straight in New York city, two years in London and a year in Chicago to capacity audiences. Its popularity has never waned.

“Many of the original players will appear at the Frolic. The songs which made the comedy a big hit are retained, others have been replaced by modern successes and the dances have not only been brought to date but others gleaned from colored dance halls, which have furnished all new steps in the country for ballrooms during the past few years, have been added.

“One marvelous dancer in the troupe is a youth, Marvin Brooks, whose dance, called the ‘Buzz,’ is novel, has never failed to produce five encores and may
be the general sensation of next year's flappers.

“Quintard Miller and Marcus Slayter, directors of the company, are favorites in New Orleans. Robert Rice and Emma Hawkins are eccentric steppers. There are fifteen chorus girls chosen with as much care as Flo Ziegfeld picks his Follies. Loretta Fairchild and Inez Dennis are women stars and George Wiltshire is a well billboarded male principal...

“Miller and Slayter’s sprightly colored musical comedy, ‘Shuffle Along’... is one of the musical comedy hits of the generation. It was written and produced solely by Negroes and is a milestone in their progress in theatrical art. The songs and dances have been brought up to date and augmented by popular hits and steps new to the city.

“Marcus Slayter, one of the original stars, is among others of the troupe who made the show a phenomenal success on Broadway. Marvin Brooks, a wonder colored dancer, will present the new hoofing novelty, ‘Buzz.’ Eccentric hoofers, singers, a chorus of slim and comely colored chorus girls and a variety of novelty stars, will complete the Frolic.”

April 16, 1927: “New Dances Are Announced For Frolic,” “A special Easter Frolic will be the program Saturday night... Cecelia Markin a ‘creamy Cocoa’ dancer whose curves would astonish Dazzy Vance, is the motory sensation of the troupe of saffron songsters and boisterous funmakers... Bootes Hope a droll comedian, Rock Martin with a chorus of dancers called ‘Chocolate Drops’ and a variety of other talented negroes will provide enough laughter to make the old theater building quiver...

“One group of colored girls will stage a dance never seen here before. The steps are said to be the only original ones of the year. The number has a Senegambian flavor, elemental rhythm, grotesqueries and flashing speed.

“In addition to a large group of trained colored thaespans from other sections of the country, the theater has engaged the stars of the local darktown stage artistry to add boisterous fun to the occasion.”

April 29, 1927: “Lyric’s Frolic For Whites To Be Great Show,” “A snappy troupe of New York colored stars, both men and girls, will provide a worry erasing Midnight Frolic... These flashing fun makers, whose glinting grins are as contagious as the flu, comprise the nationally known Bon Ton Revue company.

“Eunice Washington, renowned blues singer, is one of the many headline attractions of the troupe. As an offset in interest to her elemental singing Blake Morris, the best known eccentric acrobat on the colored stage, will present a series of unique evolutions.

“A novelty four quartette, gifted in the close harmony for which negro singers are famous, will be another important feature of the Frolic. A chorus of dazzling brownskin beauty dancers and a collection of variety performers will be included in the fast moving show... Two negro comedians who could make an auk laugh will knock New Orleans loose from its worries... The nationally known comedians are Billy Gunn and Harold Brown, drafted from the famous Follow Me company for the occasion...

“Blake Morris, an eccentric dancer whose body bends are drastic enough to make a hoop look like a straight line, is one of the good numbers. Another is a snappy chorus of evenly shaded cocoa
colored girls. Eunice Washington, renowned blues singer and a quartet of close harmony artists with a repertoire of new songs will be in the jamboree.”

May 13, 1927: “Midnight Show For Whites At Lyric Friday.” “Earl Tucker, acknowledged king of Black Bottom Dancers, will be one of the headliners... of the largest company of stars ever assembled to stage a Midnight Frolic... Tucker will demonstrate a number of eccentricities of the famous Negro dance never before seen locally.

“The troupe, straight from New York, is the Golden Brownskin Peaches company, formerly the Connie’s Inn Frolics troupe. It includes such recognized star comedians as Emmett Anthony, the ‘chirper.’ and Mantan Moreland, each a large scale guffaw producer. Jennie Dancey, ‘blues moaner,’ and Sam Cross, a juvenile hoofer whose imitations of famous dancers draw enthusiastic applause, are other members of the cast.

“A fast chorus of 10 brown skin Peaches, a jazz band led by Bill Paine, talented teams and uproarious ensembles are other features.”

May 20, 1927: “Lyric Midnight Show Will Help Flood Sufferers,” “There are thousands of destitute negroes in Louisiana who are being given handouts in islanded refugee camps throughout the vast area of flood [i.e., the Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927]. Most of them are laborers or small land owners – possessors of a cabin, a garden patch, a cow or two, which represented the savings of a lifetime before the watery catastrophe struck. Now their few belongings are lost.

“When the tawny waters receded, these negroes, even more than the white persons, will go through a heart breaking period of readjustment, according to relief workers, who say there will be no jobs for them for months.

“Realizing the starvation period ahead for the colored flood sufferers the negro ministers of New Orleans and the management of the Lyric theater... decided to put on two huge benefit performances this week, the net proceeds to go to the Red Cross for the aid of negro sufferers.

“The first of these performances will be a Midnight Frolic Thursday night... for negroes only... The second performance will be for white persons only. It will be a Midnight Frolic Friday night... with especially engaged stars, including the famous Kid Thomas Midnight Strutters Company and Gill’s Colored Lyric Orchestra...

“Demand for tickets for the midnight performance for negroes... is reported encouragingly large and the indications are the colored population will make a handsome contribution to the Red Cross. This performance will be given under the auspices of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, composed of the leading colored clergymen under the general chairmanship of Rev. H. H. Dunn...

“The Sepia Shock Troupe of the Lyric theater, inspired by the need of suffering flood victims, will stage [Friday night’s Frolic]... Irresistible jazz music, snappy dances and songs and a colorful repertoire of vaudeville acts will feature the show...

“In addition to the New York company of Midnight Strutters, a gifted troupe of colored stars, the theater has engaged Stafford Theatrical Lyric orchestra, a special added attraction.

“‘We have engaged every available star for the Frolic,’ said Maurice
Boudreaux, manager of the theater, “and reports indicate there will be a large crowd to enjoy a fine, typical negro show as well as to help the suffering flood victims of the state.”

**May 27, 1927:** “Midnight Show For White Folks Only,” “Responding to a bombardment of request for a midnight frolic, the management of the Lyric theater announces an all-star colored entertainment for white patrons only…

“A brilliant galaxy of dusky stars has been obtained… Mabel Granger, scion of southern symphony, a bright light of the colored stage, will be one of the principal characters. Dusty Murry and Rastus his twin brother, owners of the company will lead in the fun-making… Mae Williams and Lulu Johnson two saffron dancers, singers and jokemakers will try and outshine the Murray boys, in addition to these there will be a dozen brown skin maids…

“Laughter as spontaneous as steam from a drop of water on a hot stove will ripple a roar through the Lyric… Especial emphasis is placed by the theater on acts by the Negroes 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 a member of any other race – jazz music, heavy in minor tones, quickly syncopated or elementally measured in slow beats.”

**October 7, 1927:** “Lyric Launches Midnight Frolic Season Friday,” “The first Midnight Frolic of the 1927 season will be staged… Friday night. It will be the first frolic of the year for the local residents and perhaps the first of a lifetime for large numbers of tourists from the north…

“With the speed of lightning, a chorus of senegambian whirlers and jazz steppers in the Dashing Dinah Company, will start off the jollification…

“Negro comedians, patter artists, songsters and dancers have been engaged to sprinkle pepper over the white audience… Tourists, theatrical performers in other shows which have closed for the night, dilettantes and society folk will comprise the audience…

“Among the group of colored artists who will provide entertainment will be Peg Bates, ‘one-legged’ dancer. Peg promises to show some steps never seen here before. Eddie Lemons and Bootsy S---n, who have recently become sensational mirth provokers in the Negro stage world… were especially engaged for this one performance. Olive Lopez leads the chorus and has several surprises.”

**October 14, 1927:** “Singer, Dancer Are Headliners At Lyric Frolic,” “There will be a world of fun provided Friday night for the throng that attends the midnight frolic… Although the frolic will contain many musical numbers, it will be distinguished chiefly by quaint characterizations of Negro gestures and patois…

“Julia Davis, one of the country’s most noted blue song singers, employed regularly by the Victor Record Company to make records of her moaning melodies, will be the headliner…

“Florence De Legge, a lissome danseuse, who could probably be listed on the Textile Association’s color chart as a ‘Creamy Cocoa,’ was engaged by the Lyric on special contract to her nationally known undulations to the motive scheme… Having captivated
New York and Chicago as premier colored folder and unfoldier of the season, Florence was a bit hesitant about transferring her talent so far South, but the theater's proposal clanked with sufficient dollars to entice her, and she arrived, bringing with her a reputation as awe-inspiring in the dancing line as that of Julia Davis, the phonograph record star, in singing."

Note: At the time of her Lyric Theater appearance, Julia Davis had made but one known commercial recording, a 1924 coupling for Paramount, featuring blues songs accompanied by Lovie Austin, Tommy Ladnier and Jimmy O'Bryant.

**October 28, 1927:** "Mamie Smith And Gang Stars Of Midnight Show," "Three startling contrasts of ivory against noir will be seen during the infectious laughs of John Mason, Amos Devois [sic, Amon Davis] and Clarence Peters, the trio of colored comedians in the large cast which will stage a midnight frolic at the Lyric theater Friday night.

"Mamie Smith, the first Negro artist to sing for the Victor records, and a cast of twenty-five artists of merit have been secured...

"One of the attractions that is particularly appealing to the feminine contingent in the audience is the fact that Mamie wears the most expensive gowns on the stage. One of her gowns worn this performance cost this artist $1100, and the total value of the gowns worn exceeds $2500.

"This is the last American tour of this famous artist, after which, she is leaving for another tour of Europe.

"In her company she has the famous Black Diamond chorus: this is an aggregation of twelve real brownskin beauties.

"Manager Morris [sic] Boudreaux advises those who wish to take part in the evening's entertainment to get their tickets early as Mamie always packs them in...

"Mamie Smith is the originator of the 'Blues' and will be best remembered from that famous record, 'You Got To See Mama Every Night or You Can't see Mama At All.' Last year when Mamie played the Lyric it was the verdict of everyone who heard her that she excelled anything they have ever heard. In addition they will have the pleasure of seeing her as a terpsichorean artist of rare accomplishment. She will be accompanied by a blue ribbon company of 25 all colored stars."

Note: In a dispatch to the Chicago Defender, published November 5, 1927, Amon Davis provided news of the Mamie Smith Company's extracurricular activities during their Lyric Theater engagement:

"I am now broadcasting from quaint old New Orleans, La., where... I have eaten so much gumbo, shrimps and rice and other seafood that I look like a fish... My old pal Mouton gave the company a big blowout upon our arrival here and is giving another one tonight at his place of business at 1500 Bienville St., where he serves lovely meals at all hours... Last night James Jefferson, who by the way is one of the few Race men here that owns a cabaret, most of them being owned by Greeks, gave us a big crab spread and had on a long table about three hundred crabs and you should have seen these babies 'lay too' those crabs and 'dago red.' Mister Jefferson's cabaret is located at 1321 St. Peter St., this city, and is called the Wagon Top café... Mr. Boudroux, the owner of the Lyric theater, is taking the company out to his farm Thursday and
putting on a big oyster spread... Miss Mamie Smith is just having the time of her life here. Mamie is a good mixer and is always with her gang. That is one good trait she has. She is not a bit 'up stage,' as the saying goes... I will sign off from station POTWA FRENCH, and journey on to Mouton's and join in the 'freeby's' as it were, so with good will to all mankind, I will close with best wishes from the gang.”

**November 4, 1927:** “Touring Negro Troupe Engaged For Negro Frolic,” “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 knock-out.

“The famous Seven-Eleven musical company after four years touring the Columbia Burlesque circuit, has been engaged for this one performance. The original cast is here and promises to give the Lyric frolic patrons the fastest show ever seen in New Orleans. Speedy Smith, who had audiences all over the North and East falling out of their seats with laughter, is the headliner. He will be seconded only by Teddy Peters, who keeps the audience spell-bound with her imitations of several well-known characters... Speedy and Teddy advise that anyone with a weak heart not attend the Frolic, as they promise to knock them out of their seats with the same line of chatter which they used over the Columbia Wheel...

“Afro-American mimicry, exotic dancing, broad jokes and that appealing minor strain music of the dark vocalist will be furnished by the rest of the cast... The show will have one of the largest groups of negro players ever seen in New Orleans. Darktown ‘Wise-Cracks,’ a burlesque on the monarchs in Zululand, a series of 1927 comedy dances, and songs and a snappy bunch of dark dialect will, according to press agents, ‘separate a number of ribs from their moorings.’ The chorus of fifteen girls, ranging from highest yellow to the deepest black, will prove to be the fastest on tour.”

Note: The *Louisiana Weekly* of November 5, 1927, described Teddy Peters as “a riot of laughter in her songs
and characterization of a happy-go-lucky male drunk,” and went on to outline the plot of the Seven-Eleven Company’s burlesque comedy production: “The story opens with a Mississippi River scene and the steamer Natchez at the wharf in Vicksburg. It then moves on to Go Cum’s Chinese Laundry, the Hotel Needmore and then on into Zigzagbooland, which is an imaginary island on the African Coast, where a great celebration is held in Go Cum’s cabaret, where all ends happily.”

November 11, 1927: “Armistice Show For Whites Only,” “An ‘Armistice Special’ midnight frolic will be given... with a hilarious cast of Negro actors doing boisterous burlesque and witchery... Colored actors and actresses gifted from birth in the mystic arts which create the ghostly atmosphere necessary to produce those spine quivers which must shake the frame of real Armistice celebrants, will hold the center of the stage...

“By special arrangement, the Lyric has engaged two teams of colored vaudeville artists... The first is Dusty Fletcher and Lenard Maxie, a couple of gifted songsters and dialoguists, and the second is Mac Emmerson and Herbert Lenard, Herbert styling himself ‘The Harmonica King.’

“Carlton Tarpley and Catherine Jackson, whose fame throughout the darktowns of America is supreme, will spring their typical negro jokes and songs. Dancing with the senegambian rhythm that is veritable throwback to the jungle gyrations of wild jungle folk will be staged by the rest of the company...

“Dusty Fletcher is one of the senegambian shouters who will help make the walls of the old theater shake, the real architectural shake, however, will come when a chorus of dark-skinned and supple girls, aptly named ‘The Chocolate Drops,’ do their accelerating steps [and] rhythmic jelly roll pantomime.”

November 25, 1927: “Negro Stars To Appear In Frolic,” “A real treat is promised visitors and home folks... when Walker and Walker, two of the most promising stars of Nubin, prance upon the stage, with Blackland. They expect to ‘knock ‘em dead at the frolic.’...”

“Davenport and Smith, the renowned record artists, whose lyric efforts have been exclusively contracted by the Okeh Record Company [sic], have been engaged as stars of the jamboree.

“The Joe Hubert Trio, three 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.

“The Williams sisters, lately recruited from New York’s most popular vaudeville house; Scott and Scott, whose fame throughout the darktowns of America is supreme, will bring their typical negro jokes and songs.”

Note: After recording for Okeh with Dora Carr during the mid-1920s, Cow Cow Davenport found a new partner in Ivy Smith, and they began recording together in early-1927, not for Okeh, but for Paramount and Gennett.

The Lyric Theater’s Midnight Frolic of November 25, 1927, was the last one chronicled in the local press. It seems the theater closed its doors abruptly, and without warning, right around this time. The often-repeated, but patently false rumor that the Lyric was destroyed by a fire may be traceable to an incident that occurred during Mamie Smith’s appearance there in late-October, as
described by company member Amon Davis in the *Chicago Defender* of November 5, 1927: “While sitting in my dressing room drumming away on my typewriter, some idiot in the gallery set off a box of matches and yelled, ‘Fire,’ and almost caused a panic. Some women and children narrowly escaped being killed. Any fool who will do a trick like that ought to be hung on the spot, because hundreds of people’s lives are in danger. Luckily we got the audience quieted down and avoided any injuries to anyone.”

Meanwhile, reports of an overall “slump in colored show business over the T.O.B.A. circuit” had been filtering into the African American press. A note in the entertainment columns of the *Chicago Defender* of March 5, 1927, addressed the Lyric Theater in particular: “William H. Smith, formerly manager of Robert T. Motts Pekin Theatre, has returned home to Chicago from New Orleans, La. In an interview, Smith stated that he considered it the poorest field on the T.O.B.A. circuit, owing to the fact that four theatres, Loews, the Orpheum, Crescent and Palace, were all giving pictures and vaudeville, galleries open to colored people at 15 cents, which makes the opposition strong against the Lyric. The Friday midnight white ramble at the Lyric prohibits colored and the actors are no longer paid extra.”

Smith’s observations seem to pinpoint the reason for the Lyric’s ultimate demise. While its closing appears to have gone without notice in the *Louisiana Weekly*, the *Chicago Defender* of December 10, 1927, reported, “The Lyric Theater in New Orleans closed its doors because of poor business. The house has been losing money for the past two years, notwithstanding that it plays the best Colored attractions on the road. The management closed the house after being convinced that the Colored people prefer to attend a white theater and sit in the gallery than sit in the orchestra of a Colored house. The Lyric admission was the same as that charged at the upper sections of the white houses for Colored.”

The February 8, 1928, edition of *Variety*, a popular mainstream entertainment weekly, included this epitaph: “The Lyric, long the South’s largest theatre catering to negroes, passes into the hands of the wreckers shortly. Colored people around New Orleans prefer to have their entertainment dispensed by white folks.” Finally, a coda from the *Chicago Defender* of November 24, 1928: “The new Dauphine theater opened in New Orleans, La., Nov. 12, as a road show house. Mamie Smith and her ‘Steamboat Days’ company... opened the house. Clarence Bennet, who some years ago headed the firm of Beaudreaux and Bennett of the Lyric theater, demolished recently, has been selected to manage the new theater.”

Lynn Abbott

Digital scans thanks to Amistad Research Center

ENDNOTES


2 *Indianapolis Freeman*, October 5, 1912. In early *Freeman* references, his name is often spelled “Gilliam.”

3 *Indianapolis Freeman*, April 17, 1915.

4 *Ragtime Review*, vol. 3, no. 2 (February 1917).

For more on Mattie Dorsey, see Doug Seroff and Lynn Abbott, "Sweet Mattie Dorsey Been Here, But She's Gone," 78 Quarterly, No. 8, pp. 103-112.

"Gets Detroit Bid," Chicago Defender, October 22, 1938.


"Remains at Terrace," Chicago Defender, February 5, 1938.

"Swings at Swingland," Chicago Defender, July 30, 1938.


"Mac Diggs Opens Café Society on Broadway," Chicago Defender, February 8, 1941.


A follow-up report in the Chicago Defender of March 2, 1929 reveals that this new venture "failed to stay on the bright side of the books," and was forced to close within a couple months of opening.

**Curator’s Commentary**

I'll begin with the traditional reminder for $25 annual dues to help defray the costs of producing *The Jazz Archivist*, which has now expanded to over fifty pages with this issue. It's quite a contrast to our first four-page issue in May 1986, and we are very pleased to introduce our readers to a broader selection of topics than ever before, ranging from the origins and early development of the Societe d’Economie, an important New Orleans benevolent association connected in several ways to jazz, to music and spirit as manifested in photographs taken at the St. Philip Street Church of God in Christ, to Louis Armstrong's correspondence with Mayor Shep Morrison, and, finally, to the black performer/white audience scenarios of Midnight Frolics at the Lyric Theater.

Fatima Shaik’s article is her first contribution to the newsletter, and we are delighted that she approached us about its publication, because most of us who are familiar with jazz are aware of the importance of Economy Hall. Ms. Shaik’s interest in the Societe d’Economie came about in an interesting way. She discovered the society’s documents in a refuse can and quickly realized that a significant part of the history of Creole society in New Orleans was on the verge of being lost forever. Her timely retrieval of the materials saved the day. When I heard her present a paper on the society at a Creole Studies Conference held in New Orleans in October 2003, I very much wanted to be able to share her findings with our readership. I already knew of Ms. Shaik as a writer of fiction because she had spent some time at the Hogan Jazz Archive in the conduct of research for two books, *The Mayor of New Orleans: Just Talking Jazz* (Berkeley: Creative Books, 1987) and *Melitte* (New York: Puffin Books, 2000/1997), a book about slavery.

Alma Williams Freeman is herself a member of the Church of God in Christ,
and her collaboration with Lynn Abbott on an oral history project documenting the history of the church has enabled the Archive to grow significantly in its coverage of music in religious settings in New Orleans. Her article serves as a preliminary report on the project and offers the added benefit of numerous images that illustrate the power of music to sanctify and unite a congregation. The work of Ralston Crawford is well known to our readers—he captured not only the images but also the spirit of New Orleans’ black community in his photographs from 1949 to 1959. In a similar vein to Crawford’s work is that of John McCusker, a staff photographer for the Times-Picayune who has also made quite a name for himself giving jazz history tours in New Orleans. John’s documentation of the St. Philip Street Church of God in Christ today reveals the strength of continuity within the church. McCusker’s is a familiar face at the Hogan Jazz Archive. He is currently working on a book about Kid Ory that will offer much new information about this seminal jazz trombonist and bandleader.

Historian Kevin Fontenot has previously published on blues balladeer Richard “Rabbit” Brown in our newsletter. In this issue he considers a letter written by Louis Armstrong to Mayor DeLesseps Morrison following his reign as King Zulu on Mardi Gras 1949. The letter illustrates Armstrong’s facility and ease in virtually any social situation and his ability to relate on a basic human level with people of diverse backgrounds. It also emphasizes how profoundly honored he felt to be chosen as King Zulu, despite the fact that the Social Aid & Pleasure Club’s use of blackface masking was perceived as controversial by many, leaving Armstrong open to criticism in some circles.

Lynn Abbott’s conclusion to the “Midnight Frolics” article contained in our last issue includes some very interesting insights into the world of black vaudeville in New Orleans in the 1920s, as well as some notable passages from bandleader Charles Gillian describing his perception of early white jazz bands, such as the ODJB. Abbott’s use of African-American newspapers shows what a valuable resource they are, and the Archive has been adding new reels of microfilm to its collection in an effort to make these materials available to researchers in the New Orleans area—the Archive’s holdings of the National Edition of Chicago Defender now runs from its inception in 1909 through 1949.

Notable activities at the Archive in 2004 have included a practicum with Marta Jean Hofacre, a retired professor of trombone at the University of Southern Mississippi, who is pursuing a degree in librarianship with an archival emphasis there. Ms. Hofacre worked on manuscript and other sheet music from the Max Kaminsky Collection during the summer. In May a group of students from Cornell College spent a week at the Archive under the direction of Professor Don Chamberlain. The students’ thirst for knowledge kept the staff hopping, but we were pleased and impressed by their intellectual curiosity, range of interests, and commitment to making full use of the Archive’s resources. Keith Brunies, grandson of jazz trombonist Henry Brunies, brought materials from his personal collection for the students to inspect and brought CDs of his grandfather’s recorded compositions as gifts.
Regarding enhancements to the collection, the Archive received a large donation from drummer Leonard Ferguson, a founding member of the Crawford-Ferguson Night Owls in the 1960s. Catherine Tassin (daughter of Raymond Burke) provided additional recorded sound materials from her father’s collection. Writer Doug Seroff donated correspondence related to his ongoing work on black music, covering the 1970s through 1990s. Bandleader Jimmy Maxwell gave orchestrations and assorted sheet music, tapes of Rene Netto, and a Phil Zito scrapbook with seventy-one photographs. Of special significance was a $10,000 donation from the Jay Pritzker Foundation, which will be used to continue the transfer of oral history audio tapes to CD begun last year with the support of the New Orleans Jazz Commission, the advisory body of the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park. The NOJC and NOJNHP have also this year provided $1,500 to inaugurate a New Orleans jazz oral history online union catalog, a collaborative effort involving the Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans Jazz Club Collection of the Louisiana State Museum, and the Commission itself, which has generated several dozen oral history interviews on video. Another $2,500 is expected to be forthcoming—it will be applied to the oral history digital transfer project.

That’s it for another year. We hope you enjoy this issue, and thanks for your support of the Hogan Jazz Archive.

Bruce Boyd Raeburn