

Posted 3.3.14 <http://places.designobserver.com/feature/hating-bourbon-street-new-orleans/38323/>

Note: Below is an edited excerpt from Richard Campanella's book, "Bourbon Street: A History" (LSU Press, 2014), the first-ever full-length scholarly investigation of New Orleans' most famous, and infamous, space. <http://www.amazon.com/Bourbon-Street-History-Richard-Campanella/dp/0807155055>

Hating Bourbon Street

Richard Campanella



Mardi Gras on Bourbon Street, 2012. [Photo by author]

Hundreds of millions.

That's how many people, over the past two generations, have crammed themselves into a minor and rather middling artery in a secondary city on America's Third Coast. They made it into one of the most famous streets in the nation, a brand that has diffused worldwide. People by the thousands beeline for this narrow space, and parade up and down it nightly, because a crusty cohort of shrewd locals figured out what pleased them and delivered it with panache, while constantly battling police, patricians, preservationists and pontificators. The street is named Bourbon, the city is New Orleans, and the story is fundamentally American.

Bourbon Street emerged from an inward shift in the urban geography of "sin" in the late 19th century. It gained momentum with the rise of leisure tourism in the early 20th century, and catapulted into national fame during World War II. It has hummed ever since, round the clock, 365 days a year — all without the benefit of a corporate structure, a team of experts, a board of directors or a marketing branch. Formed by working-class characters toiling individually but prospering collectively through the clever use of space and the adaptive commodification of culture, Bourbon Street today is at once "the biggest disorganized street in the whole country" [1] and a well-honed economic engine that pumps millions of outside dollars into the city's economy and generates imagery and reputation about an entire metropolis.

For some, the Bourbon Street image is a delectable mélange of historicity and hedonism; for others it's iniquitous, crass, phony and offensive. Americans on either side of the culture wars hate Bourbon Street, but they hate it for entirely different reasons. The Right hates it for its commercialization of sin; the Left, for its commercialization of culture. The Right hates it because it is dangerous pretending to be safe; the Left, because it is safe pretending to be dangerous. The Right, because it's funky and honkytonk; the Left, because it's neither. Hating Bourbon Street is one of the few things traditionalists and progressives agree on, so long as they don't compare notes.



Bourbon, Royal, and Chartres Streets a decade after they were first surveyed, as depicted by Gonichon in a detail of *Plan de la Nouvelle Orleans telle qu'elle estoit au mois de dexembre 1731*. [Courtesy of the Library of Congress]

The Authenticity Game

Intrinsic to the progressive brand of Bourbon hating is the notion of authenticity, or rather, the lack thereof. Authenticity may be viewed as the narrowness of the gap between one's innermost nature and that which is expressed outwardly. The wider the gap, and the more planning and scheming goes on to disguise that gap, the less the authenticity. Few people lost sleep over authenticity before the 1900s. Most humans lived lives that were all too gritty and real to leave time to contemplate gritty reality. Those wealthy enough to distance themselves from daily drudgery mostly wanted to lengthen and flaunt that distance. This began to change as industrialization led to the expansion of the middle class, the spatial subjugation of the poor, and increased consumption of, among other things, modern leisure travel experiences. "Public relations" became a field; tourism became an industry; and image became everything. A gap widened between what people said about themselves — and about places and products — and what they really were. The privileged became sensitive to their own artifice and grew intrigued by the apparent genuineness of common folk and their simple ways. Affluent youth started visiting the spaces of the poor, listening to their music, appropriating their language — "slumming," it was called. The most committed moved into their neighborhoods, like the French Quarter.

Postindustrialization furthered this process. The late-20th-century shift to an information society of white-collar professionals working in office parks and living in exurbs produced a generation insulated from risk and bound by structure. Educated young people were aware of their privilege, and a certain segment grew bored and anguished with it. As Adam Nathaniel Mayer writes, they "suffered a kind of postmodern malaise which in turn spurred a quest for meaning." [2] Previous generations had common causes like escaping poverty or fighting wars to satisfy the top tier of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs; this generation did not. So they sought meaning through individualized quests for authentic experiences.

Because authenticity seemed to call for a certain demeanor, its seekers brooded, acted aloof and squinted when they dragged on their cigarettes. Because it needed a certain look, they grew or chopped their hair defiantly, got tattoos, and donned ragged or vintage clothing. Music, food, cinema, literature, cars, religion: just about every aspect of culture had a "groovy" (1960s), "alternative" (1980s) or "critical" (2000s) counterpart which pitted itself against the mainstream and viewed itself as authentic. And because authenticity also had a geography, its seekers packed their knapsacks and hit the road — out of suburbia and into the wilderness, to distant countries, communes, college towns and mountain villages, and to the decaying inner cities abandoned by their elders. In the past few decades, educated, mostly white youths from prosperous backgrounds have transformed urban spaces in cities like Brooklyn and Oakland and Baltimore and Boston and London from shabbiness and indigence to restoration and gentrification.

New Orleans fit the bill perfectly. It had history, culture, and the poignancy of tragedy and past grandeur. It had a European look, a Caribbean feel, an expatriated vibe, an abundance of historic housing at low rent, a pervasive booziness, and music, food and festivity to boot. It was authentic!

There was just one problem: authentic New Orleans depended wholly on the hideously inauthentic corporate conventioners, SUV-driving suburbanites, and crass rubes who infested the inner city as tourists. Numbering close to 10 million per year, they ruined the progressives' quest for authenticity as absolutely as they absolutely loved Bourbon Street, which was *their* favored geography. Authenticity seekers responded by loving to hate Bourbon Street — ardently, almost histrionically, because outing the inauthentic enhanced their claim to its antithesis. They viewed Bourbon Street as a place where the spurious is sold to the phony to profit the sleazy at the expense of the real, and they wanted everyone to know that they were on to it.

Not everyone plays the authenticity game. Many working-class natives of metro New Orleans, particularly African Americans, have all the authenticity they need, and tend to view Bourbon Street as harmless, naughty fun. Middle-class folks throughout the region enjoy it for what it is and shrug off its faults. It's the cultural elite and their aspirants who obsess about authenticity, going so far as to segregate nearly all aspects of city life into an authentic/inauthentic dualism. They would universally agree, for example, that the Seventh Ward, St. Claude Avenue, the bounce scene, second-line parades, Mardi Gras Indians, and anything to do with Creoles all sparkle with realness. And with equal unanimity they renounce the upper Quarter, the French Market, Indian-owned T-shirt shops, and anything related to Bourbon Street. To be sure, most are willing to concede a few spots of Good Bourbon amid ten blocks of Bad Bourbon.

Even the most rabid haters revere Galatoire's, say nice things about Irvin Mayfield's Jazz Playhouse, maintain a polite neutrality regarding the St. Ann queer space, and enjoy Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop, whose candlelit interior wins over just about everyone. But these exceptions only prove the rule — and progressives rule that Bourbon Street is phony, period.

Authenticity is a powerful theme in both the intellectual and popular discourse about modern New Orleans. It is used, as sociologist Kevin Gotham observes, "to influence public debate, contest policies, neutralize counterarguments and opposition, and mobilize constituents." [3] Buzz about authenticity can make or break a restaurant. It defines social circles and where they circulate. It underlies the credibility of artists, musicians, researchers and writers. The authenticity argument helped win nationwide support for the rebuilding of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and motivated thousands of authenticity-starved young professionals to move here unbidden to participate in the recovery. The city revels in its own realness, and sees no irony in statements such as that made by the Chief Executive Officer of the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation, who extolled his company's "global efforts to bring the story of our authentic and unique culture to leisure travelers everywhere" — even as he canned a consulting firm with deep local roots in favor of a New York ad agency. [4]

The "Real" New Orleans

Authenticity is seductive; we embrace it because it makes us feel exclusive. Hating Bourbon Street has valuable social currency, and it's an easy step toward assuming co-ownership of "real" New Orleans culture. But declaring something to be inauthentic positions the critic in the dubious position of arbitrating reality. What qualifies any one individual — a



Bourbon street scenes from the late 1930s (left column), paired with 2013 views (right). [Photos by the WPA, courtesy of the Library of Congress and the Louisiana State Museum; and by the author]

"progressive," no less — to cast such bold judgment? The fact that no one person or community ever thinks of himself, herself, or itself as anything but fully real and genuine suggests that inauthenticity is at best a subjective and arbitrary construct, and at worse, an arrogant disparagement. It smacks of smugness; it is necessarily exclusionary; and it is usually elitist — yet it tumbles from the mouths of people who purport to be enlightened, inclusionary and egalitarian. Worse, inauthenticity rests on the troubling supposition that not all human beings or human endeavors contribute equally to this thing we call culture; that some are more worthy than others.

Another weakness with authenticity is that it is ahistorical. A hundred years ago, scholars of the Old Guard like Charles Gayarré, Alcée Fortier, Grace King and John Kendall took it upon themselves to scribe the "real" history and culture of New Orleans. They esteemed the French founders, the aristocracy, the grand edifices and the Confederate generals, and shunted aside the poor, blacks, women, laborers, shotgun shacks and anyone or anything else they deemed outside the fault-free, triumphant, "authentic" New Orleans narrative. Now, it's reversed: scholars today find plenty of fault in the historic inequities of wealth and power, roll their eyes at the cobwebbed icons

of old, and adulate those marginalized by the musty patricians of the past. What happened? Did the inauthentic become authentic? The fake real? Or did we change, as we came to view, with the passage of time, that what struck our predecessors as mere backdrop was in fact a legitimate and important part of

New Orleans history and culture?

Scholars a hundred years hence will likely intellectualize how New Orleanians back in the 2000s shopped at a place called Walmart, listed to the music of a lady who called herself Gaga, and generated income at the famous Bourbon Street — and perhaps they might ponder why contemporary scholars never wrote about these topics. Time puts the lie to authenticity. Dismissing the Bourbon Street of today as inauthentic is precisely the same ahistorical mistake the Old Guard made a century ago. It obtusely presumes that no one in the past manipulated their image, hyped their business,

contrived verisimilitude, or sold the sizzle; that everyone was on the up-and-up, and what they displayed outwardly represented their true innermost nature. It's utter nonsense. "Inauthenticity" is entirely human. It's real. Bourbon Street today is just as authentically part of real New Orleans culture as Storyville was a hundred years ago, and as Social Aid and Pleasure clubs, the housing projects, Creoles and Tremé are today — no more, no less.

When viewed in this light, Bourbon Street emerges as a fascinating and refreshing phenomenon. The dizzying, deafening artifact we see today originated organically, without an inventor or a vision or a legislative act. There is no Bourbon Street logo, no headquarters, no board of directors, no visitors' center, no brochure, not even a website. The nightlife that made the street famous — after two hundred years of utter normalcy — was created spontaneously by a cast of local characters, who, in an uncoordinated attempt to make a living individually, succeeded collectively. Localism has always predominated on Bourbon Street; even today, in an era defined by corporate globalization, New Orleans-based proprietors own fully 74 percent of the units on Bourbon Street, and Louisianians own 90 percent. [4] Bourbon Street is a self-organizing local network sans a central nervous system, a self-correcting system that recognizes its own imbalances, and a brutally efficient marketplace operating with a minimum of sentimentality. As such, Bourbon Street has proven to be pugnacious, adaptable and resilient. It represents a triumph of localism, an argument for emergent over ordained order, and a case study of civic (if often uncivil) compromise. It has been famous for nearly one-third of the city's entire existence — longer than the French and Spanish colonial eras combined, and the entire antebellum era. Bourbon Street is New Orleans's most lucrative sustained homegrown commercial success.

Contrast this with the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, the annual springtime fete that attracts hundreds of thousands of people to the Fairgrounds in Gentilly. Jazz Fest takes great pride in its musical acts and regional foods, arts and exhibits; cultural cognoscenti love it devoutly, and criticize it only when it fails to live up to its own



Bourbon Street. [Photo by Patrick Haney]

authenticity-reverent ideals. Among the unwritten rules of self-respecting festgoers are no beads, no Bourbon T-shirts and no Bourbon antics; Jazz Fest sees itself as a cultural refuge from all that phoniness. Yet Jazz Fest was invented by a man from Massachusetts as part of a worldwide megafestival circuit — essentially a local franchise of a global chain. Meticulously choreographed and carefully policed, it is managed out of New York, coordinated by crack professionals, "presented by Shell" (a phrase now officially appended to the event's name), increasingly dependent on global superstar acts, subsidized by an on-site Acura showroom, and funded by Big Oil — not to mention an entrance fee that has risen 400 percent in 10 years, to 50 dollars per person, more than the median daily take-home pay in New Orleans. Trained staffers screen the acts, taste-test the

foods of every concessionaire, and inspect the merchandise of all vendors before passing authentic/inauthentic judgment. The motifs of the event are all professionally designed to affect a funky juke-joint atmosphere — bottle caps nailed to rough-hewn clapboards, folk-style naïve art, helter-skelter multicolored lettering, that sort of thing. Jazz Fest is the epitome of invented, planned, centralized cultural control that leaves nothing to chance and covers its tracks with the trappings and aesthetics of authenticity. An existential philosopher would have to be particularly generous to describe Jazz Fest as authentic, and equally parsimonious to dismiss Bourbon Street as phony. Yet that is precisely what most Bourbon-hating culture lovers do.

The Least Pretentious Place in Town

A final rationale for Bourbon-hating transcends conservative and progressive worldviews. It's taste. Many people spurn Bourbon Street not necessarily because they see it as sinful or phony, but because it's crass and tasteless. In her essay "Notes on Camp," Susan Sontag viewed poor taste in art — kitsch — as aesthetically misguided to a comical extreme. But when set forth earnestly, devoid of all pretense and affectation, Sontag found kitsch to bear a certain honest and genuine appeal. Kitsch that is meant earnestly is campy; kitsch delivered lazily or cheaply is tasteless.

Bourbon Street from late 1930s to the mid-1960s was campy. The Oyster Girl and the Tassel Spinner were proudly proffered by impresarios as exemplars of stylish eroticism. People dressed to the nines and patronized Bourbon clubs craving the velvety cultural cachet that such clubs convincingly delivered. We laugh at them in retrospect, but they were not produced to be ridiculed; they were produced to dazzle. Midcentury Bourbon Street nightclubs presented themselves with enough decorum and pizzazz to make the kitsch campy.

What happened on Bourbon Street in the 1960s and 1970s was that the earnestness went out of the camp and left in its place only bad taste. It sold well, nonetheless, because the eternal parade of tourists forever replenished itself and had no collective memory. So the service got lazy, the merchandise cheapened, the bands lost their edge, the strippers let their bodies go, and Bourbon Street became, in the view of many, a tasteless and vapid commercial conjunction with a bad case of cultural sclerosis.

Bourbon Street doesn't necessarily disagree. Or agree. One of the benefits of having no spokesperson is that Bourbon Street cannot take offense. Criticism of Bourbon Street is diffused and abstracted to all its constituent parts, and that which belongs to everybody belongs to nobody. No Bourbon musician or chef retorts when detractors excoriate The Street's music or food, just as no Bourbonite protested when the writers of an "underground" (read: authentic) guidebook pointedly expunged Bourbon Street. [5] Bourbonites really don't give a damn; they cry crocodile tears all the way to the bank. They'll address that tastelessness thing if and only if those trips start bearing shrinking sacks of cash. And sclerotic? Hardly. Bourbon Street operates on the principles of free-market capitalism. Those who don't flexibly adapt to demand go bankrupt; those who survive must effectively and efficiently give the people exactly what they want — and, yes, that may well be tasteless.



Las Vegas has been called America's most honest city for its undisguised pursuit of profit. Perhaps Bourbon rates as our most candid street, for the clarity of its deal: *accessible pleasures offered for a price to the passing parade*. For all its flamboyance and swagger, Bourbon Street is one of the least pretentious places in town. It's as utterly uncool as it is wildly successful, and in an era when "cool capital" is increasingly craved and fiscal capital increasingly scarce, there's something refreshing about a place that flips off coolness and measures success the old-fashioned way: by the millions. And authenticity? Not only does Bourbon Street not try to be authentic, it doesn't even think about it. If, as Sartre once said, "you seek authenticity for authenticity's sake, you are no longer authentic," then perhaps the opposite is true as well. For all its ruses and illusions, Bourbon Street puts on no airs, requires no subsidies or handouts, has no need for the kindness of strangers, and lets the loquacious literati and the fuming fundamentalists fulminate alone. What you see when you peer past the neon is exactly what you get.

Editors' Note: "Hating Bourbon Street" is adapted from [Bourbon Street: A History](#), by Richard Campanella, published March 2014 by Louisiana State University Press.

Notes

1. Business owner Earl Bernhardt, interviewed by the author, October 11, 2012.
2. Adam Nathaniel Mayer, "[Pondering Urban Authenticity: A Look at the New Book 'Naked City,'](#)" *New Geography*, April 2010.
3. Kevin Fox Gotham, *Authentic New Orleans: Tourism, Culture, and Race in the Big Easy* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 12.
4. Mark C. Romig, "Thorough Review Led to New Ad Agency," *Times-Picayune*, July 25, 2012, B4.
5. These percentages are based on units. When we look at value, New Orleans-based proprietors in 2012 owned 56 percent of the appraised land and building value of Bourbon Street; those based in Jefferson Parish owned an additional 13 percent; and Louisianians in general held 72 percent of the value. (Analysis by the author based on property values and ownership information from the Orleans Parish Assessor's Office, queried October 2012.)
6. Michael Patrick Welch with Alison Fensterstock, *New Orleans: The Underground Guide* (New Orleans: UNO Press, 2010).