



A Caroline Durioux drawing of a Bourbon Street nightclub in 1942. Courtesy LSU Museum of Art.

# A NIGHT ON THE TOWN IN 1930s NEW ORLEANS

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**G**OING OUT tonight? Consider your options. For suburban youth in the metro New Orleans area, a Friday or Saturday evening on the town might mean hanging out at the food court or the multiplex. For urbanites, it might mean dinner on Magazine and music on Frenchmen, or drinks at The Bottom Line or dancing at the Hong Ngoc Club. Restaurants, bars, music and dance clubs, cinema, theater and retail venues comprise the vast majority of modern-day sites featuring nocturnal amusements. Else, folks stay home and watch television.

That wasn't an option three generations ago. Evening options in circa-1930 New Orleans were larger in number and broader in range than today, and they reflected every social and urban condition of the era, from Prohibition to segregation to technology and gender relations. It's difficult to assess how New Orleans ranked nationally with regard to nighttime amusements, but it's safe to say that this major American city of nearly a half-million restive, festive souls abounded in choices.

Among them was a new concept recently borrowed from Paris, the "night club," or "niteriy," which had first arrived to New Orleans earlier in the century. In some ways, the nightclub represented the next in lineage after the "concert saloons" of the late 1800s. Both venues brought together entertainment and alcohol (legal or otherwise) in dark, stylized spaces scented with the possibility of sex. Unlike in concert saloons, however, an air of exclusivity circulated among nightclub patrons, construed via fine attire, high prices, membership, a cover charge, a hat-and-coat check, and a velvet-curtain barrier. Restaurant service made nightclubs more of a total-evening experience rather than just a watering hole, and earned

them the name "supper clubs" or "dinner clubs." Thematic décor, usually imaginative and sometimes garish, aimed to evoke swankiness or exoticism. Entertainment bookings were eclectic, including comedians, dance acts, contests and novelty performances, but eschewing anything so vulgar as vaudeville. Patrons danced, as most arrived as couples, quite different from the male-dominated scene of concert saloons. Nightclubs benefited from, indeed catered to, the liberated lifestyles to which women in the 1920s were laying claim. Whereas women were usually servants, performers or prostitutes in concert saloons, in nightclubs they were patrons as well, participants in the emerging social trend of "dating," in which young men courted flappers with bobbed hair and cloche hats by treating them for a night on the town. Nightclubs created libidinous but classy and safe private-domain public spaces in which these newly permitted social interactions could take place. Starting in 1925, nightclubs found a home on a street called Bourbon, which over the next two decades would become nationally famous for them.

Additionally, numerous private social clubs, as well as 390 commercial clubs, entertained the thousands of New Orleanians who were dues-paying members. During Prohibition they functioned as private speakeasies, and many if not most also hosted illicit games of chance. Members-only clubs benefitted from the fact that the illegality of most gambling within Orleans Parish pushed the big casinos into neighboring Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes, leaving open a lucrative economic niche within New Orleans proper.

For those who preferred traditional entertainment, awaiting them were 65 theaters presenting live performances of one type or another, and 56 mo-

tion-picture theaters including new "chains." Many performance theaters also showed films, and movie houses often staged live acts.

Dance halls were among the most culturally significant social spaces in the cityscape. An informative thesis by Elbert Samuel P'Pool, written in 1930 at Tulane University and stored in Jones Hall's Special Collections, takes us inside the dance halls of this era.



A typical bar street scene, 1939. Courtesy of the collection of the Louisiana State Museum.



The 63 that operated across New Orleans came in many forms: some were attached to saloons or billiard halls to share clientele; others blurred lines with cabarets or nightclubs. They could be permanent public for-profit enterprises, temporarily rented spaces, or private halls affiliated with clubs or churches. “Open halls” welcomed couples for a cover charge, whereas “closed halls” catered to men without dates who paid a fee to dance with a “hostess” employed by the house. The State of Louisiana passed laws in 1926 to regulate dance halls, imposing closing hours and banning minors, liquor, drunks, loiterers and disorderly conduct. One of the impetuses for the intervention was the emergence of a popular money-making scheme of dubious legality, in which a young lady employed by the club made herself available for dance or conversation and then beguiled her suitor into treating her to an overpriced drink. For reasons unclear, the ruse came to be known as “B-drinking.” So long as a policeman was present, such peccadilloes were overlooked — for a price. B-drinking and bribery, not to mention prostitution, would later become the fortes, and foibles, of post-World War II-era Bourbon Street.

Dance halls spanned the socio-economic, ethnic, and racial spectrum, and generally, the demographic sub-segments of local society did not mix. The Gay-Shattuck Law kept whites and blacks segregated wherever alcohol was served, and that was also the case in dance halls. The Pelican at 303 South Rampart and the nearby Astoria Dance Hall catered to better-off African Americans and prided themselves as dignified and respectable joints — but joints nonetheless, with an entrance policy that required explicit approval of the owner because of the illicit booze inside. A few blocks away, the Music Box on lower Carondelet catered to the white middle class, mostly young local men and some regional visitors. It operated in a well-lit 30-by-70-foot upstairs room that adjoined a billiard hall. For 10 cents’ admission, a visitor could enjoy a “six-piece Negro Jazz Orchestra,” which sequenced two-minute performances of a waltz, a jazz variation, and finally a crescendo. Want to dance? A dozen hostesses — described by P’Pool as “graceful” and “cheerful” but “not known for their beauty” — awaited your request. The house charged 10 cents per song, from which all the girls were paid a percentage. A refreshment stand brought in a little extra revenue, while a policeman and a matron kept order from the corner. Apparently order prevailed: P’Pool, who observed the Music Box one spring night in 1930, saw no evidence for “improper positions or movements,” and judged that it represented “one of the better sort of its type.”

Less so was the case for the Alamo Dance Hall on Liberty between Canal and Iberville, where P’Pool felt decidedly unwelcome, and the Fern and La Vida, on Iberville between Liberty and Rampart. Adjoined by a slew of sub rosa gambling dens strung out along Rampart — “with mysterious swinging doors... opening into an unknown rear,” these three dance halls were the remnants of the so-called Tango Belt, a cluster of semi-legal joints located in the upper rear of the French Quarter during and after the decline of Storyville, but before the rise of Bourbon Street. The crowds here were lower-middle class, a bit rougher, more ethnic (particularly Filipino), and engaged in illegal gambling and drinking. Beyond that, P’Pool saw



The Liberty Theater on St. Charles Street, photographed in 1935 or 1936. By Walker Evans, courtesy the Library of Congress.

“no impropriety,” although he did notice that things got “fast” when the matron or the police stepped out.

The Tango Belt at this time also had two burlesque theaters, the Dauphine and the Palace, on Dauphine Street near Iberville. Things were decidedly less proper here. The dancing was performed not by the patrons but by “twenty women dressed mostly in their own powdered skins with glittering fringe adornment about their breasts and hips, [dancing to] salacious music most poorly played... [R]ude and obscene bodily gestures” flew from both male and female performers, “sex appeal so crude and overdone,” declared P’Pool, “that only the most depraved could but revolt at the entire performance.” And the audience? “...unwashed, unpressed, unshaved.”

The New Slipper, located a block from the burlesque theaters, had been nearly as disreputable until it recently reopened under new management following a bust. This Burgundy Street cabaret now bore more of a semblance to the fancy nightclubs popping up on Bourbon. Its “six-piece orchestra,” led by Albert Brunes and featuring “all white men, good musicians,” sounded like a group that could have gotten a gig on Bourbon. So too the diva with a “parlor voice,” and the hat check girl. Unlike the lower-end dance halls, the New Slipper put on sophisticated airs, presented a theme (“The Mystery of Wickedness”), and built a physical barrier to separate the raffish street from the ritzy interior. Unlike the swankiest places, however, it obnoxiously pressured visitors to pair up with hostess, buy illegal drinks, and dance for a 25-cent (rather than 10-cent) fee. “This is the type [of dance hall] that caters to the out of town ‘gink’ who wants to see some ‘night life,’” concluded P’Pool.

Over on Bourbon Street was Kelley’s in the Old Absinthe House — which even in 1930 “boasts its age and purposely keeps a dilapidated appearance outside.” At first glance the joint appeared to be closed but for one door ajar, over which stood “a big Negro door man in a sky-blue long-tailed uniform.” Couples — some in the know, others adventurously curious after an evening at the theater — would approach the

doorman, exchange words, and gain passage. “Everything [inside] was gaudy and dignified, grand and mysterious, furnished in ‘tinsel seeming splendor’ lined with beaver board.” Prices were high and no one complained; tipping was generous because anything “less would have been beneath the dignity of the place.” Mrs. Kelley stayed upstairs in the Old Absinthe House’s hidden entresol whenever she was in town; she also ran “a real cabaret” in Panama’s Canal Zone and shuttled between the two ports managing her assets.

Economic stagnation stabilized the night scene in New Orleans throughout the 1930s, although Bourbon Street gained a number of new clubs and bars nonetheless, as it provided a reasonably priced escape from dismal reality for local folks and a small number of visitors. All would change on Bourbon and throughout the amusement industry in New Orleans in subsequent years, as tens of thousands of war plant workers moved into the city, hundreds of thousands of service men embarked for combat in Europe and Asia, and millions more took their R&R here from Southern military training camps. Transformations following the global conflict would, among other things, shift populations outwardly into the suburbs, replace de-jure segregation with de-facto segregation, and bring new behavior-changing technologies like television and air conditioning to homes. By century’s end, take-out and television came to constitute an evening’s entertainment for some folks — but not so many that New Orleans today has anything less than one of the most robust nocturnal entertainment economies in the nation, for a city of its size.

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