



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE HISTORIC NEW ORLEANS COLLECTION

The Maxime Supper Club, at 300 Bourbon St., was housed in a one-story building rented from the American Brewing Co., pictured here in 1952. The club's doors opened in late 1925.

## BOURBON STREET'S FIRST NIGHTCLUB

*The opening of Maxime's ushered in a 'golden age' of glitzy entertainment*



**By Richard Campanella**  
InsideOut columnist

Ninety years ago this month, a new type of business opened on Bourbon Street. It was called a nightclub, and it both reflected and affected the changing social mores of the 1920s, transforming Bourbon Street forever.

Nightclubs represented a variation of the concert saloon of the late 19th century. First appearing on Bourbon Street in 1868, concert saloons typically featured can-can dancers or other ribald entertainment for male audiences, who were served a steady stream of alcohol by comely

waitresses. Associated with gambling and prostitution, concert saloons were not the sort of places where respectable women or couples would want to be seen.

Nightclubs, on the other hand, catered to respectability. Featuring fancy dinners and classy entertainment, they cultivated an air of swanky exclusivity through the use of thematic décor, memberships or cover charges, a velvet-curtain barrier and a doorman, all of which made patrons feel special just to be there. Both owners and patrons wanted prices to be high — that made it all the more exclusive — and everyone dressed to the nines.

The most significant social aspect of nightclubs involved gender. Whereas women were usually servants, performers or prostitutes in concert saloons, in nightclubs they were pampered patrons as well. Many were participants in the emerging social trend of “dating,” in which young men courted flappers with bobbed hair and cloche hats with a night on the town. Nightclubs created spaces in which these newly permitted

*The*  
**MAXIME**  
*Supper Club*

300 Bourbon St. at Bienville  
*Celebrates Its Formal Opening*  
**Wednesday, Jan. 13th,**  
**10:30 P. M.**

*The Princeton*  
**Revelers' Orchestra**  
*Will Serve That Dancy Music*

Entertainment by Your Favorites  
Babe Carroll—The Cheer-up-odist  
Teddy Carlo—Plenty of Voice and Personality  
Anthony Belecì—The Golden Voiced Tenor  
Joe Manne—The Chicago Blues

No Cover      Phone 7710  
Charge      Main 5562

*Louis Newman, Mgr.*



RICHARD CAMPANELLA / STAFF

Maxine's original building was demolished in 1966 to make room for a hotel, the present-day Royal Sonesta, and no evidence of the club remains today.

social interactions could take place, while their private ambiance enabled them to evade Prohibition agents.

Nightclubs emerged during the Belle Époque in Paris in venues, such as the famous Maxim's on Rue Royale (1893), and diffused to other European and American cities. While the Grunewald Hotel's "Cave" (1908, now the Roosevelt Hotel) was probably the first modern nightclub in New Orleans, Bourbon Street — already home to theaters, bistros and saloons — offered the perfect environment for the concept to take root.

In Louisiana, nightclubs got an unintended boost from a 1908 state law known as the Gay-Shattuck Act, which, in addition to racially segregating bars, prohibited female patronage and musical performances wherever alcohol was served. But the law did not prohibit women, alcohol and live music in establishments that also served meals, thus creating a legal loophole — and an economic opportunity.

Cuisine, couples, libations and entertainment were the key ingredients to a "club," and because few people drank and danced during the day, the enterprise became a "night" club. The terms "supper club" and "dinner club" also were used.

What first brought nightclubs to Bourbon Street was the creative mind of Arnaud Cazenave, a flamboyant French-born wine merchant who, finding New Orleans to his fancy in 1902, decided to make it home. Cazenave established a French café in the Old Absinthe House and in 1918 expanded into a larger space diagonally across Bourbon on Bienville Street. This is today's Arnaud's Restaurant.

Ever the entrepreneur, "Count" Arnaud (as he liked to be called) sought to enlarge his holdings. Ever the Parisian, and contemptuously dismissive of the American legal nuisance of Prohibition, he looked to the City of Lights to inspire

the City That Care Forgot. He came up with an idea and shared it with singer Babe Carroll, who recounted the conversation in a 1949 New Orleans Item interview with Thomas Sancton.

"One night he called me over to his restaurant," recalled Carroll, "and told me of his plans to open a club on Bourbon and Bienville and call it 'Maxime's,' after the famous spot in Paris. He wanted me to sing."

Situated at 300 Bourbon St. in a rather functional one-story building rented from the American Brewing Co., The Maxime Supper Club opened its doors in late 1925, but saved its formal inauguration for the new year.

In retrospect, 300 Bourbon St. on the evening of Jan. 13, 1926, may be considered the birthplace of Bourbon Street's "golden age" of swanky clubs and elaborate floor shows. According to the advertisement in *The Times-Picayune*, it was quite a night, with the Princeton Revelers' Orchestra providing "that dancy music" and featuring Joe Manne's Chicago blues, "Golden Voiced Tenor" Anthony Belec and Babe Carroll as "Cheer-up-odist."

Cheerful perhaps, but Carroll initially had her doubts. "Rampart was the street in those days," she said in reference to the so-called Tango Belt in the upper-lakeside corner of the French Quarter. "I wondered for a while if a night-club could really go on Bourbon."

But the sheer force of Cazenave's "personality" — and his sixth sense as an entrepreneur — "could make a club go anywhere. And he did. Maxime's became a great success," she added. "He was the real Columbus of Bourbon St."

Carroll contended Maxime's was, in Sancton's paraphrasing, "the first full-fledged Bourbon St. night club in the style that eventually made it one of the most famous streets in the country." To be sure, there were similar venues

nearby, such as Peter Casabonne's club in the Old Absinthe House. But "in those days," countered Carroll, "the entrance was on Bienville." How about Turci's? And Toro's? "[T]hose were restaurants," she said. "I'm talking about night clubs." Keyword searches on digitized newspaper archives corroborate Carroll's argument: Maxime's was the first of its type on Bourbon Street.

Carroll's description of Maxime's serves as a checklist for what made a nightclub special. Opening night was by invitation only, and a hat check took patrons' garments. Alcohol was served in demitasses, grudgingly acknowledging Prohibition but otherwise ignoring it.

The floor show included a master of ceremonies, and from behind a black velvet curtain emerged blues singers, triple pianos, comedians, jazz orchestras featuring names such as Max Fink, and dancers with "brief costumes" and "sex appeal" but absolutely no "sporting house" behavior. Patronage was "traveling men, salesmen, businessmen [as well as] wives and daughters [and] good decent kids" on dates.

Carroll herself came to be viewed as "the first singing star of Bourbon Street" when she "walked out in the spotlight one night in 1925 and put it on the maps." It helped that the Tango Belt on North Rampart had been raided incessantly by police, and, losing ground to expanding Canal Street department stores, saw its bar and club scene shift to Bourbon. A critical mass had developed on Bourbon Street, and that momentum would soon make it the city's premier geography for hedonism and indulgence.

Cazenave's impact on Bourbon Street would last a long time, but Maxime's would not. It got padlocked for Prohibition violations later in 1926, and Cazenave got arrested for two carloads of booze in 1927. By 1928, his club was known as Frolics, and it would clash with the law repeatedly despite its classy aspirations.

A few years later, its biggest problem was not the law, but the marketplace: new nightclubs had opened throughout the first three blocks of Bourbon, employing well over a hundred musicians. Carroll, too, would open a nightclub — but in St. Bernard Parish, away from all the competition on Bourbon Street.

Cazenave remained a Bourbon entrepreneur and advocate until his death in 1948, having lived long enough to see the street become nationally famous during and after World War II.

The curtain would eventually fall on Bourbon Street's "golden age" in the 1960s, when police cracked down on illicit activity and many old-line clubs closed. Tourists began to outnumber locals by wide margins, and the action shifted to drink-carrying pedestrians in the street.

Maxime's original building was demolished in 1966 to make room for a hotel, the present-day Royal Sonesta, and no evidence of the club remains today.

But Count Arnaud's flagship restaurant on Bienville is still going strong, as is the momentum he helped impart to Bourbon Street's nocturnal entertainment scene — starting on that winter night, 90 years ago.

•••••

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of nine books on the history and geography of New Orleans, including "Bourbon Street: A History" (LSU Press, 2014) from which this article was drawn. He may be reached through richcampanella.com, rcamp@tulane.edu or @nolacampanella.