

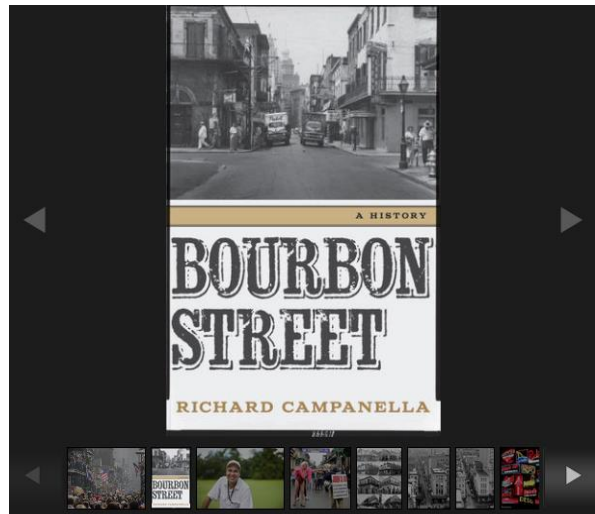
Is Bourbon Street authentic? New Orleans scholar makes case in grand, new history

By Chris Waddington, *NOLA.com* / *The Times-Picayune*

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Visiting Bourbon Street is easy. Millions do it very year. But reading about the famed New Orleans thoroughfare rarely has been rewarding – at least until the appearance of Richard Campanella's "Bourbon Street: A History."

Published in March by Louisiana State University Press, Campanella's vividly told, fact-packed account of the French Quarter entertainment strip couldn't be more topical. It should be required reading for anyone who wants to discuss New Orleans crime, economic development, the value of historic preservation, the business of vice, and the touchy subject of "authenticity" in a city that celebrates its past.



'Bourbon Street: A History' by Richard Campanella (LSU Press, \$35).

Campanella's book is full of surprises, casting scholarly light on everything from death of burlesque to the rise of the daiquiri. Yet the book's biggest surprise, at least for the Tulane University geographer, was that he bothered to write it.

"Like other serious observers of New Orleans, I held Bourbon Street in contempt," Campanella said. "I had succumbed to the elitist delusion that only certain limited groups of people participate in culture in an authentic manner. I thought of Bourbon Street as fake – whatever that means – and that made me an arbiter of reality instead of a good observer."

Campanella, who moved to New Orleans in 2000, focused on other aspects of the city. He wrote a string of prize-winning books, including "Lincoln in New Orleans," "Bienville's Dilemma" and "Geographies of New Orleans." (He also writes a monthly column for *NOLA.com*|*The Times-Picayune*).

Hurricane Katrina changed his view of Bourbon Street.

"In the days and weeks after the storm Bourbon Street sent an important message to the world: Johnny White's was open, the buskers were singing on the sidewalk outside, the heart of New Orleans continued to beat," Campanella said. "Bourbon Street didn't blink during the city's darkest hours: it went back to work. It was the first commercial area to re-open, the first to send

tax dollars to city government – at least in a spotty fashion – and Bourbon Street has never gotten credit for that. It never even sought credit."

So Bourbon Street stirred the geographer's heart – and his curiosity, too. When his research began, he expected to find a subject well trod by other scholars, but discovered that the field was open to him.

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that this is the first, serious, full-length book about Bourbon Street. It's a place that appalls preservationists, reformers and intellectuals -- anyone who gets social rewards by decrying noise and garish commercialism," Campanella said. "On the other hand, Bourbon Street is incredibly influential. It's the most recognized place name in the city – and for better or worse, it has exported a vision of New Orleans culture around the world. It should be the most written about phenomenon in New Orleans – and instead, it's gotten the least attention."

Campanella plunged into his subject, parsing city tax rolls, court documents, title transfers, period photographs, 911 call records, and newspapers – the dusty facts, preserved in the city's rich array of archives and libraries. With those, he built a convincing historical narrative of Bourbon Street's evolution – from the residential and business strip of antebellum New Orleans to the entertainment magnet of today.

Campanella's research also led him to walk the street and hang with the Bourbonites of today. He shot fresh documentary photographs, counted passing pedestrians and interviewed Bourbon Street workers. He traded emails with Chris Owens. He hung out with Earl Bernhardt, the man who invented the Hand Grenade and who parlayed a small, drink-vending franchise at the 1984 World's Fair into a Bourbon Street empire.

"Bourbon Street changed in fits and starts, mostly through the scattered efforts of entrepreneurs, working on their own. There was no one inventor of Bourbon Street, just as today there is no CEO, no brochure, no visitor's center." Campanella said. "In many ways, its comparable to Mardi Gras. Both are spontaneous, bottom-up phenomena, without a central organizational element. And both are derivative of the historic cultural essence of the city: we're a place that celebrates pleasure and turns a blind eye."

The tides of history also changed Bourbon Street, and Campanella's book follows each fluctuation. When the city grew after the Civil War, old residents left the Quarter, and entertainment venues began to appear there, made accessible by a growing network of streetcars. With the closing of the Storyville district, Bourbon Street profited. It stumbled through Prohibition, and built a national reputation as World War II brought sailors, soldiers and defense workers to town.

In the early 1960s, the street changed again when a crackdown on illegal backroom gambling wiped out the fancy nightclubs and burlesque shows that were subsidized by gaming. It hit tawdry hard times in the 1970s, and came back once again, when someone began to sell drinks to

pedestrians, and the crowd scene of today emerged. (Campanella will discuss the origin of the go-cup at the upcoming Tales of the Cocktail festival in New Orleans).

Through all that history, one thing never changed: the disdain of the city's elite for a street where "the party never stops."

"Read the 1914 newspaper headlines about Storyville, and they sound just like the stuff that people say about Bourbon Street now – a disgusting, crime-ridden place that's not a real expression of New Orleans culture," Campanella said. "Today, of course, everyone loves to write about Storyville – there seems to be a new study every week – and it is treated as an authentic expression of the city's freewheeling culture. I suppose Bourbon Street will get the same courtesy in 100 years."

Campanella isn't a natural advocate for the denizens of Bourbon Street. He's a scholarly guy, with a two-year-old son, and he likes to explore the city by bicycle. He commutes by bicycle, too -- a fourteen-mile trek on work days.

"Frankly, I'm not a cocktail and bar type," he said.

But Campanella is passionate about his adopted city, and he is a bit of a contrarian.

When we asked him about the recent shootings on Bourbon Street, for example, he voiced the same outrage that the entire community feels. He spoke with the voice of a worried parent and a concerned citizen, but he also noted that Bourbon Street remains one of the safest places in the city. He bases his argument on simple statistics: millions of visitors pass the site of the crime every year and never experience problems.

"More car accidents happen at busy intersections than on quiet corners, but that doesn't mean they are less safe. It just means that they have more traffic," he said.

Are you ready to argue statistics with the professor?

Are you not so sure about the cultural importance of Bourbon Street?

Do you want to see this cesspool of drunken abandon swept clean to be replaced by a tidy, historical theme park?

Then you're in for a fight with Campanella, who has marshaled his arguments, done the research and turned in one of the most important books ever written about New Orleans.

"Bourbon Street is a totally authentic, only-in-New-Orleans phenomena – and a grand success. That's hard for some people to swallow," Campanella said. "It's the place where a crazy cohort of locals figured a way to package and commodify the city's century-old image of hedonism. You may not want to go there for your leisure, but you do have to respect it."