

A LOOZIANA LOSER

Fock 2: The Big Easy

On Roadrage2000, though, Louisiana's lone lure was New Orleans. And New Orleans' sole attraction was the French Quarter, specifically Bourbon Street.

New Orleans throws some damn wild parties. Bourbon Street is a trip. I've been through that city a few times now, both for "professional purposes" and on ramacks, and that colorful street has never disappointed. In fact, it just keeps getting better, as I work up the nerve to explore it deeper and deeper.

Each time I've been to New Orleans -- or NOLA, as in **N**ew **O**rleans **L**ouisian**A**, which is how the locals seem to refer to it -- by van, I've parked comfortably on North Rampart Street, just a short four-block walk north of Bourbon. It borders Louis Armstrong Park, so there are no apartments, houses or businesses to worry about, and since the park is fenced in and locked up tight after dark, and the street is very well lit, "stray cats" had not been a problem either.

By '98, when I went there for New Year's weekend, I really had it down pat. Here's how to do a four-day weekend in New Orleans when you are on an austerity budget. I found a metered parking spot on North Rampart, and pulled in early on Wednesday afternoon. The meter required feeding at a rate of \$1.25 an hour, and I had about four hours to go till that requirement would end at 6:00 and be done through the holiday and weekend. So, five bucks to park for four days. Not bad.

I never had to move the van either, just kept it in the same spot. I did kill the battery once, watching too much football on TV during my daytime recovery stints. AAA (not AA) came out and attended to that in a jiffy though.

It would be easy to spend a LOT of money on Bourbon Street; self-discipline is key. I strolled to a local store in the French Quarter and bought provisions: ice, Advil (uh-huh), bread, and a case of Foster's Oil Cans. At only \$1.50 per 24-ounce can, they were much cheaper than the bar-bought-beers would be. How frugal!

So, on my first trip down to Bourbon, I procured a 32-ounce Abita Amber, mainly to get the big plastic cup. Oh, I drank the beer! But I needed the cup. With Nawlins' commendable Beer-To-Go approach, anyone can walk in and out of whatever bars (with some snooty exceptions) carrying plastic cups full of beverages that were bought elsewhere. There are even booths jammed into tiny alleys between buildings, from which potent Hurricanes and other concoctions can be purchased at bargain prices. Those booths are a boon when the bars are packed.

So, in and out of place after place I went, catching blues here, rock there, dance music elsewhere, and generally enjoying one of the best people-watching venues in the world. And when the Abita ran low, I took the saunter back to Blue Man, poured an ice-cold Foster's into the big old cup, did the appropriate penalty, and bounced on back to Bourbon. It also served as a good periodic check on the van's well-being; I had a lot of valuable stuff in there, and a van-theft would have sucked quite a bit.

This I would do about four times each night. By then, the walk began to seem a lllllttttle long, and I would start to purchase my bevs at the bar. But, apart from the initial cup expense, and the obligatory cover charges (usually \$5 or less, except on NYE when it was \$10), I always made it well past midnight before having to dip into trip funds. Not that midnight

suggested any kind of border or barrier. I never did get back to Blue Man to sleep before 5:00 or so. It was a real bombardment.

I won't even begin to describe the scene on Bourbon Street at the stroke of '99. If you've been on that street, you know exactly what to picture. If you haven't, then there's nothing I can say that would put you there.

There were far fewer costumed people than there had been in Key West in '94 -- for some reason those whackos down there seemed to combine New Year's and Halloween, which was indeed fun.

But I suppose I should count all those Ohio State alumni who were decked out in full red from head to toe: matching hat, matching jacket, matching sweatpants, matching shoes, matching spouse. Get away, man!!! You're 64 years old! Even the cheerleaders don't dress like that!

Stupid me did not even realize there was to be a football game in town -- the Sugar Bowl: Ohio State vs. Texas A&M -- that weekend. Duh. Real sports fan. The college crowd did make for many lively exchanges in the streets and bars, and many a coed displayed her wares before a multitude of flashbulbs, just for a meretricious string of beads that she could have bought for next to nothing.

If you want to get a feel for Crowd Density at midnight, picture standing in the aisle of a moving bus, then put 400 people on the bus with you. That's probably pretty close. There were those disconcerting moments when the crush was such that your feet were no longer on the ground: the squeeze of the bodies had lifted you up, and was threatening to squirt you out like a watermelon seed. Only one thought crosses your mind when that happens: Stay Vertical!

So, arms pinned at your sides, and legs somewhere unknown, you feel like a buoy being tossed on a choppy sea, just trying to keep the Up end Up. It's an odd balance game that goes on; must be kinda like surfing or snowboarding, at least in the way you have you shift your body and hips to keep from tipping. But if you go horizontal and slip through to the pavement, you ain't gettin' up. You are Trampled, my friend. And that can put a damper on the weekend.

The days were spent calmly, without a whole lot of extra motion. Mostly, they consisted of sleeping till noon in the Belly Of The Whale (my nickname for Blue Man's bedroom, like it?),



making a couple of nice cold samiches, or a salad, drinking much water, taking a short slow walk to Bourbon, sitting on a stoop and writing in the Notbook, sauntering back, watching some football, going for a half-hour run, having another van-made meal, watching some more football, then heading back to Partyville around seven or so. Pretty uneventful days, but I wasn't there for the daytimes, anyway.

Even those times were not without amusement. One 70-year-old lady came by and rubbed my leg while I was writing one afternoon. It was warm enough for shorts, and she gave my right thigh a good caressing as she and her two daughters walked by. They were tanked already on frozen drinks, and she came back to chat for a while. She was from Missouri, and had last been in New Orleans on her honeymoon, in 1952. She said it "had changed."

And the runs were cool: bopping along the boardwalk, watching the boats and the river and the people, then plodding through the park and plaza area by the cathedral where all the psychics and such are, and then through the Quarter and up along Bourbon Street (had to run

faster and look better there, of course). I even got some little comments, like "Nice legs!" from some of the boys on the 800 block. Cheeky devils! Very enjoyable runs, despite the physical discomfort of my internally battered body, and, since I knew I wasn't going to see anybody I knew, it didn't really matter how slow I went.

For a post-run shower, I would dunk a small towel in the cooler – yes, it was cold water, thanks for reminding me – wring it out, and give myself a surface scrub. My hair was fairly short, so a good dunk and dry was good enough to keep the cooties away. Shaving was a true delight also: pour some cold water in a Frisbee, wet my face, wet my razor, and drag the damn thing across my face. Yahhh, nothin' beats that for fun. Stupid thing was that I had a small battery-powered shaver in one of Blue Man's pockets the whole time, but I didn't find it until the final day. Duhh.

Generally, the weather was no bargain, either. Not much over 50 by day, except for one sunny afternoon that was high 60's for about two hours, and around 40 by night. A little rain, and some chilly winds. Not exactly summerish climes, but no complaints. It beat the holy hell out of the single-digit wind chills that the northeast was "enjoying."

A French Quarter stroll in a mid-summer is an enormously different experience. On one July afternoon, I sought some refuge from the Bourbon Street hoopla in those quieter blocks for a while. The blank, unbroken, shuttered-up facades of the homes gave the sweltering streets a gone-out-of-business appearance. It was a tad spooky. Not a soul was outside; it was as if the people were all peeking through their shutters at me. Perhaps even aiming guns my way. (Paranoid? Nahhh!) The mid-afternoon sun bounced its heat from blank pale wall to blank pale wall. It was so damn hot. There were corner bars, some boldly adorned with rainbow banners or flags, but patrons were scarce. It was a lonely walk, and even a tad sad, for some reason. It didn't take long for me to opt back to Bourbon for a cold one.

The ride home from that New Year's Weekend sojourn was planned to be three days, with stops at Atlanta and Baltimore, then Boston for some hoisting with some old cronies before swinging back home to Rochester. But once I got road-borne on Sunday, that changed. When I reached Atlanta, I determined that (a) it was too cold to sleep in the van -- it was sub-freezing that night -- and, (b) I did NOT need another night of partying anyway. So, I pressed on to North Carolina, and took a real cheap motel room for the night. First shower in four days. Ahhhh. Those towel-off rinses do some good, but nothing matches the hot streaming water of a fresh shower.

That Monday was a PR for me, as I mentioned earlier, with 894 miles covered in just under fourteen hours. I was tired. Your perspective really changes too. I reached the George Washington Bridge in New York City, and said to myself: Cool, almost home. Bullshit! I still had about 200 miles, and more than three hours to go!

The most telling fact of the northering ride: in two days, nearly 1600 miles, I did not have a single beer. Not one. And not once did it even cross my mind to get one. Those of you who have ramacked with me before can appreciate the significance of that.

So, when I pulled into New Orleans late on Monday night, July 3, 2000, it was that same North Rampart Street parking spot that I went for. It was taken, as were all the other meters on the street, but I found a spot just around the corner of the park, on a small side street, which, to me, seemed even better.

With Blue Man securely parked, I went walkabout to find some fun and games on that unique street four blocks away. I knew it wouldn't disappoint.

In a two-day visit in the Summer of '98 I learned the feeling of night-into-morning on Bourbon Street. Suffice to say that it was a "life-changing experience" and leave it at that. Some bars stay open 24-hours a day; that pretty much covers it. You can leave at 2:00, do whatever, and go back to the bar at 3:00. Plenty of people are still there, just like it was still midnight. You can leave at 4:00, come back at 5:00. Same deal. It's uplifting. Yeah, that's what it is.

There is a lot to be said – though not all of it good, I suppose -- for coming out of a bar into glaring 90° sunshine at 7:15 on a Monday morning. There is a lot less to be said, however, for trying to go to sleep at 9:00 that same morning, in the back of a van that has been sitting on Canal Street (one of downtown Nawlins' most heavily trafficked thoroughfares) in that same hot sunshine, just collecting solar radiation and passing it through to the oven inside. The nights were sweaty enough on that trip -- most of them I ended up sleeping on towels to protect my bedding. Good thing I was usually tipsy, or I might have never gotten any sleep.

Well, this particular Monday morning, sleep was just not gonna happen. And I really needed some. It had to be over 100° in there. I gave up on the Belly, and climbed into the front seat. Driving was out of the question. I locked my doors, fired up Blue Man's engine -- I even gave it the old Batman line: "Thrusters to power. Turbines to speed" -- cranked the AC straight to "Max", reclined my driver's seat, and plopped back into a shirtless, sloppy, sweaty mess, my arms flopped limply at my side. Anyone walking by would have thought I was just plain dead: a hit-and-run shooting victim, left to rot with his engine running.

Legally, I would've been flayed for operating a vehicle under the influence, but I suspect that, even in New Orleans, the police aren't on the alert for sleeping, parked, half-naked, drunk drivers on the busiest street in the city on a Monday morning.

I got about an hour-and-a-half, I figure, just enough to rally me to a shady park north of the city along Lake Pontchartrain, for some real snoozin' under a big old tree. I drank at least two gallons of water that day, and still felt dehydrated. Didn't have a beer until midnight either.

New Orleans had the requisite weirdoes -- I mean, besides me. There was an eight-foot tall black guy with gimpy knees, and a three-foot tall white guy with coke-bottle glasses. There were painted people playing living statues, and women flashing their breasts from balconies just to get a few pennies worth of plastic beads. You know: the usual unusuals.

And there were tap dancers up the ying-yang! When did this bullshit start? That apparently had become the new street-beggar modus operandi. Kids in the age range from about eight to about fifteen -- all the ones I saw were black, but I don't know if there were racial delineations to this or not -- usually in pairs or maybe threes, with a shoebox in front of them for "donations", and wearing sneakers or basketball shoes (with God-knows-what jammed in the sole for the tapper), would take turns tapping away as people with money sauntered by. But they were never in the highest population spots on Bourbon Street: I think the local gendarmes kept them out from underfoot and relegated them to the darker and less affluent spots. I don't remember seeing money in anybody's box, but that was probably because they SUCKED!!! It looked bogus anyway, with the sneakers and all, but not one of them could do anything clever or impressive with his feet.

There was one kid who did catch my eye, though. He did his tap dancing with a full-sized bicycle wheel spinning gyroscope-style on top of his head. He was a very bad dancer, but you tended to not notice as much. He had a little money in his box, but none of it was mine.

I will drop cash in a "street entertainer's" coffer from time to time, but s/he has to do something to impress me, either talent-wise, or creativity-wise, or comedy-wise. Tap-dancing

with a wheel on your head almost counted, but I didn't want to encourage him to continue with such behavior.

Speaking of beggars, anyone who has spent more than a few minutes on Bourbon Street knows the street scammers. You know: the old "Give me three dollars and I'll tell you where you got your shoes..." line. Well, I had one of them try to start that with me while I was sitting on the curb with Skott, and I just told him to get lost, that I didn't want to deal with his scurvy ilk. He actually took umbrage at my umbrage, introduced himself (he didn't look like a Tony though), and proceeded to sit down and try to rationalize why he and his kind were not scummy pieces of pigeon dung.

I would like to report that he succeeded, but in fact he failed miserably. It was kind of comical, in a sad way. Then, in the middle of justifying his "profession", and trying to show that he was not a scoundrel, he tried to wheedle in a little scam on me. I reviled him for his skullduggery, and shooed him away forthwith.

One outdoor, volunteer, public entertainer did get some loot from me though: ten bucks! It was just after sunset, and I strolled away from the rising clamor of Bourbon Street to take a break and clear my sodden brain a little bit. Checking out the Mississippi River seemed to be in order.

Quite a number of people were out there, just digging the brown river and the humidity. Placed nowhere in particular among them was a black man in his mid-fifties or so, playing a soulful saxophone, his dark form almost a silhouette against the sinking heavy air. I plunked my unsteady self down on the grassy knoll (no, not that one!) close by, and lay back to soak in his Louisiana summer vibes. The water walked by, as it has for millennia, and life just kinda went away for a while. Rivers and fires have that effect on you. Especially with tunes to accompany them.

He finished his melody, and silence resumed. In a concert hall, applause would have been appropriate, but out here, the silence just fit. After a few seconds, deep and quiet words spilled out of my brain: "that ... was ... great."

The man thanked me, and asked what I wanted to hear. "Anything soothing," I replied, without shifting a muscle.

He nodded, licked his mouthpiece, and set about blowing many long, low, numbing notes.

When he finished, it was dark. I didn't fall asleep, but I just kinda lay like dead weight on the bank. Not a fiber was active, not a ripple of tension remained, my heart was barely beating. My critique was eloquent: "Mmmmmmmmmmm."

He chuckled. I talked with him for a few minutes -- I forget his name (I wrote it down, but it's gone) -- and told him he should be on stage, making money with his talent. He used to, he said, for thirty years, but his wife made him give it up completely for more than seven years, until just about two weeks ago.

"What did you do to change her mind?" I asked.

Great laugh: "I gave HER up!"

His tip hat had a few bucks in it. I dropped in a ten, and wished him the best. I know I'll never see him again, but he did me right, God bless him. Best sawbuck I spent the whole trip.

The strangest thing that happened on that '98 visit reinforces the spooky voodoo spirit that pervades the bayou territory. There's a big gap between what you believe and what you disbelieve. I don't think those two things border on each other, like you get to the fifty-yard-line and now you've stepped from Belief to Disbelief. To me, it's more like a bell curve: there's some stuff you definitely are convinced is true, and there's a pile of shit at the other extreme

that you say "no fugging way" about. In the middle is anything that you're really not sure of: stuff you don't really buy, but enough people out there seem to, that you think, well, maybe: UFO's, psychic phenomena, ghosts, Bermuda Triangle, witchcraft, ouija boards, God -- you know, that kind of stuff. To me, that constitutes the bulk of the universe. I really don't think our puny human minds can comprehend everything that's whirling around us.

So, *anyway*, I'm walking through this big plaza where the cathedral is, between the French Quarter and the river late one afternoon. The plaza was fairly crowded with tourists and tourist-gougers alike. There was an escape artist wrapped in chains, odd drummers, and tables set up at intervals with fortune



tellers, tarot cardists, palm readers, and psychics. I strolled along, half-assedly looking at this or that, when I noticed this "psychic" woman sitting across her small table from a middle-aged white woman. The psychic looked like Oda Mae Brown from the movie *Ghost*. I scoffed, watching the two of them. "Oh, yeah," I thought to myself, "this woman's psychic."

At the exact instant that sentence finished in my head, she absolutely shot a glare at me. I mean, blasted a bitter look right through my eyes. I took a little step back, and my next reaction was to laugh a little and think, "OK, maybe she is." She smirked, and resumed her conference. And I went off to get another 32-ounce Abita Amber from my favorite booze booth.