

Is New Orleans Dead? (Continued)

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The Naughty Nightclub

At The My-O-My, The 'Girls' Are Boys, And The Little Old Ladies From Iowa Just Love It



Photo by D. Eric Bookhardt

Charro Lane, one of the star attractions at the Club My-O-My. She's a boy.

The Club My-O-My: Where The Little Old Lady From Dubuque Meets Those Naughty 'Girls' Who Are Boys

By Wentworth Brewster

One of New Orleans' hottest nightspots is also, curiously, one that most New Orleanians never visit.

Little old ladies from Dubuque, on a septuagenarian spree with fellow members of their Po-Ko-Ke-No Club, or a recently retired Thom McAn shoe salesman and the little woman finally taking that extended trip they'd always planned, or maybe just a Midwestern farm couple, direct descendants of Grant Wood's American Gothic archetypes, taking a summer tour—all of these people will go back home talking about a place most native Orleanians seldom even hear about anymore.

Located unobtrusively on the corner of Burgundy and Conti, Club My-O-My is a mainstay on the tour bus circuit, but such was not always the case.

When the club first opened in 1946, most of its patrons were people who ventured out to Jefferson Parish, lured by the gambling and the good times. It was located on the West End, part of what natives call Bucktown. In fact, Club My-O-My had been housed in four different locations, all on the lakefront, prior to its current relocation in the French Quarter.

In the early '60s, the local trade tapered off and the Club began to depend more and more on tourists to support its particular (and at that time, exclusive) brand of entertainment. (The Club was also plagued by fires and by the periodic hurricanes that deal harshly with the West End area.) For the past 12 years, the club has been a popular spot on the Dixieland Tours bus circuit.

So it was, with a photographer in tow, that I went to check on the current state of what surely qualifies as a New Orleans institution.

We were greeted by Bunny Bates, Club My-O-My's most durable personality. Bunny has been with the My-O-My since 1949, two years after the founding of the first West End club and is the putative spokesperson for the current troupe.

Bunny took us backstage to meet the "girls" and to give us an opportunity to chat with him before the first show of the evening. The place was a buzzing, susurrating hive of cosmetic activity, as they all made themselves fine, busily working at the transformation into their stage personae.

Our presence was duly acknowledged ("FIGARO? What's that? A transvestite publication?") as the performers continued their metamorphoses into glittering butterflies (Ovid would have been done proud). Bunny, a diminutive, easy-going fellow, began applying his make-up for the evening. "You know," he told us, "in this business, after you're thirty-five, you're done—unless you go into comedy. That's how I survived. Comedy."

When I inquired as to whether there were any transsexuals in the show, he looked at me patiently



Chris Collins, a My-O-My newcomer.

Photo by D. Eric Bookhardt



Bunny Bates, a female impersonator at the My-O-My since 1949.

Photo by D. Eric Bookhardt

and said quietly, "Why be a female impersonator if you're a woman?" He had me there.

After this somewhat rhetorical riposte, he assured me, however, that the My-O-My was in the business of presenting female impersonators, and anyone who was not a genital male, or who ceased to be a genital male at some point in the time-space continuum, could not tread the boards of the stage at the Club My-O-My.

A query about his ever considering the notion of a sex-change operation brought a somewhat sheepish reply: "Then I won't have anything to play with, would I?" A few of the other performers said, Yes, they had considered the operation, but the majority said they were uninterested in going the Jan Morris route.

Why does someone become a female impersonator? "It beats the hell out of driving a truck!" was one retort. Another maintained that he used to go in drag and had been so realistic that he received encouragement to go into the business. No pop psychology or cut-rate Freudian explanations were offered.

Bunny had been a waiter in a supper club when one fateful night he was called upon to substitute for an ailing performer. Another statuesque impersonator named Charro Lane claimed the artistry of another impersonator had been the precipitating factor. Again, no one seemed interested in trotting out standard psychiatric anecdotes



Randy St. Ray, making himself into a woman in the My-O-My dressing room.

Photo by D. Eric Bookhardt

and solutions.

As we were ushered out of the dressing room to await the show, tourists were beginning to file into

the club. Almost all of the clientele appear to be middle-aged, conservatively dressed couples. Practically all of the club's business depends

on the tourist trade: the night I attended, the Dixieland buses were lined up outside. Female impersonation, it seems, for those of us not

brought up in the Mardi Gras atmosphere of New Orleans (or the carnival-like range and squalor of most large urban areas), can be pretty hot stuff. You don't see this sort of goings-on every day back home in Kokomo.

Most of the patrons seem to enjoy the show—an enjoyment immeasurably increased by the feeling of doing something slightly naughty and vaguely perverse—but on a non-participatory level.

Most of the seven individual acts harked back to those halcyon days when instead of topless-bottomless go-go dancers of all five sexes, Bourbon Street strip joints featured rather more recondite fare—exotic dancers, fan dancer, bubble dancers, women whose brief alluring costumes were removed by the beaks of parrots in one act. Strippers usually had a thematic gimmick to their act (Patti White—Schoolteacher Turned Stripper) or a classy allusion-illusion to Classical Antiquity (Galatea, The Statue That Comes To Life).

Most of the My-O-My's acts retain an odor of camphor, a slightly mothballed variation of the

modes of the old school of bump and grind. One dancer, Tanya (declaring herself “from Barcelona, land of the Pharoahs”) does a remarkable belly dance, all curves and angles in motion, an exhibition of solid geometry that Salome might well envy—or if not Salome, at least Yvonne DeCarlo.

Even more astounding was Bunny's assertion that Tanya had introduced and perfected this variation of an Eastern houri's dance-of-the-seven-veils within the last two months.

Randy St. Ray, Chriss Collins and emcee Laurie Lane performed respectable renditions of burlesque routines of the Star-and-Garter variety, but Lee Meadow's impersonation of Liza Minnelli doing a “Cabaret” medley seemed to strike the most responsive chord in the audience.

In fact, most big name female impersonators (T.C. Jones, Jim Bailey, Charles Pierce) attained notoriety because they combined their impersonations with parodies of famous women stars (impressions of well-known public figures seem well-nigh irresistible even to

the crankiest members of an audience).

But I couldn't help being struck by the irony of this particular routine, Mr. Meadows as Liza in her tux—here was a man dressed as a woman dressed as a man (whew!). It does begin to get Byzantine.

Bunny Bates' act consisted mainly of a parody of Patti Paige singing “Go On With The Wedding,” which he lip-synched (there is no live-music, all acts—unlike the Messrs. Jones or Bailey—are performed to pre-recorded material). The humor is basic and the audience appears to like it that

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way—e.g., emcee Laurie Lane introduces Bunny not as the face that launched a thousand ships but as the face that sunk them all.

After the curtains closed, the patrons immediately departed, as decorously as school children on a fire drill. Most seemed to have had a good time. I spot-checked the crowd for famous faces—Bunny had told me celebrities often stop by: “Fannie Flagg is forever coming here, and Marty Allen was here just a few weeks ago.” Bunny came to our table after the show, wanting to know if we had any further questions. With his bridal regalia off but makeup intact, he vaguely resembled Joel Grey's emcee in “Cabaret.”

While it is difficult to conceive visiting the My-O-My as an habitue, of viewing the place as a regular watering-hole, perhaps local citizens and denizens who had forgotten this old (well, not all that old) New Orleans tradition might jostle with that increasingly visible and far from endangered species, the tourist, for a view of the singular New Orleans that visitors take home with them.

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