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“Respectably Dull”: Striptease, Tourism and Reform in Postwar New Orleans

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“Respectably Dull”: Striptease, Tourism and Reform in Postwar New Orleans

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History
Public History Concentration

by

Lauren Elizabeth Milner

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Abstract

The French Quarter of New Orleans and its famous Bourbon Street receive millions of visitors each year and are the subjects of both scholarly study and the popular imagination. Bourbon Street's history of striptease has largely been untouched by scholars. In the post-World War II period, nightclubs featuring striptease entertainment drew the attention of reform-minded city and police officials, who attempted to purge striptease from the city's historic district in an effort to whitewash the city's main tourist area and appeal to potential outside economic industrial opportunities. Through news articles, correspondence, tourism brochures, and published reports, this thesis explores how striptease endured on Bourbon Street despite various reform campaigns against it and shows that striptease was an integral part of the New Orleans tourist economy in the postwar period.

New Orleans, Striptease, Burlesque, Bourbon Street, Nightclub, French Quarter, Reform, Post-World War II

In March 1948, burlesque dancer Stormy and her band drove a pickup truck to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. There, she staged a striptease in the bed of the truck with the musicians playing a tune behind her, the sides of the truck advertising her act in New Orleans. This performance incited a mob of students, led by a group of football players.irate at Stormy’s striptease, the crowd tore off the truck’s signs, beat up the band members, smashed the truck and instruments while football players tossed Stormy and her manager into a lake. Bruised and battered, with four loose teeth and having lost her clothes and jewelry, Stormy was hotly pursued by the angry student body before the police intervened. The university’s president, Dr. Harold W. Stoke, later defended the students’ actions in an editorial, declaring “I cannot honestly condemn you for this indignation at this insult to your University.”¹

Dr. Stoke and Baton Rouge’s leaders had reason to sympathize with the action of the LSU student body. They wanted Baton Rouge to have no part in New Orleans’ reputation for sin and vice any more than did many of New Orleans’ own policymakers. They viewed striptease and its French Quarter nightclubs as proof that New Orleans was home to vice. Some New Orleans policymakers believed that where burlesque striptease was performed, sure to follow were organized crime, b-drinking, illegal gambling, homosexuality and other perceived social issues that might block their goal of reform and economic development. New Orleans policymakers saw the country’s post-World War II boom as a chance to shed its reputation for sin and hedonism in favor of the new industrial opportunities realized by other similarly sized Southern cities, like Houston and Atlanta.

Although popular history has often linked stripping and New Orleans, little scholarship can be found on striptease in the city. No study exists solely on the subject of New Orleans

¹ Charles Hargroder, “‘Stormy’ Says Ardor Dampened After Dunking by LSU Students,” *Baton Rouge Advocate*, March 5, 1948;” Students Defended On ‘Stormy’ Stand,” *Advocate*, March 10, 1948.

striptease and those scholars who do mention the topic use it anecdotally. Robert C. Allen made no mention of New Orleans in his 1991 seminal study *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, which focuses on the birth of burlesque in New York. In *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* (2004), Rachel Shteir devotes a few pages to the involvement of New Orleans in burlesque striptease. In her study, which could be seen as a sequel to Allen's work, Shteir focuses on burlesque after the turn of the 20th century as it evolved into striptease variety shows. According to Shteir, striptease in New Orleans evolved into a popular entertainment differently than in other cities due to the city's long history as a "pleasure town" where a pre-established abundance of "hookers, nightspots, and dance halls" paved the way for striptease to become a part of the nightlife.²

In *Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920* (2004), Alecia P. Long carefully traces the origins of New Orleans' commercialized culture of sexuality, dealing primarily with the creation of the prostitution district known as Storyville in the early 20th century. Long points out that as the city developed a reputation for sexual permissiveness and good times for visitors, some of the city's policymakers encouraged this reputation and used it for profit. According to Long, while many reformers and groups like the Traveler's Aid Society advocated the closing of Storyville, others, including Mayor Martin Behrman, worried that the closure of the prostitution district would mean an end to the city's tourism allure.³

² Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: Untold History of the Girlie Show* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 253.

³ Alecia P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 226-7.

Anthony Stanonis in his 2006 study, *Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1918-1945*, focuses on the impact of social factors and image on tourism in New Orleans. Stanonis refers to the tourism of the interwar period as mass tourism, which catered to the middle and lower classes and to both genders. This study uses the same definition when referring to tourism of the post-WWII era. According to Stanonis, the rise of sky scrapers and the business district in the city increased the allure for the historic buildings of the French Quarter and that “New Orleanians capitalized on such nostalgia by reinventing the urban past, developing mass tourism, and converting negative associations involving . . . vice into positive attributes that stirred out-of-towners’ curiosity about the mysterious city.”⁴ This increased attention to the tourism industry in 1930s New Orleans was due, in part, to the damaging effects of the Depression on local commercial and industrial ventures. As the Depression wore on, tourism boosters sought to capitalize on the citizenry’s desire to escape hard times at home by highlighting the city’s “romantic, leisurely past.”⁵

This study, primarily researched using local newspapers, letters, and published investigative reports, will pick up where Long and Stanonis leave off and will attempt to fill the gap in scholarship on striptease in New Orleans. While Long’s study focused mainly on prostitution and Stanonis’s work delved into the city’s modern tourism as a whole, their works provide the background to the success of post-World War II striptease on Bourbon Street and the attempts of reform-minded policymakers to curb the practice during this period. This work will argue that after World War II, despite attempts by New Orleans policymakers and law enforcement officials to ban striptease on Bourbon Street in a strategy to clean up the city’s

⁴ Anthony Stanonis, *Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1918-1945* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 22-23.

⁵ Ibid, 31.

image, striptease remained a popular part of the French Quarter's tourism economy well into the 1960s. As with other cities, while issues of morality and decency factored into attempts by New Orleans to rid itself of striptease, these issues were mitigated by striptease's link to tourism, and therefore to economic issues. While reformers wanted to rid the city of what they deemed to be lewd and obscene, many locals, particularly those who were involved in the city's tourism, knew the entertainment found on Bourbon Street to be a drawing power for the city's visitors. However, the city's policymakers pinpointed striptease, in addition to New Orleans' other vice issues, as a tangible offense that reinforced a negative view of the city. Policymakers wanted to purge striptease from Bourbon Street, therefore presenting a more wholesome and positive tourist environment to visitors, in order to bring New Orleans into competition with other Southern cities for the attraction of industry.

Policymakers claimed that the city was being hurt economically when investors, conventiongoers, or vacationers came into contact with any of the supposed undesirable elements of the French Quarter, such as obscenity and homosexuality, nightclub owners who hosted illegal gambling, and prostitution. Others claimed that the city benefitted economically from the French Quarter, and that in the decades since World War II, the Quarter had become largely the domain of tourists and businesspeople who had come to Bourbon Street specifically to participate in this entertainment economy. The income from tourism supported this claim. In 1953, city planners estimated that the French Quarter made \$36 million dollars per year from tourism.⁶ Reform-minded officials and policymakers often overlooked the drawing power of Bourbon Street striptease for tourists. Many New Orleans visitor guides featured information on popular nightclubs, and a 1948 advertisement in the city's newspaper, *The Times-Picayune*, proclaimed

⁶ "Sanitary Order Issued Against French Quarter," Baton Rouge *State Times*, February 5, 1953.

that “New Orleans is famous for the Sho-Bar,” a local nightclub, while another advertisement in the adjoining column promised that “you haven’t seen [New Orleans] till you’ve seen Prima’s “500” Club.”⁷

In effect, through reform, some of the city’s policymakers were attempting to shape the visitors’ experience of the Vieux Carré by attempting to rid Bourbon Street of striptease. Eventually, however, it was not the reform movements of the postwar era that killed off burlesque in the Bourbon Street nightclubs of New Orleans but rather the emergence of the sexual revolution and feminism in the 1960s. Striptease was quickly replaced with simply stripping, and burlesque-style striptease disappeared until the neo-burlesque revivals of the late 1990s.

Nightclubs and Striptease in New Orleans

Where 19th century saloons and concert halls once stood, nightclubs, like the Casino Royale, had opened at the end of the Depression to provide late night entertainment and dancing.⁸ As the twentieth century iteration of burlesque, these striptease performances were usually interspersed with comedy routines and variety acts. While these types of performances died out or were banned in many parts of the country, like in Boston and New York, New Orleans continued to employ these burlesque elements well into the 1950s.⁹ The terms

⁷ Advertisements, *The Times-Picayune*, January 6, 1948.

⁸ “New Night Club Opens Doors in French Quarter,” *The Times-Picayune*, November 30, 1940.

⁹ Andrea Friedman, “The Habitats of Sex-Crazed Perverts”: Campaigns against Burlesque in Depression-Era New York City,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7, no. 2 (October 1996), 235-6 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3704140?origin=JSTOR-pdf> (accessed April 24, 2012); Shteir, 147; *New Orleans Guide For Visitors* (New Orleans, October 1959), Anthony J. Stanonis Collection 22, Special Collections and Archives, Loyola University Library, New Orleans, La. *The New Orleans Guide For Visitors* lists an acrobat, magician, exotic dancers, and live music as part of the Sho-Bar’s “continuous entertainment.” Blaze Starr was the headliner.

“burlesque” and “striptease” were often used interchangeably after World War II, such as in newspaper advertisements, as burlesque theaters closed and these shows moved into nightclubs, and this study uses these terms as such. The Casino Royale, opened in November 1940, featured a variety floorshow similar to those of the Depression. Though the club’s opening announcement in *The Times-Picayune* does not refer specifically to stripteasers, the club would feature them prominently, particularly after the war.¹⁰ World War II served to bring the economy of New Orleans out of the Great Depression. The war industry brought manufacturing jobs to the city, including the Higgins Industry that produced more boats, landing craft and other vessels than any other manufacturer for the war effort.¹¹ A major naval base, an Army Aviation base on the city’s lakefront, and a Coast Guard station brought in large numbers of servicemen and women on their way to or from the various fronts.¹² This large influx of outsiders and a local population newly flush with money necessitated the need for entertainment. Soon in high demand, bars and nightclubs opened all over the city but, most importantly, on the French Quarter’s Bourbon Street.

In October 1940, *Variety* reported that the French Quarter was slowly coming back to life from the Depression, and by 1943 *Variety* proclaimed New Orleans to be the “Paris of the New World,” because of the war boom.¹³ While the 1943 article noted the loss of serious tourist dollars due to the cancellation of Mardi Gras, it also mentioned that nightspots, including those

¹⁰ “New Night Club Opens Doors in French Quarter.” The floorshow, shown twice a night on weekdays and thrice on Saturdays, featured a “specialist in magic,” a tap dancer, Joe and Jane McKenna billed as “eccentric dancers,” Red Hendricks, and Marie Wells, a vocalist.

¹¹ Michael Edwards, “Higgins’ Little Boats,” *America In World War II* (June 2009).

¹² Ted R. Liuzza, “New Orleans’ War-Boom Harvest Makes City ‘Paris of New World,’” *Variety*, April 21, 1943.

¹³ Ted R. Liuzza, “N.O. French Quarter Coming Back To Life,” *Variety*, October 16, 1940.

described as “hole-in-the-wall niteries with strippers,” were raking in the money brought on by war industry.¹⁴

After the war, nightlife entertainment rapidly continued to expand on Bourbon Street. *Billboard* reported a “strip splurge” where the local clubs competed against each other for the most popular striptease dancers by “buying peelers for anywhere from \$300 to \$700 for two-week dates.”¹⁵ In the postwar years, many striptease nightclubs popped up on Bourbon Street, though some were more popular than others. The better-known clubs, in addition to Casino Royale, included the 500 Club, Sho-Bar, Gunga Den, and Moulin Rouge.¹⁶ Some nightclubs, like the Sho-Bar and Casino Royale, catered heavily to tourists by featuring advertisements in tourist brochures and featuring famous dancers like Sally Rand and Tempest Storm.¹⁷

Augmenting the price of admission for the club owners was the practice of b-drinking, in which women hired by the club owners would entice male customers to buy drinks and bottles of alcohol at highly inflated prices. Often the waiters would stop bringing change back to the customer and, in this era before credit cards, once the customer had run out of money and was sufficiently inebriated, the club’s employees tossed them into the street.¹⁸ Sometimes, b-drinking

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Strip Splurge In New Orleans,” *Billboard*, November 8, 1947. The article also notes that the striptease shows are still in the old format of having other performers between strip acts.

¹⁶ *Visitor’s Guide* (1952), Anthony J. Stanonis Collection 22, Special Collections and Archives, Loyola University Library, New Orleans, La. The author’s estimation of nightclub popularity is based on advertising presence in local papers and tourist literature, popularity of strippers working for the club (i.e. nationally recognized names like Blaze Starr), and the amount of attention received during cleanup campaigns. See the map of these popular clubs in the Appendix.

¹⁷ Robert Kinney, *The Bachelor in New Orleans: A Handbook for Unattached Gentlemen and Ladies of Spirit Visiting or Resident in the Paris of America* (New Orleans: Bormon House, 1946), 98, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans La.

¹⁸ James Savage, *Jim Garrison’s Bourbon Street Brawl: The Making of a First Amendment Milestone* (Lafayette, La.: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2010), 12.

also included drugging the helpless customer with a sedative, called “slipping a mickey.”¹⁹ The women involved in this practice were known as b-girls and were usually the club’s lesser known dancers, barmaids, or even women hired by the club manager specifically for the purpose of b-drinking.²⁰ The presence of b-drinking in heavily tourist-populated areas caused bad publicity in the city and occasionally brought burlesque dancers into the unwelcome view of the law.

The local papers provided the easiest access to publicity for nightclubs. *The Times-Picayune* and the *New Orleans Item* featured daily advertisements for the clubs in the entertainment sections, next to movie advertisements and the latest Hollywood gossip.²¹ To reach more local customers and tourists, large signs and marquees posted on the clubs featured bright lights and the current entertainment offerings. Many times, the sign images and subject matter would attract the ire of the city’s Vieux Carré Commission, the French Quarter’s preservation society, that considered the posters obscene.²²

Bourbon Street nightclubs would contract big name burlesque dancers for periods ranging from a few weeks to a few months. Shortly after opening in 1948, the Sho-Bar hired Sally Rand, a famous fan dancer who had become a star during the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair.²³

¹⁹ “Coroner Testifies Dunn Died From Knock-Out Drops.” *Advocate*, October 28, 1950.

²⁰ Aaron M. Kohn, *Report of the Special Citizens Investigating Committee of the Commission Council of New Orleans: The New Orleans Police Department*, vol. 5 (New Orleans: 1954), 213, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, La.; Scott S. Ellis, *Madame Vieux Carré: The French Quarter in the Twentieth Century* (Jackson, Ms.: University Press of Mississippi, 2010): 139-140. Ellis also notes that many in the police department and policymakers assumed b-girls to be prostitutes but points out that the object of b-drinking was to keep the men at the bar drinking and spending their money for as long as possible.

²¹ “Cupcake,” *The Times-Picayune*, November 11, 1953; “Visitor’s Guide,” *New Orleans Item*, September 1, 1953; “Stormy’s Casino Royale,” *The Times-Picayune*, December 15, 1949.

²² “Night Club Signs Ordered Removed,” *The Times-Picayune*, December 16, 1948. Note that “Vieux Carré” is the French term for the French Quarter, meaning “Old Square.”

²³ Shteir, *Striptease*, 148; “Dancer Appears In New Orleans Show.” *The Times-Picayune*, November 16, 1948.

Other famous dancers followed, including Lili St. Cyr, Tempest Storm, most known for insuring her breasts for one million dollars, and Blaze Starr, infamous in Louisiana for her affair with Governor Earl Long.²⁴ Other prominent dancers on Bourbon Street included Evangeline The Oyster Girl, Lilly Christine The Cat Girl, Alouette LeBlanc the Tassel Twirler, Linda Brigitte, and Stormy.

The dancers also promoted themselves in various ways. One popular publicity tactic involved getting arrested and thereby getting the incident in the paper, or to at least cause such a ruckus that some sort of police intervention precipitated publicity. Inciting a violent riot may not have been Stormy's intent in her trip to Louisiana State University but the resultant front page article proved the adage "there's no such thing as bad press" when, after the LSU incident, the Casino Royale was renamed Stormy's Casino Royale.

Evangeline The Oyster Girl, whose real name was Kitty West, also benefitted from similar mayhem. In her popular act at Stormy's Casino Royale, Evangeline, with dyed green hair, rose out of a giant papier-mâché oyster shell and danced with a large pearl.²⁵ In 1949, the Casino Royale booked for a limited engagement Divena The Aqua Tease, a traveling dancer who performed her act in a giant tank of water. The club gave Divena top billing over the other performers, including Evangeline. One night during Divena's underwater performance, Evangeline ran to the stage and smashed Divena's tank open with an axe. Conveniently, a photographer for *LIFE* magazine was present to document the chaos and Evangeline's resultant

²⁴ Sim Myers, "Just Jottings." *Times-Picayune*, June 15, 1959; "The Gaiety," *The Times-Picayune*, January 23, 1958; Shteir, 278; "Lewd Dance Charged In Bourbon St. Arrest," *The Times-Picayune*, April 11, 1959; Blaze Starr and Huey Perry, *Blaze Starr: My Life as Told to Huey Perry* (New York: Pocket Books, 1974), 112-117.

²⁵ "Opening Tonight At Stormy's Casino Royale," *The Times-Picayune*, December 3, 1948; Rick Delaup, "Evangeline The Oyster Girl." *Eccentric New Orleans*, <http://www.eccentricneworleans.com/evangeline.htm> (accessed February 10, 2012).

arrest.²⁶ In later years, Evangeline related different stories of her motivations for interrupting Divena's act. In the 2010 documentary *Behind the Burly Q*, Evangeline told interviewers she was so incensed over the Casino Royale's manager giving Divena the higher billing that she rushed to the water tank, "got out the fire axe and busted it into a million pieces."²⁷ In another interview for a 1999 television special *The French Quarter That Was*, Evangeline claimed that the incident had been the idea of the club management and the fire axe had been placed next to the stage for the purpose.²⁸ Despite the violence, or perhaps because of it, Evangeline The Oyster Girl remained a popular act on Bourbon Street. In *Behind the Burly Q*, fellow dancer Dixie Evans remembers, "Kitty West came out of the big oyster shell on Bourbon Street for years. I mean tourists used to flock there. They weren't going to leave New Orleans until they saw Kitty come out of that oyster shell."²⁹

Cleaning Up Bourbon Street

During the tail end of WWII and the immediate postwar era, the State of Louisiana had attempted cleanup efforts of nightclubs through alcohol regulation. In 1945 the United States Brewers' Foundation, a trade organization formed to spin a positive public perception of beer drinking, had attempted clean up by barring beer sales to four nightclubs on Bourbon Street,

²⁶ "Stormy's Casino Royale," *The Times-Picayune*, October 12, 1949; Howard Jacobs, "Owner of Club Provides Souvenirs for Stealing," *The Times-Picayune*, January 11, 1970; Howard Jacobs, "'Take Issue Wissue' [sic] Challenges 'Quotes,'" *The Times-Picayune*, September 6, 1973; Howard Jacobs, "Check Cashing Given a Whorl," *The Times-Picayune*, February 20, 1976; Rick Delaup, "Evangeline The Oyster Girl," Meghan Keneally, "The Beauty of Burlesque: Classic LIFE Photographs Capture Glamour of Risque Art During Its Pre-War Heyday," *Daily Mail* (London), December 13, 2011, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2073213/Putting-Classic-burlesque-pictures-glamour-art-getting-undressed.html> (accessed April 30, 2012).

²⁷ *Behind the Burly Q*, DVD, Leslie Zemeckis (New York: First Run Features, 2010).

²⁸ *The French Quarter That Was*. WYES-TV, David M. Jones and Peggy Scott Laborde. 1999.

²⁹ *Behind the Burly Q*.

including the Moulin Rouge and the Puppy House (later the Sho-Bar), for their part in the “b-girl racket.”³⁰ The nightclubs were reinstated to the foundation less than a month later but b-drinking continued.

In addition to b-drinking, clubs were accused by city and state officials of refilling empty liquor bottles with cheaper or inferior liquor, usually reported as being an issue with whiskey. Nightclubs and bars guilty of the practice could receive a \$1,000 fine, suspension of liquor licenses and possible prison time for the owners.³¹ In 1949, in an effort to catch these violators and protect easily duped tourists in town for the New Year’s Day Sugar Bowl, New Orleans Police Superintendent A. A. Watters joined with the state’s Board of Alcoholic Beverage Control and the district supervisor of the alcohol tax unit for the Bureau of Internal Revenue to instigate a cleanup effort.³²

Perhaps the authorities erred by announcing their intentions and the date that the inspections would occur, for a week later, the team only managed to charge one nightclub, Club D’Artistes, for selling whiskey from a bottle whose proof didn’t match the liquor. The owners of another club on Bourbon Street, Sloppy Joe’s, refused to turn over two bottles of whiskey for inspection to police officers.³³ When the owners, Olga and Joseph Segretto, refused to turn over the bottles of liquor they were charged with “allowing ‘lewd and immoral entertainment’ in [Sloppy Joe’s],” and the Louisiana alcohol control board revoked their liquor license for 15 days.

³⁰ Jay R. Brooks, “In This Friendly, Freedom-Loving Land Of Ours – Beer Belongs...Enjoy It!” *All About Beer Magazine*, November 2009, <http://allaboutbeer.com/learn-beer/history/2009/11/in-this-friendly-freedom-loving-land-of-ours—beer-belongs...enjoy-it/> (accessed May 1, 2012); “Foundation Drops Four Night Clubs,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 10, 1945; “23 Night Clubs In State Cut Off From Beer Supply,” *Advocate*, March 1, 1945. Of the 23 nightclubs banned from the association in the state, 17 were in New Orleans.

³¹ “Re-Use of Liquor Bottles Charged,” *The Times-Picayune*, December 30, 1948.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ “Police Back Liquor Demand With Threat, Saloonist Says,” *The Times-Picayune*, January 7, 1949.

Evelyn West, the dancer of the evening whose entertainment was called into question, had performed her show “Esky, the G-String Thief.” When the alcohol control board heard evidence on this dance, it had the hearing room cleared of all women, including the owner, Olga Segretto.³⁴ When the Segrettos objected to the gratuitous charge of lewd dancing Superintendent Watters seemed to agree with the Segrettos and offered to file charges against the officers. However, in a later meeting with a group of bar and nightclub owners to lay out the police department’s new measures to be enforced, Watters reaffirmed zero tolerance of “nude and seminude and suggestive exterior signs,” and “floor show acts, described by official observers as lewd and lascivious.”³⁵ There was not universal confidence he could obtain his desired results, however. Later at a press conference in which Watters reported on his meeting with the nightclub owners, he announced that the business operators had reached an agreement to cooperate with the police. The audience laughed.³⁶

Some local business owners backed the reform efforts, and urged the mayor and police to do more to clean up the Quarter. A week after the failed 1949 Sugar Bowl cleanup, the city’s chapter of the Young Men’s Business Club [YMBC] sent a letter to Mayor Morrison, including a list of suggestions for the city to clean up the French Quarter. The YMBC believed the Vieux Carré Commission needed more than one part-time inspector to combat the nightclub advertisement sign issues, police officers should be frequently rotated from working Bourbon Street to prevent bribery and favors, and more plainclothes officers should be stationed on Bourbon Street. Above all, the club demanded that the city become more active in filing charges

³⁴ “N.O. Night Club License Suspended Over Immoral Show,” *State Times*, January 22, 1949. The article also called Evelyn West a “torrid dancer whose bust is insured for \$50,000 by Lloyds of London.”

³⁵ “Police Back Liquor Demand With Threat, Saloonist Says.” Watters also informed the owners that sidewalk barkers and pandering taxi drivers would not be tolerated.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

against businesses “which are conducting lewd and immoral entertainment,” specifically mentioning Leon Prima’s 500 Club and its featured dancer, Lilly Christine The Cat Girl. The group claimed that the 500 Club had the “worst of the entertainment,” and Superintendent Watters needed to take action against nightclubs where “sexual intercourse is simulated by performers.”³⁷ The YMBC suggested that the police and district attorney set an example by issuing stiff fines and strengthening the city’s ordinance against obscenity.³⁸

By 1950, striptease had become the target for reform efforts by the police superintendent, district attorney, and the city’s mayor. The reform-minded in New Orleans had lumped striptease in with b-drinking, prostitution, organized crime, and other perceived problems of the historic district. While tourism boosters of the 1930s and 40s had encouraged the city’s perceived hedonistic past and local writers like Lyle Saxon embellished stories of the city’s romanticism, these established promotional maneuvers clashed with the aspirations of current city officials.³⁹ This old world atmosphere, of sin, intrigue, and desire, so attractive to tourists, contrasted with the 1950s suburban dream of family values, propriety, and middle class progress in the city’s suburbs of Metairie, Kenner and the Lakefront.⁴⁰ But while some believed that cleaning up the French Quarter would change the image of New Orleans for the better, others feared that a cleanup would change its nature and its attraction to tourists. According to Scott S. Ellis, in *Madame Vieux Carré*, many locals saw the crime in the French Quarter as an institutionalized

³⁷ Dave McGuire to Mayor deLesseps S. Morrison, January 19, 1949, deLesseps S. Morrison papers, Manuscripts Collection 270, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Stanonis, *Creating The Big Easy*, 23-4, 52; Anthony Stanonis, “‘Always in Costume and Mask’: Lyle Saxon and New Orleans Tourism,” *Louisiana History* 42, no. 1 (Winter 2001), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4233717?origin=JSTOR-pdf> (accessed January 30, 2012); 31-2.

⁴⁰ Ellis, 62; Connie Atkinson, “Louis Armstrong and the Image of New Orleans,” in *Satchmo Meets Amadeus*, ed. Reinhold Wagnleitner (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2006), 129-43.

characteristic of the Vieux Carré. Most who fought reform saw the image of the French Quarter as historical and unchanging, something to be left alone. Then a tourist died in a nightclub.

On New Year's Day 1950, a Nashville man, Robert Dunn, Jr., died from a lethal dose of "knock-out drops" at The Latin Quarter Club on Bourbon Street.⁴¹ The police determined that Dunn had been "slipped the mickey" by one of the club's b-girls.

For a wealthy out-of-town business visitor to die was a nightmare of negative publicity for the city, and caused major concerns amongst the reform-minded populace. By the end of March, Mayor Morrison and the City Council formed a 17-member citizen's investigative committee to gather information on vice issues in the French Quarter and report its findings to the mayor. The committee, sometimes called the mayor's vice commission, had begun to hear testimony from French Quarter police officers and business owners on b-drinking, prostitution, the quality of police work in the French Quarter and possible illegal operations of nightclubs.⁴² Morrison stated to the press that "a citizen's commission of this sort can accomplish a great deal of good. This has been the experience of the California, Chicago, greater Miami and other crime commissions."⁴³ The committee was comprised of representatives of the city and police department, French Quarter residents and two Bourbon Street nightclub owners Owen Brennan and Gaspar Gulotta.⁴⁴ The appointment of Gulotta met resistance from fellow committee

⁴¹ "Death Cabaret Seized By Feds," *The Times-Picayune*, March 25, 1950; "Quartararo Mum To Grand Juror," *The Times-Picayune*, April 1, 1950; "Hearing Denied Dunn Case Figure," *The Times-Picayune*, May 16, 1950.

⁴² "Orleans DA's Office Probing Fleecing Charge," *Baton Rouge State Times*, April 6, 1950; "Latin Club Back In Business Again," *The Times-Picayune*, June 11, 1950; Haas, 181-2.

⁴³ N.O. Crime Commission To Be Formed By C. of C.," *Baton Rouge State Times*, September 29, 1950; Edward F. Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison and the Image of Reform: New Orleans Politics, 1946-1961* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 181-2. Topics of interest to the committee were b-girls, prostitution, homosexuality, illegal gambling, the quality of police work and the character of club owners.

⁴⁴ Haas, 181.

member and commissioner of the Louisiana Alcohol Beverage Control Board, Thomas Schniedau, who felt Gulotta had no place on the committee as there had been recent allegations of b-drinking occurring in Gulotta's club. Morrison refused to remove the bar operator from the committee, telling the press, "I have no apologies whatsoever for appointing him."⁴⁵

Some private social groups supported the mayor's clean-up initiative. After the death of Robert Dunn, more stories had surfaced about Bourbon Street visitors falling victim to "knock-out drops."⁴⁶ In a 1950 *Times-Picayune* article, the directors of the Junior Chamber of Commerce asked for "strict enforcement of ABC act provisions that prohibit "'b-girls,'" and the selling of liquor to children and prostitution."⁴⁷ In the same article, Naomi M. Drake, president of the New Orleans Business and Professional Women's Club, called for "a citywide boycott of those bars that do not operate ethically," and the president of the Altrusa International Club, Kathleen Ruddell, asked that "the entire French Quarter [be] 'cleaned out' but especially Bourbon Street."⁴⁸ President of the French Quarter Property Owners Association and brother of the mayor, Jacob Morrison, told the press that people should begin gathering evidence and submitting complaints to the police as "the Quarter has gotten out of hand. Certain people feel they can run wild and get away with it."⁴⁹ In a 1952 letter to William Kearney, president of Texas Wire & Gable Company, Jacob Morrison informed the businessman as to why he had wanted to block new clubs from applying for liquor licenses, explaining, "As a result of the war,

⁴⁵ "'B-Girl' Vanishes; Life Threatened," *The Times-Picayune*, April 6, 1950

⁴⁶ "Orleans DA's Office Probing Fleecing Charge."

⁴⁷ "Mayor to Name Vice Inquisitors," *The Times-Picayune*, March 30, 1950.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

a tremendous number of ‘fly-by-night’ bars and night clubs opened up in every block in large portions of it. The character of the Quarter has suffered proportionately.”⁵⁰

Although the mayor’s committee conducted inquiries into the vice issues of the French Quarter, the committee was limited in its power to offering suggested changes to the mayor and commission council. The resultant clean-up campaign conducted by the police department did little to solve the committee’s targeted problems of the Vieux Carré, like prostitution and b-drinking. According to Edward Haas, in *DeLesseps S. Morrison and the Image of Reform: New Orleans Politics, 1946-1961* (1974), even after the commission had met in 1950, when the police raided brothels in the French Quarter, one or two prostitutes might be arrested out of the entire house of sex workers before the police moved on to bust another brothel and make a show of only arresting a few of those occupants as well.⁵¹ The cleanup campaign continued in this same vein until January 1951 when the Kefauver Committee, officially called the United States Senate Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce, arrived in New Orleans and Morrison put his anti-vice efforts on hold for the televised hearings on the city’s organized crime problems. With this national spotlight on New Orleans, cracking down on striptease took a back seat.⁵² The next large scale reform attempt that involved striptease occurred a few years later.

⁵⁰ Jacob Morrison to William Kearney, April 15, 1952, New Orleans Vieux Carré Commission, 1941-1987 Papers, City Archives and Special Collections, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, La.

⁵¹ Haas, 182-3.

⁵² “Morrison to Be First Witness at Kefauver Hearing,” *Advocate*, January 24, 1951; Haas, 184-187; Senate Historical Office, “Kefauver Crime Committee Launched,” Historical Minutes, United States Senate website, http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Kefauver_Crime_Committee_Launched.htm (accessed October 26, 2012). In 1951 the Crime Committee, led by Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver, visited New Orleans on its tour of 14 major cities to conduct highly publicized hearings on organized crime in the United States.

In 1953, the police and city council alike agreed upon an independent study on the police department. This decision came out of a grand jury investigation. Between 1947 and 1952 a series of armed robberies had occurred in New Orleans amounting to \$300,000 in stolen cash and valuables, and the shooting of a bystander. In September 1952, Chief of Detectives Harry Daniels received an anonymous tip that two of the city's police detectives had been involved in committing the robberies. The police arrested Carl Tyson, a "safecracker," in January 1953 in connection with the armed burglaries and Tyson corroborated the anonymous tip by naming two detectives as his accomplices. In addition, during the grand jury proceedings of the robbery cases, claims surfaced of police officers accepting illegal gifts from private citizens and of witness tampering. In the spring of 1953, due to pressure from the accusations of criminal misconduct by the police department, Mayor Morrison and the City Council agreed to the request from the grand jury for an independent inquiry into the police department by a third party group.⁵³

The resulting Special Citizens Investigating Committee [SCIC] was comprised of three representatives, Dudley Foley Jr., Philip Gensler, and George Stohlman, from the Bureau of Governmental Research, the New Orleans Metropolitan Crime Commission, and the Society of Former FBI Agents. The SCIC hired a former FBI agent and lawyer Aaron M. Kohn as lead investigator. Kohn had just completed a similar lengthy study on corruption in Chicago's police department.⁵⁴ One article on Kohn's work in New Orleans referred to Kohn as a "professional-crime-fighter."⁵⁵ In the summer of 1953, Kohn and his team of investigators began their inquiry

⁵³ "Police Probe Timetable," *The Times-Picayune*, March 29, 1953; "Case Before DA, Says Morrison," *The Times-Picayune*, March 29, 1953; "Probe To Get All Facts – Morrison," *The Times-Picayune*, April 2, 1953; "Outside Probe Urged By Jury," *The Times-Picayune*, April 2, 1953.

⁵⁴ Haas, 194-195.

⁵⁵ Pat J. McDonnell, "Can't Let Hoods Run Government Says Aaron Kohn," *Advocate*, July 28, 1957.

into the New Orleans Police Department and in April 1954 published their findings. Besides discovering pervasive corruption in the police department, the SCIC looked into striptease dancing along with gambling, b-drinking, and prostitution in the French Quarter. The investigation found that the police stationed there often ignored these illegal activities. Evidence revealed that police received pay-offs from the various businesses and criminal organizations as well.⁵⁶ In their report, Kohn and the SCIC equated what they called “lewd and sexually suggestive dancing” with the “use of knock-out drops,” “pinball gambling,” and “lewd homosexual activity.”⁵⁷

The 1954 report stated that in 1951, there had been 166 bars and clubs in the French Quarter area and that despite cleanup attempts after the death of Robert Dunn in 1950, “the same conditions, in many of the same places, and usually under control of the same individuals, were [now] found to exist.”⁵⁸ Kohn’s team had investigated most of the bars and nightclubs in the French Quarter. Of the Bourbon Street nightclubs that promoted striptease dancing, the team found not just “lewd” dancing but other infractions. For instance, the Master of Ceremonies of the Casino Royale, Frankie Ray, was observed paying off a patrol officer. A former employee of the club, Louisa Treme, admitted in an interview that she had been both a dancer and b-girl.⁵⁹ The SCIC also reported that nightclubs, like Gunga Den, served alcohol to on-duty police officers or gave them free bottles of liquor. It should be noted that in the published report the

⁵⁶ Kohn, vol. V, 9.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 8 & 11.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 9.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 35-6.

SCIC seemed to blame the bar or nightclub for police drinking during their shift rather than the police officers.

A striptease dancer for the Moulin Rouge, known as Georgia Bombshell, testified that she worked at the club as a b-girl between her shows. She had failed to report to work one day in March 1953, and had been fired. When the Moulin Rouge's manager refused to pay her the \$30 she had previously earned as a b-girl, Georgia threatened to call the police but the manager calmly informed her that the club could have her arrested; that the police were on the side of the club.⁶⁰ Georgia Bombshell's story of police corruption was supported in the published report by eyewitness reports by undercover investigators of pay-offs occurring in other clubs. Later the report alleged that Frank Ferrara, owner of the Sho-Bar, was a friend of a former assistant superintendent of police and had allowed some patrol officers to drink on the house.⁶¹

In the SCIC investigation of the Moulin Rouge, investigators noted that "all of the girls, dancers, and waitresses, were b-girls" and while most, if not all, of the clubs did have b-drinking, this unsubstantiated statement that all female workers in nightclubs participated is indicative of the overgeneralizations that were used by most of the reformers to fuel fears of French Quarter vice.⁶²

Above all, the SCIC report concluded that in addition to the deep-seeded issues of corruption in the police department, many bars and clubs of the French Quarter were "crime-breeding, crime-committing destroyers of the character of our youth and of the reputation of our community [and] should not be allowed to exist. The laws forbid them."⁶³ The police

⁶⁰ Ibid, 213-4.

⁶¹ Ibid, 365.

⁶² Ibid, 212.

⁶³ Ibid, 12.

department and Mayor Morrison supported the efforts of the SCIC until the SCIC scheduled public hearings and released a preliminary report of its findings.⁶⁴ The investigative committee called in Morrison for questioning on the basis that he was the administrative head of the police department. During the hearing, Kohn questioned the mayor about the mayor's alleged acceptance of campaign contributions in the 1946 mayoral election from an operator of a brothel.⁶⁵ In a statement to the press in February 1954, Morrison criticized the committee's hearings and the methods used by Kohn in questioning witnesses, saying that the hearings contained "the rankest kind of hearsay testimony, innuendoes and testimony of guilt by association, [and] data that would never be admissible in a court of law."⁶⁶ That the hearing had taken place as Morrison ran for reelection only served to increase Morrison's indignation of the proceedings and divide the mayor and the investigative committee.

In the interim report released by the SCIC to the public in February 1954, the committee accused Mayor Morrison and District Attorney Henry Curtis of hampering Kohn in his interrogations during the public hearings.⁶⁷ The mayor responded to the report with a letter to the SCIC in which he accused Kohn of making "statements, some of which were assumed facts, never proven, and some of which were completely false," and that Kohn "in many instances, went far beyond what was appropriate, proper and decent" while conducting the hearings.⁶⁸ In

⁶⁴ "Jurors Return Interim Report," *The Times-Picayune*, January 29, 1954.

⁶⁵ "Morrison Denies Campaign Contribution Had Strings," *Baton Rouge State Times*, December 30, 1953. Morrison admitted to receiving \$20,000 in campaign contributions from Henry Muller, the alleged "operator of a house of prostitution," but insisted he did not accept the money in exchange for a promise to let the house operate.

⁶⁶ "Hearing in Probe Fair, Says Mayor," *The Times-Picayune*, February 16, 1954.

⁶⁷ "Morrison Denies He Hampered Inquiry As Charged In Report," *The Times-Picayune*, February 16, 1954.

⁶⁸ "Mayor's Letters, Replies by Citizens' Committee," *The Times-Picayune*, February 18, 1954.

his letter, Morrison remarked that he had believed that the investigation by the SCIC would have been fair and impartial but that he had yet to see the committee bring up anything positive about the police department. The three members of the SCIC, Foley, Gensler, and Stohlman, each responded to Morrison's letter refuting the mayor's accusation of partiality. In his letter, Foley told Morrison that if the mayor had paid attention during the hearings instead of reading newspapers he would have had a full appreciation "of what transpired at the hearings, particularly since [Morrison] did not have, and often refused to let Mr. Kohn give [Morrison], the necessary background information."⁶⁹ The SCIC then sent *The Times-Picayune* a copy of Morrison's letter and copies of their responses, all of which the newspaper published in-full in February 18, 1954. This publicized in-fighting quickly led public opinion of the hearings to turn from support to disdain for the SCIC's perceived attempts to discredit the popular Mayor Morrison's administration.⁷⁰ Thus, after the committee finished its investigation and released its final report in April 1954, the city lost a viable reform and cleanup catalyst in the Special Citizens' Investigative Committee. Mayor Morrison, who throughout his long career in office would campaign as the reform-minded candidate, in the end had soured to the actions of the SCIC, saying nothing had come of the entire investigation except "rumor, innuendo, and attempts to prove guilt by association."⁷¹ With no public demand for reform, and for the lukewarm push for reform from the mayor's office, there would be no large French Quarter cleanup effort to speak of until 1958, while in the interim the mayor would struggle with the SCIC over the report's recommendations.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Haas, 202-5.

⁷¹ Ibid, 206.

Lilly Christine's Day in Court

On the Fourth of July in 1958, Bourbon Street bustled with tourists and locals. Barkers stood outside nightclubs attempting to lure passersby to see the striptease acts and indulge in over-priced drinks. Up the street came a man immediately recognized by Bourbon Street denizens, John J. Grosch, chief inspector for the District Attorney's office, bent on catching lewd dancing literally in the act.⁷² But the barkers would be too quick for him. After all, the newspaper had warned that nightclub raids might be coming. Only the night before, 44 strippers had been arrested.⁷³ Bourbon Street saw Grosch coming a mile away.

Striptease had changed since Inspector Grosch's days as a young police detective in the late 1940s. In 1949 acts like that of Sally Rand were more tease than strip, creating the illusion of nudity. Now dancers emphasized bumps and grinds.⁷⁴ Instead of featuring burlesque acts interspersed with comics and magic acts, the clubs cut costs and gave the tourists "what they want," exotic dancers, one right after another.⁷⁵ With the price of liquor rising and increased attention from Grosch and other authorities, some clubs had even eliminated their live bands in favor of cheaper rock and roll records.⁷⁶ An opinion piece in *The Times-Picayune* decried the pricing out of locals in the French Quarter. The article complained of the high price of drinks in Bourbon Street nightclubs, declaring that even if a spectacle like Mickey Mantle appeared "decked out in a sequin gown and [knocked] out a few pop flies in Jackson Square, [locals]

⁷² "Grosch Continues Check on Spots in F.Q.," *Advocate*, July 5, 1958.

⁷³ "Says Raids on Quarter Strippers to Continue," *The Times-Picayune*, July 4, 1958.

⁷⁴ Pen Wilson, "Point of View," *The Times-Picayune*, February 8, 1959.

⁷⁵ Pen Wilson, "Point of View," *The Times-Picayune*, February 8, 1959.

⁷⁶ I. J. Vidacovich, "Closing Strip Joints Spells Trouble to Bourbon Street," *Advocate*, January 6, 1963.

couldn't care less, at \$2.55 a drink.”⁷⁷ The club prices were set at tourist rates and visitors were willing to pay more on vacation and for a chance to experience what was perceived as the “real” New Orleans. Locals, however, did not feel as welcomed at \$2.55 for watered-down drinks, which in 1956 had the same buying power as \$21.51 in 2012 money, a bit too steep for local entertainment.⁷⁸

With the preemptive warning of raids, and strippers toning down their tease as Grosch came in to bust them, Fourth of July was not very fruitful for arrests. The next day in *The Times-Picayune*, Sim Myers reported on local opinion of the raids and strippers. While one woman deemed the cleanup a long time coming, a waiter countered that “They can make the Quarter so respectably dull it won't attract anyone at all if they keep this sort of thing up.” Most of those interviewed agreed that out of the various elements in the Vieux Carré, the “girls in those clubs were not dangerous.”⁷⁹

A few months before the July arrests, New Orleans had elected a new district attorney, Richard A. Dowling. As part of his first order of business, he had updated the office of the city attorney, asking the city for \$100,000 to purchase new vehicles and office equipment. On July 19 in an interview with the press, Dowling asked the people of Bourbon Street to follow the law. Though he acknowledged that he had no agency to “close the gates on Bourbon Street or anywhere else” and claimed he didn't order any arrests, Dowling did send Grosch to investigate the “dozens of complaints” received by his office, but only after “[holding] off as long as I could.”⁸⁰ According to Grosch in an interview with *The Times-Picayune*, Dowling directed the

⁷⁷ Pen Wilson, “Point of View,” *The Times-Picayune*, October 21, 1956.

⁷⁸ Calculation via BLS Inflation Calculator, <http://www.bls.gov/cpi/cpicalc.htm>.

⁷⁹ Sim Meyers, “On The Square,” *The Times-Picayune*, July 5, 1958.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

inspector to create files on club entertainers for ease in tracking and prosecuting them, especially in complaints made by out-of-town guests.⁸¹

Inspector Grosch could be a bit of a wild card. He constantly spoke to the press, giving reliably juicy quotes and revealing his directives from Dowling. A week after he had arrested 44 striptease dancers and seven barkers, he swept down the strip, tearing down posters and signs advertising striptease shows, collecting about 44 “life sized pictures from three clubs” that were not “fit for people to see.”⁸² While one bartender protested that the photographs were decent, Grosch ranted, “I made them remove all those nude pictures. I confiscated them. They must stop that teasing and that filthy dancing.” He then had a photographer document each naughty poster for evidence for the District Attorney’s office.⁸³

Grosch stalking around Bourbon Street on Fourth of July may have resulted in few arrests, but it did not signal an end to the cleanup.⁸⁴ On July 16 at the 500 Club, Grosch and a fellow investigator for the district attorney arrested Lilly Christine “The Cat Girl” for obscenity for her dance “Tom Cat Fever.” In an interview with *The Times-Picayune*, Christine argued that her act did not involve stripping and that she, an exotic dancer not a stripteaser, did not wear anything more revealing than the costumes worn in a Broadway performance, *Peep Show*, but Grosch told reporters that for someone such as himself who had “been around” it was “the filthiest performance he’s ever seen.”⁸⁵ Also charged alongside Christine were Wally Allen, the

⁸¹ “Grosch To Keep File On Dancers,” *The Times-Picayune*, July 19, 1958.

⁸² “Strippers’ Strip Stripped in N.O. Clean-Up Drive,” *Advocate*, July 11, 1958.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*; “Says Raids on Quarter Strippers to Continue,” *The Times-Picayune*, July 4, 1958.

⁸⁵ “‘Cat Fever’ Cools Off After Arrest,” *Advocate*, July 19, 1958; “Police Charges Faulty, Says DA,” *The Times-Picayune*, July 24, 1958.

club master of ceremonies, and Felix Montez, the club manager, in aiding and abetting, counseling and procuring Christine to commit “a lewd and lascivious, filthy and indecent performance.”⁸⁶ As of Lilly Christine’s arrest, Grosch and his men had arrested 52 dancers and barkers in the two weeks of the district attorney’s effort to clean Bourbon Street of vulgar dancing.⁸⁷

Unfortunately for Lilly Christine, District Attorney Dowling would not drop the charges against her as he had done with some dancers arrested in the July raids. Unfortunately for Dowling, Christine was not going to take the charges lying down. Just months earlier, Christine had had dealings with the law in civil matters. In April 1958, she had filed an infringement suit against owners of the Brass Rail Cocktail Lounge and the Monkey Bar for their use of the moniker “Cat Girl,” calling it unfair competition as she had used the moniker since 1948 and had obtained a service mark for the name from the U.S. Patent Office.⁸⁸ This personal precedence to protect herself and her fame may explain why Assistant District Attorney A. I. Kleinfeldt recommended a \$1,500 bond for her obscenity charge, while other dancers were issued \$1,000 bonds.

Christine was charged under the third paragraph of the Louisiana’s Revised Statute on Obscenity, defined as the “Performance by any person, or the showing or display of any picture

⁸⁶ “Grosch To Keep File On Dancers,” *The Times-Picayune*, July 19, 1958.

⁸⁷ “Dowling Behind Raids – Grosch,” *The Times-Picayune*, July 18, 1958; Haas, 183. Grosch also gave a five-hour interview to a reporter from the *Item* in 1950 when he was a criminal sheriff, during which Grosch revealed he didn’t think much of Mayor Morrison’s attempts at reform, citing the vast amount of graft in the police department as proof of Morrison’s failure.

⁸⁸ “Infringed Upon, Says ‘Cat Girl,’” *The Times-Picayune*, April 8, 1958.

or motion picture, in any public place or in any public manner, of any act of lewdness or indecency, grossly scandalous and tending to debauch the morals and manners of the people.”⁸⁹

When the case went to trial, Christine’s lawyers cited as precedence the previous rulings of the Louisiana Supreme Court in *City of Shreveport v. Wilson* that the description “lewd and indecent act” was too indefinite to identify a crime, and in *State v. Rose* the term “lewd dancing” was considered to be “insufficiently descriptive to define an offence.”⁹⁰ On October 1, 1958, the Orleans Parish Criminal Court threw out Christine’s case. Judge J. Bernard Cocke ruled paragraph three of the obscenity law to be unconstitutional, stating that the law used the vague word “act,” which is not as easy to define as, say, “dance.” This ruling, however, was not the end of Christine’s fight. District Attorney Dowling appealed the ruling to the Louisiana Supreme Court, stating that just because one section of the law was ruled unconstitutional did not give the dancers on Bourbon Street license to bump-n-grind as they pleased, stating “If I think the law is being violated, I’ll raid them again.”⁹¹

On August 3, 1958, an opinion piece in *The Times-Picayune*, executed a well-written eye-roll over Dowling and Grosch’s raids, pointing out that the police or other authorities only stepped in when they received complaints. “One thing is sure: The lawyers are burning the midnight oil. There are any number of law clerks conducting research aimed at finding out what the revised statutes of Louisiana have to say about the vigor, and direction, with which the pelvis may be tossed.” The article admitted that Lilly Christine’s arrest may have taken reform efforts a bit too far but suggested that the city should turn Bourbon Street into “a jazz and music belt,”

⁸⁹ Louisiana Revised Statute 14:106; 1958.

⁹⁰ “ ‘Cat Girl’ Case Is Thrown Out,” *The Times-Picayune*. October 2, 1958.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

since “the pelvis hasn’t twitched yet that can match the first 12 bars of “Honky Tonk Train Blues.””⁹²

On November 9, 1959, over a year after Lilly Christine was arrested for her “Tom Cat Fever” dance, the Louisiana Supreme Court ruled on *State of Louisiana v. Lilly Christine, alias “Cat Girl.”* In a five-to-two decision, the court reversed and set aside the lower court’s dismissal of the obscenity charge and sent the case back to Judge Cocke’s court for trial. Justice Walter B. Hamlin confirmed the ruling that section three of the state statute on obscenity was indeed constitutional, and that a dance is a performance and that the words “indecent” and “lewdness” are taken by the court to mean “that the moral feelings of the community have to be grossly shocked and offended” and that there was no need to further elaborate on these terms because “they would amount to nothing but tautology or redundancy.”⁹³ The dissenting opinion by Chief Justice John Fournet warned of the danger for the court to allow the lower courts in Louisiana to decide what constituted a performance of lewd and indecent acts as this would create “no certain or understandable rule and no uniform standard of conduct to guide the individual in ascertaining what acts it is his duty to avoid.”⁹⁴

Christine and her lawyers filed a motion for rehearing of the State Supreme Court case, which was then granted by the Court. The justices’ decisions were issued on February 15, 1960, in which the Court ruled that the state statute on obscenity was unconstitutional. In the rehearing, the affirming judge, Chief Justice Fournet, stated that for a criminal statute to be “valid and enforceable, [it] must define the offense so specifically or accurately that any reader having

⁹² Pen Wilson, “Point of View,” *The Times Picayune*, August 3, 1958.

⁹³ *State of Louisiana v. Lilly Christine, alias “Cat Girl,”* 44327, 239 La. 259; 1959.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

ordinary intelligence will know when or whether his conduct” is lawful or not.⁹⁵ He further reiterated from his previous dissenting decision in 1958 that the Court cannot allow multiple lower courts in the state to determine for themselves what is a lewd or obscene performance, that it has to be standard across the board.⁹⁶ The dissenting opinion written by Justice Hamlin notes that while the statute may be unconstitutional, none of the justices had proposed as to what would make it constitutional.⁹⁷

The Court’s decision irked Dowling who felt the justices had “put the stamp of approval on Bourbon Street” and that “all pending cases go out the window with the obscenity law.”⁹⁸ Christine’s success struck a blow in favor of exotic dancers and stripteasers. Where previously on the legal front these women were largely portrayed, especially in the media, as faceless vessels of entertainment, Christine now had proven that they had a level of agency in the male-dominated world of nightclubs.⁹⁹ After the Court ruled unconstitutional the state statute on obscenity, New Orleans Police Superintendent Provosty A. Dayries told the press that he would “continue to keep entertainers under control by using primarily city ordinances [on obscenity].”¹⁰⁰ The next day, February 20, *The Times-Picayune* published a political cartoon of Dayries attempting to cover a striptease dancer onstage with a book labeled “City Anti-Obscenity Ordinances” after she had stripped off a book labeled “Defective State Anti-Obscenity Laws.”

⁹⁵ *State of Louisiana v. Lilly Christine, alias “Cat Girl,”* 44327, 239 La. 259; 1960.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ “D.A. Says Ruling Gives Bourbon St. ‘Approval,’” *Advocate*, February 17, 1960.

⁹⁹ Howard Jacobs, “Passing of Exotic ‘Cat Girl’ Is Shock,” *The Times-Picayune*, January 26, 1965. Lilly Christine died in Hollywood, FL in 1965 after retiring into obscurity. She reportedly died of peritonitis when she failed to seek medical attention.

¹⁰⁰ “Raids Pledged Under N.O. Law,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 19, 1960.

The cartoon asked, “Can she strip this off too?”¹⁰¹ Future reform efforts in the city would prove that striptease dancers would be able to easily dance around the city ordinance.

Local Women’s Groups and Striptease

Despite the July 1958 shake-up by Dowling and Grosch, striptease and exotic dancing continued along Bourbon Street, and women’s groups both opposed and, perhaps surprisingly sometimes supported the continuation of the practice. A local women’s group, Women United to Combat Obscenity, objected to nightspots on Bourbon Street having open doors, which allowed glimpses of the nude dancers within. The group reportedly asked the New Orleans Public Service, Inc. to reroute the evening and late night bus routes from Bourbon Street to protect the sensibilities of women bus riders.¹⁰²

Other women’s groups and preservationists opposed reform movements of the French Quarter and even supported nightclubs as being part of the atmosphere, but drew the line at stripping. In a 1959 letter to the editor, Mayor Morrison’s sister-in-law and Vieux Carré preservation activist Mary Morrison expressed her fears over architectural changes in and around the French Quarter. In response to a proposed demolition project on Canal Street by the D.H. Holmes department store, Morrison pointed to the recently published Downs Report made by the Real Estate Research Corporation of Chicago that said “the principal reason New Orleans business district has not dried up, as has happened in many other cities, is ‘its adjacency to the French Quarter.’”¹⁰³ Mrs. Lou Wylie, chair of the Women United to Combat Obscenity, told

¹⁰¹ “Can She Strip This Off Too,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 20, 1960.

¹⁰² “Cleanup Urged in Vieux Carré,” *The Times-Picayune*, December 5, 1959.

¹⁰³ “Views of Readers,” *The Times-Picayune*, October 21, 1959.

reporters that “Despite the Downs report” the group was confident the city’s business leaders “will find that decently operated night clubs... will be more productive of revenue from tourists.”¹⁰⁴ However, big names in striptease like Lili St. Cyr and Blaze Starr created a larger drawing power than so called decently operated clubs and tourists continued to flock to Bourbon Street for striptease shows.

Blaze Starr

Perhaps the most famous stripper to perform on Bourbon Street, Blaze Starr arrived in New Orleans in January 1959.¹⁰⁵ Upon her arrival, Starr began a year-long contract at the Sho-Bar for \$1,000 a week and immediately attracted the notice of Governor Earl Long.¹⁰⁶

During Starr’s time on Bourbon Street, an editorial published in *The Times-Picayune* lamented, “They’re burying the blues in New Orleans” in favor of strippers, “the new New Orleans culture.”¹⁰⁷ Some clubs had tried to introduce live music back into the nightclub striptease scene but these attempts were few and far between, according to the article. The club owners were convinced, as one put it, that “they [the tourists]... only want strippers... I put in jazz, too...But what happened? They played for me, the waiters and each other.”¹⁰⁸ The author had counted 24 “strip joints” on Bourbon Street compared to only three places in the French Quarter to hear jazz. In her autobiography, Starr remembered, “Every girl in the business wanted

¹⁰⁴ “Cleanup Urged In Vieux Carre,” *The Times-Picayune*, December 5, 1959.

¹⁰⁵ Starr and Perry, 111.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 113; Eleanor Harris, “The Truth About Governor Earl K. Long,” *The Times Picayune*, September 20, 1959.

¹⁰⁷ Pen Wilson, “Point of View,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 8, 1959.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

to strip [on Bourbon]. It turned out to be everything I had ever heard it was. Bars and clubs lined both sides of the street. It was a place where night never ended. And the Sho-Bar itself was one of the largest clubs I had ever worked in. It seated almost five hundred people and was always filled to capacity with tourists, sightseers, and the locals.”¹⁰⁹

In the few years that she lived in New Orleans, Starr carved out an infamous reputation for herself.¹¹⁰ Her affair with Governor Long was well known, even to his family. The governor’s wife, Blanche, even confronted the couple in Starr’s motel room, irate over Long’s extra-marital activities.¹¹¹ *The Times-Picayune* and *Baton Rouge Advocate* watching her movements, reported Starr’s rumored vacation plans with the governor, staking out her apartment and following her and the governor about town.¹¹² Governor Long, never known for keeping his peace, made statements to the press, in which he alternately urged them to stop “harassing that poor woman,” and joked with reporters that he should “get a ‘small cut-in’ if Blaze Starr is packing patrons” during her shows.¹¹³ The flames of publicity were fueled by Long’s alleged mental breakdowns and confinements in mental hospitals as well as Starr’s arrests for stripteasing.¹¹⁴ Four months after Starr first arrived in New Orleans, police officers

¹⁰⁹ Blaze Star and Huey Perry, *Blaze Starr: My Life as Told to Huey Perry* (New York: Pocket Books, 1974), 112.

¹¹⁰ Margie Bonnet Sellinger, “Stripper Blaze Recalls Her Affair with the Governor,” *People*, December 18, 1989. In the same article, Blaze Starr claimed also to have had sex with President John F. Kennedy, in a walk-in closet at a dinner party, while he was still a senator.

¹¹¹ Starr and Perry, 135.

¹¹² “Blaze Vacation May Be In State,” *The Times-Picayune*, September 4, 1959; “Long Says ‘Nothing to It,’ Just Have Mutual Friends,” *Advocate*, September 3, 1959; “Governor Long Visits Home of Dancer’s Barmaid Friend,” *The Times-Picayune*, September 3, 1959; “‘Just A Friendly Visit,’ Says Blaze,” *The Times-Picayune*, September 3, 1959.

¹¹³ “Long Says ‘Nothing to It,’ Just Have Mutual Friends;” “Long Suggests Blaze Pay ‘Cut,’” *The Times-Picayune*, September 30, 1959.

¹¹⁴ “Decision Delayed, Long Still Held,” *The Times-Picayune*, June 16, 1959; Eleanor Harris, “The Truth about Governor Earl K. Long,” *The Times-Picayune*, September 20, 1959.

arrested her at the Sho-Bar for “performing a lewd dance.” The vice squad also arrested the club manager, Jose Martinez, but State Representative Patrick McGittigan later paroled the two.¹¹⁵ A year later, Starr and Martinez were arrested again in what *The Times-Picayune* called a “Crackdown on Bourbon Street” for “immoral and improper” dancing.¹¹⁶ The crackdown also included the arrest of another popular striptease dancer, Linda Brigitt, and her club manager from the Gunga Den down the street. Starr’s “lewd” and “immoral” dance involved a red chaise lounge. At the end of her act, Starr would writhe around on the couch while activating the smoke machine underneath that gave the impression that the chaise lounge was on fire.¹¹⁷ After Earl Long’s death in 1960, Starr returned to Baltimore where she bought the famous Two O’clock Club and continued to make a name for herself until her retirement in the 1980s.¹¹⁸

Jim Garrison Raids Bourbon Street

The last big cleanup attempt of Bourbon Street at the end of the postwar period was the brainchild of Jim Garrison, the district attorney who succeeded Dowling. New Orleans’s political landscape had changed with the dawn of the 1960s. Governor Long had died in early September 1960, shortly after his election to Congress, and deLesseps Morrison had resigned his mayoralty

¹¹⁵ “Lewd Dance Charged in Bourbon St. Arrest,” *The Times-Picayune*, April 11, 1959.

¹¹⁶ “Police State Crackdown on Bourbon St,” *Advocate*, January 4, 1960.

¹¹⁷ Starr and Perry, 108. For a version of this dance see: *Buxom Beautease* (1956), directed by Irving Klaw and featuring Blaze Starr, Tempest Storm, and Lili St. Cyr.

¹¹⁸ Starr and Perry, 181; Sellinger, “Stripper Blaze Recalls Her Affair with the Governor.” Today, Blaze Starr lives in her home state of West Virginia where she makes and sells her jewelry and signed memorabilia at www.blazestarrsgems.com.

to become ambassador to the Organization of American States, to be replaced as mayor by the less reform-minded Victor Schiro.¹¹⁹

Jim Garrison promised that upon his election he would be “the best district attorney this city has ever had,” in contrast to Dowling, who had been accused of accepting campaign money from Bourbon Street nightclub owners with pending court cases.¹²⁰ In August 1962, two months after Garrison’s election as district attorney, Garrison began his well-publicized raids on Bourbon Street. *Time* magazine described the raids as “[tilting] at windmills and gin mills.”¹²¹ Garrison told the press, “Its not that I’m against stripping... B-Drinking and prostitution are against the law.”¹²² By December, Garrison continued his campaign by padlocking some of the more prominent nightclubs, The Flamingo Club; El Morocco; Jazz, Ltd.; and Guys and Dolls.¹²³ By the new year, five strip joints had been padlocked. Garrison defended himself to the press saying, “I’m not against night clubs and tourists like good night clubs. But these [the strip clubs] are not night clubs. They’re tourist traps.”¹²⁴

At first Mayor Schiro and the police department supported Garrison’s reform measures, as it was good for the public image. However, they were not as keen on throwing in their support for the long-run intensive attempts at reform that Garrison had in mind. In an August 30

¹¹⁹ “Thousands File Past Bier Of Long; Rites Set Today,” *Advocate*, September 7, 1960; Haas, 285-7. Morrison and his son died in a plane crash in Mexico in March 1964.

¹²⁰ “Garrison Vows Anti-Dope Fight,” *The Times-Picayune*, January 26, 1962; “Garrison Quits Position In City,” *The Times-Picayune*, January 16, 1962.

¹²¹ “Garrison and Others Sworn,” *The Times-Picayune*, May 8, 1962; Savage, 9; “Bourbon Street Rococo,” *Time* 89, no. 9 (March 3, 1967): 30, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed May 5, 2012).

¹²² Savage, 14.

¹²³ “Padlock Confronts Skin Mills,” *The Times-Picayune*, December 23, 1962.

¹²⁴ I. J. Vidacovich, “Closing Strip Joints Spells Trouble to Bourbon Street,” *The Advocate*, January 6, 1963.

interview, Police Superintendent Joseph Giarrusso said that because Bourbon Street was a main attraction for the “internationally famous” French Quarter, the raids Garrison had been conducting did “the whole street an injustice,” and that his police officers were handling the vice issues in the French Quarter.¹²⁵ When asked about striptease on Bourbon Street, Schiro had joked to the press, “You can rest assured I’m keeping abreast of the situation.”¹²⁶ However, despite the reservations of Giarrusso and Schiro, Garrison continued to investigate and raid nightclubs.

However, Garrison encountered a monetary roadblock. The office of the district attorney had spent a large amount of money on the Bourbon Street nightclub investigations and raids, quickly depleting the department’s budget. Investigators often did not keep receipts from the bars while undercover, making it hard for Garrison’s office to track how its budget was spent and for Garrison to receive more money from the city for his investigations. In August 1962, the judges of the Orleans Parish Criminal District Court informed Garrison that his office had been cut off from receiving more money until it could keep better track of expenditures.¹²⁷ This monetary setback did not deter Garrison from continuing his nightclub raids. Police Superintendent Joseph Giarrusso publicly accused Garrison of acting more like a police chief than a district attorney.¹²⁸ By November, however, Garrison had become frustrated by what he perceived to be the Criminal Court judges’ unwillingness to cooperate with his campaign. In a November 9 press conference, Garrison accused the eight judges of taking too many vacation days and allowing pending cases to accumulate on the docket. A few days later, Garrison further charged that the judges also

¹²⁵ “Will Not Quarrel, Giarrusso States,” *The Times-Picayune*, August 30, 1962.

¹²⁶ Ellis, 81.

¹²⁷ Savage, 10-12.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

deliberately hindered his clean-up efforts in the French Quarter.¹²⁹ Garrison's accusations led the judges, including Judge Bernard Cocke who had presided over Lilly Christine's case a few years earlier, to sue Garrison for criminal defamation. The judges won.¹³⁰ In 1964, Garrison appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court and the lower court's decision was reversed.

Even while Garrison prepared for his defamation trial, his office continued to conduct raids on Bourbon Street outside of police involvement. On January 12, 1963, the district attorney's office conducted one of its largest raids, arresting 31 people from 11 nightclubs.¹³¹ While in previous raids by Garrison's office those arrested had been charged with b-drinking and prostitution, in this raid the charges included permitting obscene and immoral acts. Assistant District Attorney Frank Klein told the press that the "star performers were generally more obscene and some were downright filthy. They don't even stand on their feet any more and an act in a prone position can't be considered dancing or an art of any sort."¹³² While the raids did not eradicate striptease on Bourbon Street, Garrison was confident that his efforts at nightclub reform would be met with success. In an April 1963 letter to Mayor Schiro, Garrison assured the mayor that he did not "subscribe to the theory that these commercialized vice operations cannot be completely eliminated once the will to do so is developed," and that "cities much larger than New Orleans have eliminated these operations very effectively – Los Angeles, New York and Houston, among others – and I think we will see New Orleans moving up with them..."¹³³ Later

¹²⁹ "Expect N.O. Judges, D.A. To Contact Gremillion," *The Advocate*, November 9, 1962.

¹³⁰ Savage, 1.

¹³¹ "Bourbon Street Clubs Raided For Obscenity," *The Advocate*, January 13, 1963.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Jim Garrison to Victor Schiro, April 15, 1963, Victor Schiro Papers, 1904-1995, MS 1001, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, La. Emphasis his.

in the letter, Garrison accused the police department and mayor's office of attempting to discredit Garrison's lead investigator by conducting an inquest on the investigator with the help of the Bourbon Street Association of Night Clubs. Further in his letter, Garrison described the atmosphere behind his fierce and lengthy investigations against striptease nightclubs when he complained to Schiro that "the police department is supposed to be on our side and against the Bourbon Street operators." ¹³⁴

While Garrison and his investigators did conduct many raids against stripteasers and nightclubs on Bourbon Street in 1962-63, he was unsuccessful in reaching his goal to completely eliminate commercialized vice. The padlocked establishments reopened to more tourist business. Garrison did not hesitate to step on toes during his time as district attorney, which did not endear him to other city officials like Police Superintendent Giarrusso or Mayor Schiro but he did gain popularity in Louisiana as a reform-minded politician which allowed him to have relatively free reign of his investigation of the John F. Kennedy assassination in the late 1960s.

The End of Striptease on Bourbon Street

Ultimately, changing trends in entertainment and sexual permissiveness of the 1960s and 70s, rather than a forced reform by city policymakers, killed burlesque striptease in New Orleans. As the 1960s progressed, striptease gave way to the more popular strip, which emphasized nudity instead of the act of undressing. Once-popular dancers retired or changed careers. Blaze Starr bought the Baltimore club that had been responsible for setting off her career, and ran it until Baltimore's version of Bourbon Street closed down in the 1980s. In 1965, Lilly Christine died of an abdominal inflammation in Florida after failing to seek medical

¹³⁴ Ibid.

attention.¹³⁵ Other dancers, like Evangeline the Oyster Girl, married and had a family; or, like Stormy, faded into obscurity.

Sex and sexuality became more available and obvious to the public eye during the 1960s. New dances like The Twist emphasized some of the same hip-shaking movements that had gotten striptease dancers arrested 10 to 20 years previously. Women began to wear mini-skirts and go braless. Topless dancing, that is without the pasties or net mesh bras of stripteasers, became popular as did nudity on Broadway. Pornographic movies became more readily available. *Playboy* dictated the ideal girl to be the girl-next-door, not an exotic dancer on a stage. Tall, skinny, androgynous Twiggy became the desirable aesthetic for women instead of curvy, busty striptease dancers like Blaze Starr or Tempest Storm.¹³⁶

The Sexual Revolution that came out of the counterculture of the 1960s diminished the stigma of premarital sex, produced coed dorms, made birth control readily available and emphasized free love.¹³⁷ Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962), Joan Garrity's *The Way to Become the Sensuous Woman* (1969) and Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex: A Gourmet Guide to Love Making* (1972) became bestsellers for their topics on sexual advice and sex outside of traditional relationships. By the 1970s streaking became popular, particularly on college campuses. The increased exposure to sex and nudity lessened the impact of striptease. Women's liberation of the late 1960s and 70s took care of the rest. Instead of using nudity to tease and entice, now women took off their clothes in political and social protest. Striptease

¹³⁵ "Lilly Christine, N.O. Stripper, Dies in Florida," *The Advocate*, January 27, 1965.

¹³⁶ Shteir, 317-325.

¹³⁷ Alan Petigny, "Postwar Psychology, and the Reperiodization of the Sexual Revolution," *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 1 (Autumn 2004): 63, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3790027> (accessed October 26, 2012).

began to be viewed as a reproduction of stereotypical gender roles.¹³⁸ Striptease therefore gave way to new forms of sexual entertainment across the country and in New Orleans.

Despite the best efforts of reform-minded New Orleans policymakers, like Morrison, Grosch and Garrison, striptease of the post-World War II era remained much too popular of a tourist attraction on Bourbon Street for anti-vice and reform campaigns to have long term results. Though these reformers wanted to create a wholesome image of the city's historical district for visitors, striptease remained a part of Bourbon Street until changing social norms replaced striptease with a new form of sexual entertainment, stripping.

In the early part of the 21st century, New Orleans, as with other cities, has seen a resurgence of the burlesque striptease popular in the late 1940s and early 50s. Performers like Trixie Minx and dance troupes like Bustout Burlesque and Fleur de Tease perform striptease numbers to live music in packed theaters and clubs in the French Quarter. The city hosts a Burlesque Festival every fall, which receives growing popularity. New Orleans' historic district is still a place of intrigue, sin and desire for tourists, who can participate in the city's scandalous past by attending burlesque shows just as their grandparents did in the 1950s. Bourbon Street is home to striptease once again.

¹³⁸ Katherine Liepe-Levinson, "Striptease: Desire, Mimetic Jeopardy, and Performing Spectators," *The Drama Review* 42, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 10, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146698> [accessed April 21, 2012].

Appendix A A Map of Popular Night Clubs on Bourbon Street



Created by the author via Google Maps, May 2012.

Appendix B
Striptease Political Cartoon



“Can She Strip This Off Too.” *The Times-Picayune*, February 20, 1960. America’s Historical Newspapers. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.uno.edu> (accessed October 27, 2012).

¹³⁹ This political cartoon appeared in the February 20, 1960 issue of *The Times-Picayune* after Superintendent Dayries told the press on February 19 that he would continue to arrest stripteasers who performed lewdly despite the fact that the Louisiana State Supreme Court ruled the state statute on obscenity to be unconstitutional.

Appendix C
Blaze Starr Publicity Photo



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From the author's collection.

¹⁴⁰ Publicity photos, similar to this one of Blaze Starr, would be posted outside nightclubs and attracted the ire of some reformers, like Inspector Grosch.

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