



— To listen to Sandi Thom's version of "House of the Rising Sun," please click below. This version is available on I-Tunes. Many thanks to Sandi and her management team for allowing us to use it on our site. Check out Sandi at www.sandithom.com and www.youtube.com/sandithom

THE SONG & THE MYTH

By Kevin Herridge

THE SONG...

“There is a house in New Orleans they call the Rising Sun.
It’s been the ruin of many a poor girl and me, O God, for one.
If I had listened what Mama said, I’d be at home today.
Being so young and foolish, poor boy, let a rambler lead me astray.
Go tell my baby sister never do like I have done
To shun that house in New Orleans they call the Rising Sun.
My mother she’s a tailor, she sewed these new blue jeans.
My sweetheart, he’s a drunkard, Lord, Lord, drinks down in New Orleans.
The only thing a drunkard needs is a suitcase and a trunk.
The only time he’s satisfied is when he’s on a drunk.
Fills his glasses to the brim, passes them around.
Only pleasure he gets out of life is hoboin’ from town to town.
One foot is on the platform and the other one on the train.
I’m going back to New Orleans to wear that ball and chain.
Going back to New Orleans, my race is almost run.
Going back to spend the rest of my days beneath that Rising Sun.”

If you are familiar with the Animals 1964 hit version of the “House of the Rising Sun,” you may not be familiar with the above set of lyrics. They were collected by Alan LOMAX, the famous musicologist, on one of his extremely important field-recording trips to the Southern States of

America. This particular version, entitled "The Rising Sun Blues", was recorded by him on September 15th, 1937, and credited to Georgia TURNER of Middlesboro, Kentucky and "other stanzas" to Bert MARTIN of Manchester, Kentucky. The lyrics appear in LOMAX's 1941 book "Our Singing Country."

Possibly the song was an old English, Scottish or Irish folk song, or melody, that had been brought over to these mountainous regions of America by British settlers a hundred or more years before. The words were obviously altered as New Orleans was THE den of iniquity in the South. We have heard of a version in England, whose lyrics are, "There is a house in Lowestoft they call the Rising Sun." Whether this was a dig at the Animals version or the original, we may never know but it is worth considering. English musicologist, Cecil SHARP, had collected many of these old English folk songs in the early part of the 20th century. Olive CAMPBELL, the wife of a minister, had collected many ballads from the Appalachians and given them to Cecil SHARP. If you have not seen them, we recommend the movies "Songcatcher" and "O Brother Where Art Thou" for a glimpse of traditional and Old Timey music from the early 20th century.

Georgia TURNER was not the first person to record the song. The earliest recorded version was by Clarence "Tom" ASHLEY in 1932 as "Rising Sun Blues" and then in 1934 as "Rounder's Luck" by the CALLAHAN Brothers. Roscoe HOLCOMB recorded it as "House in New Orleans" and Dillard CHANDLER as "Sport in New Orleans." Country singer, Roy ACUFF, recorded it as "The Rising Sun" in 1938.

The folk-music scene evolved in the 1940s and 1950s, with the likes of Josh WHITE (1944), Huddie "Leadbelly" LEDBETTER, Pete SEEGER, and Woodie GUTHRIE all recording the song. The new wave of "folkies" in the early 1960s soon began recording it, including Bob DYLAN and Joan BAEZ. Then, in 1964, came the classic version that everyone is familiar with by an R&B band from Newcastle-on-Tyne, England...the Animals. Formed in 1958 as the Alan PRICE Combo, this was, at the time, the longest recording ever released on a 45 rpm single and because of that fact was given the "kiss of death" by the record industry. To their surprise, the record made No.1 in England and the U.S.A. and is still popular throughout the world.

Hit versions followed in 1970 by Frijid Pink, in 1978 by Santa Esmeralda and in 1981 by Dolly PARTON. Versions were recorded by such diverse artists as Andy GRIFFITH, Doc WATSON, Jerry GARCIA, David GRISMAN and Tony RICE, Mike AULDRIDGE, the CHAMBERS Brothers, French singer Johnny HALLYDAY (as "Le Penetencier"), Dave Von RONK, B.B. KING, Marianne FAITHFUL, Sinead O'CONNOR, Alan PRICE, Annatta, BACHMANN-Turner Overdrive, David H. YAKOBIAN, Duane EDDY, Gerry & the Pacemakers, Hazel & the Delta Ramblers, Henry MANCINI & his Orchestra, Jimi HENDRIX, Marie LAFORET, Mondo di

PAPETTI, Nina SIMONE, Non Profit Organization, Tim HARDIN, Mary TRAVERS, Joe and Eddie, The Weavers, Toots THIELEMAN, African singer Myriam MAKEBA, Snakefarm, and to keep Julian PORTER happy in England, there is the wonderful “live at Abbey Road” version by John OTWAY, recorded with “a cast of thousands,” all of whom are listed in the CD liner notes! The tune was used with the lyrics of “Amazing Grace” by the Blind Boys of Alabama and Wyclef Jean sampled it in “Sang Fezi.”

It has been recorded in different musical styles including Old Timey, Folk, Blues, R&B, Cajun, Disco, Punk, House/Trance, Jazz, Rock, Latin, Reggae and Country, not to mention Karaoki, elevator music, German tango, and harmonica renditions; and has always been a favorite for guitar lessons by those budding CLAPTON and HENDRIX freaks. It is probably one of the most recorded songs in history.

“House of the Rising Sun” as performed by the Animals:

“There is a house in New Orleans they call the Rising Sun
And it’s been the ruin of many a poor boy and God, I know I’m one.
My mother was a tailor, sewed my new blue jeans,
My father was a gambling man down in New Orleans.
Now the only thing a gambler needs is a suitcase and a trunk
And the only time he’s satisfied is when he’s on a drunk.
Oh mothers tell your children not to do what I have done,
Spend your life in sin and misery in the House of the Rising Sun.
Well, I’ve got one foot on the platform, the other foot on the train
And I’m going back to New Orleans to wear that ball and chain.
Well, there is a house in New Orleans they call the Rising Sun
And it’s been the ruin of many a poor boy and God, I know I’m one.”

THE MYTH...

“There is a house in New Orleans they call the Rising Sun...”

We named our former bed & breakfast the “House of the Rising Sun” for the obvious reason...the way the song starts. What else could we call it...”Dunroamin”? Bed & breakfast owners need names for their businesses and ours seemed the obvious choice. We could not believe that no one else had used it before. Maybe they were afraid of being associated with the gambling house/brothel in the song. We chose the name because everyone from 18 to 80 was familiar with the song, usually the Animals version. It has proved a successful choice as we get enquiries all the time from all over the world, not just for accommodation but also for the words of the song, the history of the song, the artists that have recorded it and about the brothel/gambling house mentioned in the lyrics.

We state on our website that we named our B&B after the “fictitious house of ill repute”. There is a house on St. Louis Street (No.826-830), in the French Quarter, who’s owners claim to be the original House of the Rising Sun brothel, purportedly ran by a Madam named Marianne LeSoleil LEVANT (French for Rising Sun) between 1862 and 1874. New Orleans and her Confederate troops fell to the Federals in October, 1862, and it is unlikely they would have permitted such “goings on” on their arrival or their stay in the city. New Orleans has always had “Red Light Districts” throughout its history, the most famous being the Storyville District. There is also evidence that an “upstanding” family lived next door to that address and it would be unlikely that they would not have complained to the new city officials that a Madam and “her girls” were plying their trade next door. But, New Orleans was raised on corruption so maybe they were “getting their share” in one way or another.

The earliest mention of any “Rising Sun” in New Orleans can be found in the ‘Louisiana Gazette’ of Monday, Jan.29th, 1821 (p.1, col.6). An advertisement appears for the “Rising Sun Hotel,” Conti Street (at present day 535-37 Conti). The same newspaper of Thursday, Feb.28th, 1822, reported that “Conti Street. About two o’clock yesterday morning a fire broke out in the Rising Sun Hotel, Conti Street. The whole of that extensive building was entirely consumed....” It does not appear the hotel was rebuilt or reopened after the fire.

Gibson’s city directory of 1838 listed “MURRAY Frs. (MURRAY Brothers), Rising Sun coffee house, 9 Old Levee St.” (approx. 115 Decatur Street today).

Searching through the city directories of New Orleans, Kevin discovered some interesting entries:

1881 - RISING SUN, Baronet, 183 Bourbon Street

1882 – RISINGSUN, Baronnet, rear of 185 Bourbon Street

1883 – RISINGSUN, Baronnet, 6 St. Peter Street

1884 – RISINGSUN, Baronnet, hatter, 145 Dumaine Street

There was no trace before or after these dates. These were all addresses in the French Quarter and have the old street numbers. The numbers changed in 1894.

The 1888 city directory listed a Rising Sons of Liberty Hall on the east side of Valence Street between Camp and Chestnut Streets. It does not appear in the 1889 directory but is listed from 1890 to 1897 as the Rising Sons of Liberty Benevolent Association (colored). It is listed from 1901 to 1903 as the Rising Sun Hall, 1019 Valence Street with no further mentions after that.

Also from 1890 to 1897 is listed the Rising Sun Hall on Clinton Street between DeArmas and Macarty Streets in the 7th District, not to be confused with the previous one. Across the street on the same block was the Morning Star Society Hall from 1885 to 1894. The street names changed in 1895 to 1897 and an address is given – 258 Cherokee between Mississippi and Macarty Streets.

These halls were benevolent association halls and at the height of their popularity around the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. They were the birthplaces of the new music of the time called Jazz. They were not brothels but it is a possibility that prostitutes frequented them, either looking for custom or “resting” between clients. Many were two story

buildings and it is a possibility that some of the smaller rooms were used for gambling. So was the House of the Rising Sun a brothel or a gambling house...or both...or neither? Perhaps it was just an Elizabethan folk song that had crossed the Atlantic in the 18th or 19th century and had its words changed to fit in with the opinion that New Orleans was a den of iniquity.

The final word on the matter comes from Pamela D. ARCENEUX, a well-respected research librarian who works at the Williams Research Center & Historic New Orleans Collection, in answer to an article written by Times-Picayune writer, Chris ROSE:

'The Times-Picayune' Daily Newspaper (New Orleans). Monday, February 3, 2003, Section B, p.6 -- "Your Opinions."

"Fact: It's Been the Ruin of Many a Poor Myth"

"As a reference librarian for many years specializing in local history and lore, as well as a long-time fan of The Animals and that group's rendition of "House of the Rising Sun," I was very interested in Chris ROSE's Jan. 12 article, "The rising son." I have made a study of the history of prostitution in New Orleans and have often confronted the perennial question, "Where is the House of the Rising Sun?" without finding a satisfactory answer. Although it is generally assumed that the singer is referring to a brothel, there is actually nothing in the lyrics that indicate that the "house" is a brothel. Many knowledgeable persons have conjectured that a better case can be made for either a gambling hall or a prison; however, to paraphrase FREUD: sometimes lyrics are just lyrics.

After having discussed the "rising sun," a popular decorative device, with a colleague who has just completed her doctoral work on the history of prostitution in New Orleans and a historian who has written about Shreveport's red-light district, as well as being personally familiar with a number of general works on the "oldest profession," there is no evidence or even a mention of the use of a rising sun as a universally recognized symbol of prostitution.

In examining property records for 826-832 St. Louis Street and numerous other resources on prominent pre-Storyville madams and prostitution in the Crescent City, I find it interesting, too, that any reference at all to the "notorious" House of the Rising Sun is conspicuously missing. Public records simply don't confirm it."

Pamela D. ARCENEUX.

We are still researching the myth so watch this site for any forthcoming revelations...but don't hold your breath!

"I will make my Easter Sunday in the name of the Rising Sun...." – *Jimi HENDRIX*.

Since writing all that several years ago, we had a guest stay at our B&B named Ted ANTHONY.

He has since researched and written a book called, "Chasing The Rising Sun: The Journey of an American Song," SIMON & SCHUSTER (2007) ISBN-13: 978-0-7432-7898-0 or ISBN-10: 0-7432-7894-4. Excellent book! Well worth a read!

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And the most recent debate on the subject comes from the "Gambit Weekly," Aug.2, 2010:

The three-story white building in the French Quarter is rumored to be the House of the Rising Sun made famous in a song by The Animals in 1964.

Hey Blake,

I have some questions about a song written about New Orleans, "House of the Rising Sun." Was there a real House of the Rising Sun in New Orleans, and where was it? Who wrote the song?

Cynthia

Dear Cynthia,

There probably were several buildings in New Orleans called House of the Rising Sun over the years, but it's likely most would have been named after the song, not served as the inspiration for it.

Back in the 1980s, Record Ron, whose Record Ron's Good & Plenty Records regularly won "best used record store" honors in reader polls, said he was told his record shop at 1129 Decatur St. occupied the original House of the Rising Sun. Ron, who died in 1996, never could authenticate that claim.

A Jan. 29, 1821, issue of the Louisiana Gazette ran an advertisement announcing L. S. HOTCHKISS and Co. had bought John HULL and Co.'s interests in the Rising Sun Hotel at 535 Conti St. That hotel opened in 1801 and was destroyed by fire in 1822.

Another story proffers the famed house was at 826-830 St. Louis St. and was a brothel originally run by Madam Marianne LeSOLEIL LEVANT, whose surname is French for "rising

sun.”

Today, the three-story white building on St. Louis Street is owned by attorney Darlene Jacobs LEVY and houses her Home Finders International real estate company. She inherited the building when her husband died in the late 1980s, and she began renovating the front apartment of the derelict building as a place for her father to live. Workmen at the site discovered risque postcards of half-dressed women from the 1800s behind a wall and uncovered fancy fluted columns and a ceiling mural of a golden rising sun surrounded by three cherubs. LEVY says the house was a bordello operated by a succession of different madams for many years before her husband bought the building.

Eric BURDON, the vocalist for The Animals, which scored a huge hit with “House of the Rising Sun” in 1964, wrote in his book *Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood* about meeting LEVY and touring the St. Louis Street house.

“It was all I'd dreamt it would be,” Burdon wrote. “A palace in the New Orleans heat. It was a wondrous feeling learning that the place I'd fantasized about for thirty years wasn't some run-down shack but was in fact a place of beauty.”

LEVY says she has no legal documents to prove the building's history. “It has been passed down in history and folklore as being the House of the Rising Sun,” she says. “It doesn't really matter to me whether it is or not. It's not open to the public.”

LEVY restored the house out of a duty to conserve historic structures, she says. “What you see now is what we feel is the original house as it was in the 1800s.”

As for the author of “House of the Rising Sun,” that is unknown. Musicologists have traced the song's origins back as far as the 18th century to a traditional English ballad. Like many ballads and folk songs, the lyrics have changed over the years to suit the singer and the audience. No one can claim rights to the song, so anyone can alter it, record it or sell it royalty-free.

So, folks, you can make up your own mind. Or, better still, make a reservation to stay with us at the House of the Rising Sun Bed & Breakfast in New Orleans and we can discuss it at length and listen to the many different recorded versions of the song we have, over a beer!