



The Magic of

The Moulin Rouge

by Pam Goertler #R-3432



Hundreds of casinos have opened and closed in Las Vegas over the years. Strip casinos that were open for many years, such as the Stardust and Desert Inn, left their marks in the minds and hearts of thousands of people who played and stayed there through the years. Smaller off-strip casinos that were open for only a few months are often nearly forgotten. The Moulin Rouge really should fall into the second category, but it was a place where some historic, almost magical, events took place and there are people who are still struggling, more than 50 years later, to keep the magic alive.

in her days of glory. Dust and dirt, inches thick, covered everything. Bits of construction debris and cardboard boxes littered the floor; I seem to recall a few booths, their upholstery torn, still in the room. I pressed our camera lens against the grimy windows trying to capture, on film, a bit of the magic that had been the Moulin Rouge. The pictures didn't turn out well, there was no magic in them, and they were lost or tossed years ago. I wish we'd seen her in her days of glory, but I'm glad we were able to see her at all.

up to create the Moulin Rouge. It was designed to offer comfortable, even luxurious, accommodations to black entertainers who were not allowed to stay at the hotels on the strip where they performed. It offered a place for black travelers to play and stay. It offered strip-quality restaurants, gambling and entertainment for local blacks who, thanks to the Jim Crow laws, were not welcome on the Las Vegas Strip or downtown. It also was the first neighborhood hotel-casino in Las Vegas.



My husband George and I went to the Moulin Rouge several years ago, long after the casino was closed. We drove past the guard house that was by the open gate, then we got out of the car and wandered around a little, and peeked through the windows. What we saw through the windows was hard to visualize as the Moulin Rouge

Much as the reputation of the Sands was formed during a few short weeks in 1960 when Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., Peter Lawford and Joey Bishop performed their antics on the stage and in the casino; so was the legend of the Moulin Rouge formed during just a few short months, in 1955.

The Beginning

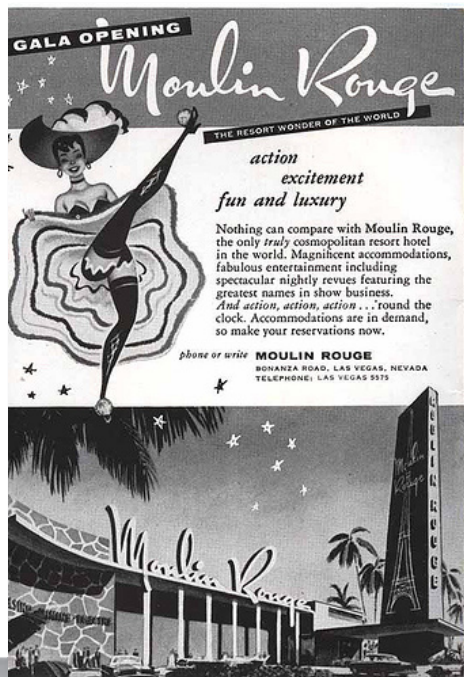
White businessmen Louis Rubin and Beverly Hills developer Alexander Bisno were two of the men who teamed

On April 6, 1955, a fire broke out at the \$2.5 million Moulin Rouge, which was still under construction. A plumber who was using a blowtorch accidentally started the blaze in the second floor attic of a hotel wing. The fire swept across the attic which had no firewalls, destroying the roof above it, burning the ceilings of the rooms below it, and damaging many walls in the rooms located on the second floor of the wing. It was reported that several firemen, attempting to fight the fire from the roof, tumbled through the weakened roof to the floor below. No serious injuries were reported; damage was estimated to be in five-figures. While the extensive fire damage delayed completion of that wing, it didn't delay the opening of the Moulin Rouge which had been planned for May or June.



The Grand Opening

The Moulin Rouge opened on May 24, 1955, and it was every bit as luxurious as the nicest resorts on the Las Vegas strip; crystal chandeliers, mahogany, a spacious showroom and a swimming pool where the guests could cool off on a hot day. The casino



and lounge were painted with murals of Can-Can dancers and scenes of Paris. What made the Moulin Rouge different was the location and the guests... the Moulin Rouge was located at 900 Bonanza Road, on the west side of the tracks, on the edge of the black section of Las Vegas. The staff of the Moulin Rouge was racially integrated, and so were the guests. The two dozen dancers and entertainers, who came from auditions that were held all over the United States, were black. The opening was well publicized, and a reporter and photographer from Life Magazine were there. Photos from the opening night adorn the cover and inside pages of the June 20, 1955 issue



Blackjack on opening night, as shown in Life magazine.

of Life Magazine.

Dee Dee Jasmine was a 17 year old dancer from Los Angeles, who was selected to be part of the Moulin Rouge Chorus Line. She recalls arriving at the Las Vegas airport and getting into a limo which took her and some other dancers down the Las Vegas Strip. They passed the Dunes, the Royal Nevada, Desert Inn, Riviera, Thunderbird, Sahara and

El Rancho Vegas... all those beautiful resorts, and the limo kept right on going. Her heart sank when they got to "the sleazy part of town", then she spotted the beautiful hotel that said "Moulin Rouge" on it... and her spirits lifted again. The Moulin Rouge housed its employees and regular performers at the Cadillac Arms, a development that far exceeded the average Westside accommodations. Young performers like Dee Dee lived next door to stars, such as The Platters. She says the performers were all like family, and they spent a lot of enjoyable time together.



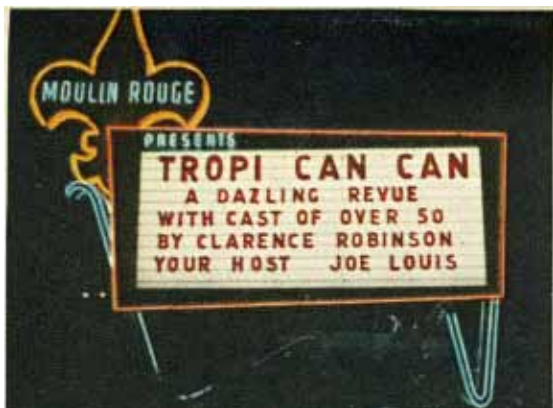
Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections

The show that



Some of the Moulin Rouge dancers (clockwise from lower left) Barbara McCorry, Jane Craddock, Norma Talbert, Lorraine Riley, Anne Bailey, Dee Dee Jasmine and (center) Norma Washington. Photo Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections

premiered at the Moulin Rouge was Tropi-Can Can, which featured Stump and Stumpy, Margie McGlory, a young Gregory Hines with his brother and father, and the Honeytones. The master of ceremonies was Bob Bailey



Prior to the opening of the Moulin Rouge, black

(Pearl Bailey's second cousin), and the host was former heavyweight champion Joe Louis. The show proved to be popular, thanks to the scheduled performers as well as performers who made unscheduled appearances! You can picture what happened... Sammy Davis Jr. is in town, performing with the other members of the Will Mastin Trio. The second show is over and Sammy would like to relax with a drink and play cards for awhile. He can't do that on the strip, so he heads to the nicest casino on the Westside, the Moulin Rouge. His buddy Frank Sinatra is in town and wants to hang out with Sammy, so he heads over to the Moulin Rouge. Frank was an

"entertainer's entertainer"... wherever Frank went, other entertainers followed, as did other members of the "inner circle", and those who wanted to be. It was the same with other black performers; Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton, Della Reese, The Penguins, and more. The crowds were so large, and the show got so popular that a third show was added. It was at that show that the celebrity guests most often joined in, giving impromptu performances of their own.



An African dance called "The Watusi" (performed here by Boots Wade) brought the chorus line at the Moulin Rouge out in father tails to writhe through a violent sequence of jumps and contortions. At climax of the dance a medicine man came bounding out brandishing two live squawking chickens..

entertainers who performed on the strip stayed at rooming houses or in private homes on the Westside. After the opening, several of the black entertainers who were regular performers on the strip maintained rooms or small suites at the Moulin Rouge. While the men who conceived the Moulin Rouge advertised it as "Cosmopolitan" or "Integrated", it was really expected to draw blacks. The fact that a lot of whites were seen there was a pleasant surprise for the owners... because it wasn't just any whites, many were famous, influential, wealthy, or all of the above! Life was good!

The Mystery of the Moulin Rouge

In 1955 the Moulin Rouge was a legend in its own time. That's why it was such a shock when, about six

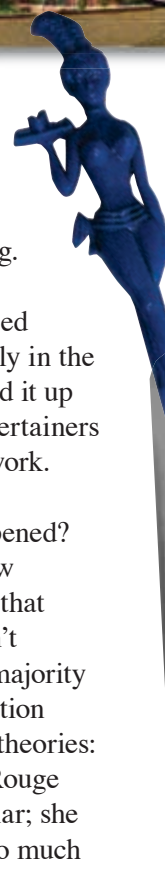


to demand immediate payment, creating a financial problem for the Moulin Rouge. Another theory said that so much money was being “skimmed” that there wasn’t enough left to pay the creditors, forcing the Moulin Rouge to file for bankruptcy. Stage Manager Wally Ogle commented that a lot of money was going out the back door... which seems to support the skimming theory. There was also a theory that the partners weren’t getting along; they couldn’t agree who should do what as far as running the day-to-day

months after it opened, it closed. That abruptly. I’ve come up with two different stories on how the casino closed. According to Dee Dee Jasmine, one day when the staff reported for work they discovered heavy padlocks on the doors. There was no advance notice; business had been

that ensued, customers and employees were grabbing chips from the tables... chips from the dealer trays, as well as the chips they’d been playing. I guess these two stories could both be correct, if gaming closed the casino early in the day and locked it up before the entertainers reported for work.

operations, so nobody was paying the creditors. Maybe the truth lies in this speculation, maybe not. Your guess is as good as mine.



What happened? Whoever knew the answer to that question wasn’t talking. The majority of the speculation offered these theories: The Moulin Rouge was too popular; she was taking too much

booming, and suddenly it was over. The other version of the story says that the Gaming Control Board came in to the casino, closed the games, closed the cashier cage, and escorted the patrons and employees out... with instructions to contact the GCB to redeem any chips. Reportedly, during the chaos

business from the strip and downtown casinos and their owners, including “the boys”, didn’t like it. Some of the strip casino owners threatened to fire any of their showgirls that were spotted at the Moulin Rouge! Pressure was put on suppliers to stop doing business with the Moulin Rouge. Also, it’s been suggested, pressure was put on those who held short-term notes



Cocktail glass from the opening night. Swizzle Stick attributed to Moulin Rouge, Las Vegas.



back to the way they were before the Moulin Rouge; white gamblers went back to the strip and downtown, black patrons went back to the Louisiana Club and the Town Tavern. After the casino closed, the Moulin Rouge Hotel continued

would take place, unless a plan to end segregation was developed within 30 days. Then he held his breath. He hadn't talked to anyone about planning a march, and he didn't know if the members of the NAACP would support such a move, which could result in injury or incarceration for anyone involved. There was a counter-offer; Mayor Gragson promised that more blacks would be hired for city jobs, and City Commissioner Reed Whipple, an officer of the First National Bank, promised that there would be loans for blacks to build

Fuller's Index gives 5/18/59 as the ending date for the Moulin Rouge. I'm puzzled about that, because I've read so many reports that indicate a life span of approximately six months, for the casino. Maybe the license was kept active until that date, since it was licensing dates that Fuller dealt with. Some reports say it closed in October, 1955, some say November. One report said that the Moulin Rouge closed on



Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections



October 11, 1955, due to "financial difficulties".

Whatever and whenever it happened, the closing of the Moulin Rouge meant that some things went

to operate, but things were never really the same.

Desegregation in Las Vegas

In 1960 the blacks in Las Vegas were getting restless. Most of the country had made forward strides towards ending segregation, but things hadn't changed much in Las Vegas. James McMillan, President of the local branch of the NAACP, notified Las Vegas Mayor Oran Gragson, that a huge march on the casino district

or buy homes and businesses. They didn't, however, promise that blacks would be admitted to any of the big casinos and resorts. McMillan turned down the offer, and began holding meetings in West Las Vegas churches, trying to get blacks to agree to march. All the while, he was receiving death threats from the Ku Klux Klan. Sergeant Wilbur Jackson, and the other black officers on the LV police force, began making frequent patrols around McMillan's neighborhood.

Oscar Crozier, owner of the New El Morocco, contacted James McMillan;



Bob Bailey

Bob Bailey worked his way through Morehouse College, in the 1940's, as a singer in a local nightclub. He was approached by two white gentlemen, who asked if he would be interested in singing with Count Basie, and he was hired as one of two featured singers. The job lasted until 1950, when the changing times, and fewer engagements, forced the big band to downsize. Bailey then got interested in television, and attended broadcast school. His color, however, prevented him from getting a job in the television field.

Crozier had been selected by the "hidden" Strip resort owners as their liaison. The message he brought: "Cut it out, or we'll drop you in Lake Mead." McMillan asked Crozier to tell the resort owners that all he wanted to do was "... make Las Vegas a cosmopolitan city, which would make more money for them. You tell them that and let me know what they say." In his autobiography McMillan admitted that he was almost ready to give up. Luckily, Crozier came back with the message "Mac, its OK. They're going to make their people let blacks stay in the hotels... Black people can go into restaurants and stay at hotels and gamble and eat and everything else." McMillan felt that the mobsters thought it would be better to negotiate than to have cars burning up on the strip... and anything less than that would have been ineffective.

A meeting was held on March 26, 1960, with James McMillan, Mayor Oran Gragson, Dr. Charles West, LV Police Chief Ray Schaeffer, Hank Greenspun, Governor Grant Sawyer, Bob Bailey, several other civil rights activists, and representatives from most of the big casino-hotels in attendance. Appropriately, the meeting was held at the Moulin Rouge, and it was announced that blacks would be allowed to patronize the casinos, restaurants and other businesses



on the strip and downtown. This became known as the Moulin Rouge Agreement.

In 1955 he took advantage of the opportunity to go to Las Vegas to co-produce and emcee the Tropi-can show at the brand new Moulin Rouge Hotel and Casino. After a few months at the Moulin Rouge, Bailey was signed to host a television show for 13 weeks, sponsored by the Moulin Rouge. Only seven weeks into the contract, the Moulin Rouge closed. Hank Greenspun, owner of the Las Vegas Sun newspaper and KLAS TV, had become a fan of the show and wanted it to continue. Sponsors were found and Bailey's show stayed on the air for the next two years.

Bailey believed that the Moulin Rouge closed because of its popularity. Back in the 1950's the chorus girls were required to hang around the casino after the shows, to keep the high-rollers interested. The (white) entertainers usually hung around, too. After the Moulin Rouge opened, the chorus girls and entertainers started going out there after the second show. The high-rollers followed them. "The Moulin Rouge became the place to be after hours." 'Nuff said?

Bailey pioneered the way for blacks in television, wrote editorials for the Las Vegas Voice (a black newspaper) and a column for the Las Vegas Sun. He became very active in the civil rights movement in Las Vegas. Bailey directed a Manpower Services Program which trained and placed over 1,000 minority workers, many of them dealers, in two years.

In 1964 Bailey opened the Sugar Hill Club, at 1316 Miller, in Las Vegas. Bailey named the Sugar Hill after an affluent neighborhood in Harlem, and a Broadway show that was about life in the neighborhood. He figured that the name would interest anyone from New York, and they would want to visit the place. Like the Moulin Rouge, the Sugar Hill became an after-hours

the phone book. The sign on the building, however, reads “Cocktails and Gambling”. (Author’s note: yes, this segment should have been in the previous issue of CCTN, in the article about the Westside Clubs. However, I hadn’t found the information when that issue went to press. Since Bob Bailey, the founder of Sugar Hill, was also associated with the Moulin



Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections

hangout. Johnny Carson would play the drums when he stopped in, and Louis Armstrong would play an impromptu trumpet solo. According to Bailey, Sugar Hill was successful until the late 1980’s, when the neighborhood got too rough. I haven’t found the Sugar Hill listed as a casino in any of the usual resources, and it’s listed under “Cocktail Lounges” in

Rouge I included the information here. Now, back to the Moulin Rouge...)

Other Important Dates In Moulin Rouge History

The Moulin Rouge changed owners several times over the years, most of them with dreams of reopening the

Moulin Rouge, and recapturing the magic that existed so briefly in 1955. In 1985 Sarann Knight Preddy, the owner at the time, encased the columns with stucco covered boxes, added awnings and a shingled roof to the tower, in an attempt to refurbish and improve the Moulin Rouge.



Sarann Knight Preddy in 1985



Changes implemented by Preddy including awnings and a shingled roof to the existing tower.

In 1992 the Moulin Rouge was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1993 new chips were made for the Moulin Rouge; The Chip Rack shows that it was open from 1993-1996.



I couldn't find any other information on the Moulin Rouge during those dates.

In 1997 Bart Maybie bought the Moulin Rouge for \$3 million. He rented out the 120 rooms, which had been transformed into "apartments" by that time, to people who were getting government assistance with housing.

In 1998, less than 200 yards from the Moulin Rouge, Fred "Bubba" Ball was arrested and was later convicted for felony drug possession.

In March of 2003, owner Bart Maybie announced plans to renovate and reopen the casino. At 1:18 A.M. on May 29, 2003, a Moulin Rouge security guard called the fire department because he saw smoke. By the time the fire department arrived,

flames were shooting out the roof of the casino building. The fire department pumped more than 5,000 gallons of water per minute on the fire, in an attempt to extinguish it, or at least control it. With no lives at stake in the long-closed casino, and with a fear that it would collapse,

no fire-fighters were sent into the building. The building was completely destroyed, except for the façade and the sweeping neon letters that formed the name. Luckily only 3 or 4 of the apartments in the hotel wing were damaged, by water, and there were no serious injuries.

On February 20, 2004, former employee Fred "Bubba" Ball pleaded guilty to arson. He was sentenced to 51 months in federal prison and was ordered to pay \$5.6 million restitution. John "Antman" Caver had been arrested on related charges, but the Clark County prosecutor's office dismissed the charges.

On February 7, 2008, it was announced that \$700 million funding was in place to redevelop the Moulin Rouge. Ground breaking is planned for 2009, with the opening anticipated in 2010.

Will the Moulin Rouge, like the Phoenix, rise from the ashes? Only time will tell.

Thanks to Rick Olson, Brian Cashman and Mark Englebreton for allowing me to use your scans.



The Moulin Rouge in 1955, and above inset after another tragic fire. Courtesy of UNLV Special Collections