

The History and Mystery of the Moulin Rouge

by Steve Fischer



Back in September of 2003, I wanted to offer for sale on eBay an autographed menu from the Moulin Rouge Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. It was signed by boxing legend and 2% owner of the Moulin Rouge, World Champion Joe Louis, who also worked as a greeter at the hotel. Interesting, but certainly not a rarity.

So I decided to do a little investigating into what ever happened to that hotel/casino. What is interesting is that there is almost no information about what happened; why an establishment that had become extremely popular suddenly closed. Yet, putting together a few facts about that year.....plus some common sense...

It was 1955. The strip hotels were doing well. There was a LOT of



Joe Lewis dressed for Helldorado Days just before opening of the Moulin Rouge (in background).

building going on. Smart money from all over the country was watching what was happening at the El Rancho Vegas and the Last Frontier and the Sahara and the Flamingo and the Sands.

Likable or not, the mobsters who owned the casinos, and the casino owners who fronted for them, were overall a pretty damn bright group of guys! Especially when it came to gambling. These were money men – they understood gaming and they understood gamblers. And they were getting successful.

These very serious gambling men, and in some cases, new casino owners had one hell of a lot riding on their own casino's success.

There were a few side stories

The new owners of The New Frontier, Murray Randolph, Irv Leff and Morris Friedman just paid Jake Kozloff, Guy McAfee and Beldon Katelman a *lot of money* to buy The Last Frontier. Then, it cost them a few hundred thousand more to convert The Last Frontier into their dream, which they called The New Frontier. These very serious men and new hotel owners needed cash flow FAST - and didn't need no competition from no uppity you-know-whats like the owners of the Moulin Rouge.

Sid Wyman was making good money at the Sands. He had points in the Sands, but he decided to leave to pursue a lifelong dream of becoming a Casino Owner. So what if he had made his money as a Bigtime bookmaker in St. Louis? He was legit now!

Sid's partner was Al Moll who had fled Missouri because that damn Estes Kefauver and his damn Organized Crime Committee were going to start asking him questions *again!*

So Moll closed his Christmas Accounts at the St. Louis bank, sold his interests in the casinos in Kentucky and Tennessee, and brought a couple mil cash to the Land Of Golden Opportunity – Las Vegas. A place where a gambler could make a decent living legally! It cost Sid and Al \$5 Million Dollars to get the doors of The Royal Nevada open – These very serious men and new hotel owners needed cash flow *fast* – and didn't need no competition from no uppity you-know-whats like the owners of the Moulin Rouge

Meanwhile, Gus Greenbaum was asked by the owner of the Riviera, "Big Tuna" Tony Accardo, head of the Chicago Outfit, to please come to Vegas and save the damn hotel! The Riv had been open for three months, and for 90 straight days had lost money each and every day! So Tony

Accardo kindly asked the management team of the Riviera to pack their bags – pick up some souvenir postcards – and be out of the hotel within 15 minutes!

At first, Gus said, “No thanks” . But Marshall Ciafano (Johnny Marshall in Vegas) who was the number one enforcer for the Chicago Outfit (he had a particular fondness for ending discussions with a blowtorch)! was very persuasive. Four nights later, his sister-in-law was murdered in her bed. Gus changed his mind. He brought his management group from the days he owned the Flamingo, but in order to purchase the Riviera, Gus had to raise some serious cash fast. He sold pieces of the Riv to his old group.

These managers weren't wealthy men. They had to mortgage homes and borrow anywhere they could to raise their stake, and they sure as beans didn't need no competition -- especially from some uppity-you-know-what's.

The Riviera Split in 1955

Ben Goffstein (7% ownership) Harry Goldman, Ross Miller and Davie Berman (split 7% ownership between them), “Icepick” Willie Alderman (7% owner), Jess Goodman, Charlie Haris, and the Atoll Brothers Frank, Fred and Elias (17% ownership). These very serious men and new hotel owners needed cash flow FAST– and didn't need no competition from no uppity you-know-whats like the owners of the Moulin Rouge.

The Dunes in 1955

Stan Miller left a good job at the Sahara to buy into the brand new Dunes. Sid Wyman, Kewpie Rich, Butch Goldstein, Major Riddle, Bob Rice, Howie Engel were listed own-



ers. Morris Shenker, the attorney for the Mob, was also an owner, as was Ray Patriarca - the Capo of the New England La Cosa Nostra.

All of these guys had spent a lot of time and a lot of money -- and they had a lot riding on the success of the brand new Dunes Hotel and Country Club. And these very serious men and new hotel owners needed cash flow FAST - and didn't need no competition from no uppity you-know-whats like the owners of the Moulin Rouge.

The Fremont, “Doc Bailey’s” Hacienda, and the Tropicana were nearly finished. And in the midst of all this building – there was an economic downturn across the country. and Las Vegas was getting a few less visitors. All these new rooms going up on the Strip – and all these very serious men and new casino owners were getting worried about all the competition.

It was the middle of the 20th century, and most of the entertainers in Las Vegas in the 1940s and early 1950s went to West Las Vegas to sleep and eat. And West Las Vegas of that time was pretty bad. Muddy streets. Little plumbing, little electricity. That's where most of the black

entertainers who worked in Las Vegas lived. The maids and the kitchen help. Even Sammy Davis, Jr. and his dad, Sammy, Sr., along with his uncle Will Mastin, all stayed in the rooming houses in that poor section of town; there were laws back then about such things.

And then, on May 20 of 1955, (articles vary on the exact day), The Moulin Rouge Hotel and Casino opened out on West Bonanza with 105 Rooms. It was variously called the “First Multiracial” or “Integrated” or “Cosmopolitan” hotel in Las Vegas. Blacks were welcome, Whites were welcome, even Benny Binion was welcome!

The two main owners of the Moulin Rouge were Louis Rubin, who made his money from New York Restaurants, and Al Bisno, a Los Angeles builder, both white. The Rouge had a total of eight owners who bought partnership in the Casino, and one who was given 2 points of the project. The others were George Altman, who became the casino boss, Al Childs, Will Schwartz, Larry Ousely, Walter Zick and Tom Foley. Tom was the hotel attorney who was also licensed by the state of Nevada to operate the bar/tavern at the Rouge.

Joe Louis was the last of the “owners”. In exchange for The Champ’s services, Lou and Al gave Lewis 2 points in the hotel. I must mention that some sources say that Joe was only a host/greeter, but LIFE Magazine which came out a month after the Rouge opened said, “Former Heavyweight Boxing Champion Joe Louis, is an owner and host of the new Moulin Rouge.” If it’s good enough for LIFE Magazine, I’ll also accept that Joe had 2 points in the Rouge.

There were 17 additional investors – none of which were licensed by the state, and as such, none of which had to have their names published. Each point of the hotel, prior to building would cost \$24,000 — and you had to buy a minimum of one point to become a limited partner.



Hotel Personnel

Sonny Boswel – General Manager (Sonny was a former Harlem Globetrotter)

Martin Black – Publicist of the Rouge

George Altman – Casino Manager George, who had left his pit boss job at The Last Frontier, and all the dealers at the Rouge were white. They were the only jobs at the hotels that were not filled by Blacks.

Blacks couldn’t deal or be involved in any casino games prior to the Moulin Rouge, so there were no experienced dealers to draw from.

Morry Deitch – Assistant Casino Manager. Previously with the Golden Nugget ‘51-55



Waiters’ jackets issued before opening night at Moulin Rouge, were expected to make the club’s waiters look snappier than any other in town.

Monk Schaefer – Swing Shift Pit Boss

Joe Chariara – Pit Boss

Cliff Marshon – Dealer

Carl Walton – Dealer

John Achoff – Pit Boss

Andy Rocknie (Called “Rockie”) – Assistant Security Chief. Retired State Senator from Wyoming, retired Pro Wrestler.

The Night In May 1955 Moulin Rouge opened

The Platters opened at the Moulin Rouge

Liberace was playing at the Riviera

Carmen Miranda was at the New Frontier

The Delta Rhythm Boys were at the Sands

Louis Prima and Keely Smith were at the Sahara

Entertainment at the Moulin Rouge

Wally Ogle – Stage Manager

Benny Parson – First orchestra leader (4 months) until he was replaced by Les Brown who was there for the last two months of the Moulin Rouge’s life.

Security At The Hotel

There were 25 Interracial Security Staff – All wearing the French Foreign Legion dress uniforms with plumed hats.

Merle Longnecker – (Head of Security). Retired after 25 years as Inspector of Homicide with the Oakland, California, PD.

Opening Night at the Moulin Rouge was packed – It was attended by all the major newspapers, magazines and the wire services. Martin Black, PR Man for the Moulin Rouge had arranged and paid for 70 newpeople to come in from the East Coast and the Midwest.

The first show at the Rouge was “Tropi-Can-Can” with the largest chorus line in Las Vegas with 23 dancers. During much of 1954, The Moulin Rouge held open, and very well publicized auditions all over the US looking for Black Dancers and Chorus Girls to dance on the line at the new hotel!

Local, state and federal officials were all over the Rouge on opening night — including Mayor C. D. Baker of Las Vegas.

Some later entertainers to play at the Moulin Rouge

Harry Belafonte, Della Reese, Hines, Hines and Dad (a very, very young Maurice and Gregory Hines and their dad), The Penguins (right before their big hit “Earth Angel”), Dinah Washington, Lionel Hampton, Duke Ellington, Sammy Davis, Jr. with Sammy Davis, Sr., Will Mastin, and Ella Fitzgerald. She, like many of the Black headliners, kept a 2-room suite at the Rouge.

The Moulin Rouge had what was called a “Breakfast Show,” at 1:30 AM – and it attracted most of the entertainers from the Strip. After the second show was over at the Sands and the Sahara and the Silver Slipper, the entertainers the singers, the showgirls and boys would head over the Moulin Rouge to sit in on the Jam Sessions. The impromptu get-togethers were becoming more and more popular.

A typical night at the Moulin Rouge would have Sammy Davis, Jr. on stage, and George Burns and Gracie Allen, Nat “King” Cole, Jack Benny and Mary Livingston, Joe E. Louis, Frank Sinatra, Peter Lawford, Harry Belafonte, and 350 others watching the hottest show in Las Vegas.

While all these people were watching the Watusi being danced by the Moulin Rouge Chorus line of 23 dancers, the dealers in pit 3 at the Desert Inn were talking to one another. The place was empty! And the Flamingo began letting craps dealers go home early.

It began to catch on. The Black celebrities who played the Strip now had nice accommodations in West Las Vegas, and the white entertainers who played the Strip, most notably Sinatra and his group, began showing up at the Moulin Rouge to watch the late show.

The night the Dunes opened, May 23, 1955, Frank Sinatra was in the house – he played, he saw the show, and then at 10:30 he escorted Hedda Hopper over to the Moulin Rouge to watch the Tropi-Can-Can and the Watusi! The Dunes people were not very happy with this! On their opening night! Sinatra and party are heading to West Las Vegas!

When Sinatra showed up somewhere, everyone else wanted to be there, too.

So on any given night the audience held far more stars than the stage did. People were lining up hours before the shows to try to get into the Cafe Rouge, the Showroom at the Moulin Rouge. After their midnight shows, the showgirls and the dancers on the Strip began heading into West Las Vegas for the 2:30 AM shows. These shows turned into Jam Sessions with world class talent playing or watching or both. It was becoming *the* place to be! And sure enough, the gamblers wanted to be where the action was. So instead of staying at the Flamingo and playing, the gamblers wanted to try out the Rouge where they heard the action really was!

Surprisingly, there are very few newspaper and magazine articles about what happened. Good records were not kept, apparently. And there weren’t many people who wrote about the history of the place.

Before the Rouge opened, there were highly publicized talent searches throughout the country to find the most beautiful black dancers, the best black bartenders, the finest black sous chefs and executive chefs and pastry chefs and the best black Maitre’d available, and, the plan began to work – money was being made!

“Holy Mackerel - Did You See Our Crowd Last Night?”

“I saw Marlena Dietrich with Sinatra! And George Burns was there again! Damn!”

On the second floor executive offices at the Sands, the Flamingo and the DI, people started to take the Moulin Rouge seriously! At first, it seemed like a nice, innocent enterprise for Negroes which didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of succeeding. It was in West Las Vegas after all. “Who is going to drive to West Vegas to play 21 next to a bunch of Negroes?” was the standard thought. Until it began taking off.

All of a sudden, night after night the midnight show at the Moulin Rouge and the breakfast show was selling out. And then the dinner show began taking off, and the tables were beginning to fill up every night! The Casino owners assumed that the Moulin Rouge was going to attract Blacks, but, to nearly everyone’s surprise, the casino was filled with white gamblers, dressed to the T’s. Diamonds, black chips, loud voices, celebrities walking around – hundred dollar bills filling up the drop boxes at the tables – it was becoming pretty heady stuff!

Apparently, enough was enough.

The showgirls who were coming over to the Moulin Rouge for the 2:30 AM Breakfast Show were told by their managers that if they were seen there again - *Once more* - they would be fired.

The liquor distributor who was supplying the Sands was told that if he kept selling to the Moulin Rouge, he could forget the Sand's business.

The food purveyor to the Sahara was asked who he wanted to keep as a client, the Sahara or the Moulin Rouge?

Questions like that would make any supplier to a hotel think seriously about who should be a client, and who shouldn't.

Then something serious happened. The Liquor License of the Moulin Rouge was suspended!

Next to the Gaming License a Casino's Liquor License is the most valuable commodity it has. After researching the "why" the Liquor License of the Moulin Rouge was lifted. I found a paragraph in one of the Las Vegas newspapers which said that the Moulin Rouge was charging "working Blacks" more money for drinks than they were charging "white collar Blacks"! So apparently, the liquor license was lifted because the Moulin Rouge was practicing discrimination. Horsefeathers! But it was lifted and for the last month of the life of Moulin Rouge, no liquor could be served, legally!

One sunny afternoon in October, Federal Agents, and agents from the state of Nevada Gaming Commission and the Clark County Sheriff's Office entered the casino portion of the Moulin Rouge, told everyone to stop what they were doing. The casino

was now closed. Newspaper reports said many of the gamblers grabbed as many hundred dollar chips as they could and headed for the front doors. Other players gathered their chips and got on line at the one casino cage hoping to cash in their chips. They were told by Sheriff's Deputies that the cashier was closed; and they would have to file in Clark County Court for redemption of their chips; the rest were now under control of the Nevada Gaming Commission.

And that was that.

There wasn't much coverage of the closing. The hotel which opened to such fanfare, covered by the national news, barely received passing references in the Las Vegas newspapers. In going through everything I could find for the months of September and October of 1955, I was able to find only 7 short references to the closing!

And that I found very surprising.

It wasn't as if The Las Vegas Sun or the Hank Greenspun's Review Journal were shy! They took on the Mafia in Vegas, they went after the casino owners, even the governors of the state was called a crook. Why didn't they make a big deal out of the sudden closing of the Moulin Rouge?

The few articles on the topic suggest "three possible reasons for its closing - poor location, poor management and a glut of new hotel rooms." *bologna!* The place was coming apart at the seams with business. The Cafe Rouge was the only showroom in Las Vegas that was continuously selling out! And that includes the Copa Room at the Sands, the Arabian Room at the Dunes, and the Venus Showroom at the New Frontier.

Yes, a few hotels had trouble at the time. Like the Dunes (which was

right on the brink of bankruptcy. It closed in June of 1956 for "remodeling" before it was bailed out by Jackie Freeman of the Sands, or the Riviera which had just opened and was losing enormous amounts of money, or the Royal Nevada which closed. But the Moulin Rouge was making money. The place was jumping! For its small size, it was turning into a gold mine!

Then suddenly, the big four began to apply pressure on the two Las Vegas banks to call in the short term notes that had been made to the Moulin Rouge investors. They applied pressure on the suppliers of the Moulin Rouge, demanding money out front for liquor deliveries or food on a daily basis.

Another possible scenario is that the owners of the Moulin Rouge were stealing the hotel blind. One of the night auditors was quoted by a Las Vegas Sun reporter that, "money was flying out the back door!" A perfectly plausible explanation. The owners were stealing money from the soft count room at the MR. Not the first time it would happen, and certainly not the last time either.

But then, one asks, "What is the Nevada Gaming Commission - stupid? They licensed eight guys to operate a gambling establishment in Nevada. They also sent in one of their NGC people daily to watch what was going on. The state of Nevada and the Federal Government don't like gambling revenues being pocketed by owners! And they know what forensic accounting is.

When they closed the Moulin Rouge, they took the books!

If there was money missing, do you think the two or three governmental agencies who were going over the Rouge's books would miss it? Not report it?



Bar in the Moulin Rouge

If they found someone's hand in the till, do you think they'd just shrug their shoulders and leave? Neither do I!

Same year – 1955, Al Parvin was convicted of stealing \$30 Million dollars from the Flamingo, and he went

to jail. Morris Lansberg was convicted of stealing from the Flamingo and the Fremont, and when James Tanner, Maurice Freeman and William Pompili were caught stealing from the Frontier, they went to jail.

How about Morris Kleinman at the Riv? He was caught embezzling money from the Riviera and was sent to Federal Prison for 3 years! When Gus Greenbaum was caught stealing from the Riviera, his head was cut off, literally.

After its closing as a casino, the Moulin Rouge was a hotel for a few years. In 1960 it was used for a historic signing of an agreement to abolish housing and other forms of racial segregation on the Strip. In May of 2003, an arsonist's fire destroyed much of the Moulin Rouge.

Copyright © 2004. Steve Fischer.
All Rights Reserved

Thanks to Mike Quinlivan for the scans of the chips used in this article

Steve writes and sells on eBay under the name "OmahaGrampa."