

## ***A PLASTIC ROSE FOR MARIE LAVEAU***

**By Michael Ventura**

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There's a preference for plastic flowers at Marie Laveau's tomb. She died more than half a century before the invention of plastic, so you have to wonder how she'd take that. She was a witch -- more accurately: a shaman -- and she was practical if she was anything, so might enjoy perhaps both the ghostly vibe of a plastic white rose and its utility. One hopes so, for she was a dangerous lady to offend. Even her tomb feels vaguely dangerous. It's one of a maze of tombs in St. Louis Cemetery #1, the oldest graveyard in the city, and there are always voodoo charms among her flowers and chalked X's on the cracked masonry, for the purpose of speeding the supplicants' prayers to wherever Marie Laveau's spirit abides -- proof that many believe she still wields power. The name of Marie Laveau is still invoked in songs, sung and danced to by many who know only the name. But she was a real and important person who exerted a strong influence on her own time and on the future, for she led and consolidated the culture out of which, just as she was dying, the blues would proliferate and jazz would be born -- and you can hear a Laveau-like spirit in America's music ever since.

Racially she was a mixture of African, Native American, and European. Her father was said to be a wealthy white planter, and her marriage certificate -- the first official record of her, dated 1819 -- says she was illegitimate. A free woman of color, both her first and second husbands (with whom she bore, it is said, at least 15 children!) came from Haiti. Haiti, then as now, was a fountain of the voodoo religion in the Americas; it was also the site of the first black independence movement, which began with a voodoo-led rebellion against the whites in 1891. Haiti's turmoil was still going on when Marie Laveau's first husband, and possibly Marie herself, emigrated to New Orleans in the early 1800s.

At that time, huge voodoo ceremonies and dances were held regularly just outside the city on Bayou St. John and the shores of Lake Pontchartrain, as they would until late in the 19th century. We know that sometime in the 1820s, Marie Laveau became the premier voodoo queen of the area, overpowering and, it is said, sometimes causing the deaths of lesser queens and kings who wouldn't recognize her authority. She reigned over both the huge lakeside celebrations and the myriad smaller gatherings that were held for voodoo initiates alone -- though throughout her life she maintained that her people were Catholic and that she offered her voodoo to the Catholic God.

White New Orleans knew Marie Laveau as a powerful woman. In her early years she was a hairdresser to New Orleans' elite, and she is said to have developed an intelligence network of hairdressers, servants, and slaves to ferret out the most embarrassing secrets of the white rich and use them for blackmail. This seems to have made her invulnerable to the law. Over the years, she was in court many times, on various charges and in various suits, but never lost a case. Neither her ceremonies nor her house (or houses) of prostitution were ever raided, at least as far as court records show (as researched by 1940s journalist Robert Tallant in his informative *Voodoo in New Orleans*). And she could come and go at will visiting the prisons, which she apparently did as a lay Catholic, spending a great deal of time with prisoners who'd been sentenced to death. She opened the Bayou St. John and Lake Ponchartrain ceremonies to whites and

went so far as to invite the press at times. (From the beginning of the 19th century, New Orleans whites -- especially women -- were heavily involved in voodoo, especially the more orgiastic practices. This contributed to the old Southern saying, "There ain't no white people in New Orleans," and to Bessie Smith's line that New Orleans "is a right fine place, whatever the black folks do, the white folks do it too.") In 1850, *The Daily Picayune* referred to Marie Laveau as "the head of the Voudou women," and she was still presiding over the more important lakeside ceremonies in 1869, when *The New Orleans Times* gave the last description of her doing so.

One of Robert Tallant's informants remembered what his grandfather told him when he was a boy: "Marie Laveau had a dance she did all by herself. She would wrap that snake around her shoulders and she'd shake and twist herself like she was a snake ... My grandfather said that was something to see."

If we put it all together we see a black woman strong enough to have real authority in a time when neither blacks nor women had any, in the South right through the Civil War and Reconstruction. We see a woman who was a shaman, and therefore, to maintain her rep, had to be a healer as well as a hexer. A woman who felt deeply enough about her theology to enforce its tenets -- voodoo-Catholicism -- on her people. A woman who was hustler enough to make money through the gullibility of whites and blacks alike, and cunning enough to protect herself and her religion from white law. And this money was not spent only on herself: She lived most of her life in a small cottage on St. Anne Street in the Vieux Carre (the Marie Laveau Voodoo Museum, said to be her old home, was actually the residence of a daughter, who also, significantly, carried her name), and she supported a virtual tribe of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Last but not least, she was a dancer -- by all accounts, an incredible dancer.

How many other figures have we in our history with such a range, with such long-lasting authority, and whose power -- political, social, and spiritual -- had nothing to back it up but their own intensity? Marie Laveau helped both to center and anchor what might otherwise have been continually more scattered and dissipated practices, especially with the shocks of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Her centering effect cannot be underestimated. What elsewhere in the South was a people who had to disguise its expression and conceal its spirit, became in her reign a true culture, a culture that felt its identity deeply *as a culture*. Only out of such an intensely felt, cohesive culture could a creation like jazz be born. (I have never thought it a coincidence that the first great jazz recordings, by King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, were recorded on June 23, the date of the biggest Lake Pontchartrain ceremonies.)

The last account we have of her was published in 1886 by George W. Cable, one of the most respected Southern journalists of his era:

"I once saw, in extreme old age, the famed Marie Laveau. Her dwelling was in the quadron quarter of New Orleans ... In the center of a small room whose ancient cypress floor was worn with scrubbing, sprinkled with crumbs of soft brick -- a Creole affectation of superior cleanliness -- sat, quaking with feebleness in an ill-looking old rocking chair, her body bowed, her wild, gray witch's tresses hanging about her shriveled, yellow neck, the queen of the Voodooos. Three generations of her children were within the faint beckon of her helpless, wagging wrist and fingers ... one could hardly help but see that her face, now so withered, had once been handsome and commanding. There was still a faint shadow of departed beauty in the forehead, the spark of an old fire in the sunken, glistening eyes, and vestige of imperiousness in the fine, slightly aquiline nose, and even

about her silent, woebegone mouth ... Her daughter was also present, a woman of some 70 years, and a most striking and majestic figure. In features, stature and bearing she was regal. One had but to look at her, and impute her brilliances -- too untamable and severe to be called charms and graces -- to her mother, and remember what New Orleans was long years ago, to understand how the name of Marie Laveau should have driven herself inextricably into the traditions of the town and the times."

On June 16, 1881, word went out that Marie Laveau was dead. *The Times Democrat* wrote, "Much evil dies with her, but should we not add, a little poetry as well?"

One hundred and nineteen years after her death, people still leave plastic roses, fetishes, and X's on her tomb. I left a note, written on a torn scrap of paper in the rain and stuffed into one of the cracks in the masonry. A Hollywood producer had asked me to write a script about her, and I wasn't sure I should. I respected both her paradoxes and her achievement, and wasn't at all certain that her tale was mine to embroider. I don't remember exactly what I wrote, but it was something like, "If you don't want this done, it's OK with me." I guess she didn't. The project never happened, and I was a little relieved. In fact, there've been many budding film projects about Marie Laveau that have gone nowhere. Make of that what you will.

She doesn't rest in peace. She doesn't rest at all. Not if she's responding to all those messages at her tomb. Many still invoke her in song. And dance to the songs. She doesn't seem to mind but, if I were you, I wouldn't do either lightly.

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