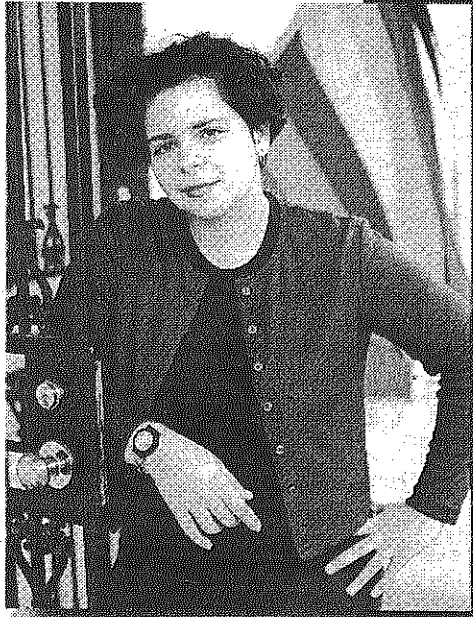
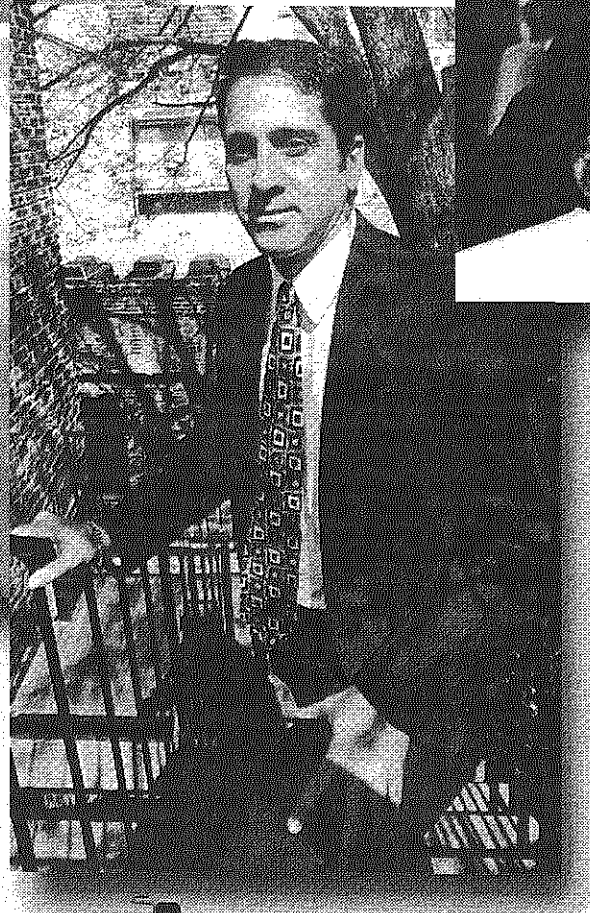


'THOSE PEOPLE THINK THAT IF WE JUST PLAY MUSIC, EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE FINE. THOSE PEOPLE HAVE NEVER KNOWN WHAT IT'S LIKE TO HAVE THE POLICE KNOCK ON THEIR DOOR IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT.'

— George Fowler (right), general counsel for the Cuban-American National Foundation



PHOTOS BY
CHERYL GERBER



'Next Year in Havana!'

Local Cuban Americans can't agree on the merits of *Buena Vista Social Club* and second lining in Old Havana.

The only thing they share is the ache to put their hands in Cuban soil.

BY CONSTANCE ADLER

Two things are immediately noticeable about Cuban-Americans in exile. The first is that most of them refer to Fidel Castro simply as "Fidel," as if they had a close personal relationship with him. Not a loving relationship, mind you, but an intimate one.

The second is that they still refer to Cuba as "home." This is even true of Cuban-Americans who have never lived there.

Such is the case with Rosana Cruz, who was born in New Jersey after her parents and brother left Cuba. She grew up in Miami and came to New Orleans in 1997 while working with Amnesty International. Since then, she has become the director of the Lesbian & Gay Community Center, heading up a task force against hate crimes. Cruz also is a musician — her band is Son del Pantano — and had a chance to play with members of Cubanismo, the Cuban band that recorded here a few months ago. She has gone to Cuba to visit family several times and would move there permanently if the political situation changed.

"I want my children to think of themselves as Cuban," she says. "That's how I think of myself. I'm even more Cuban than my brother who was born there."

This atavistic connection to the land resonates in all Cuban-Americans as they consider this island nation, a skinny spit of beautiful if ungraced real estate, home to 11 million souls plus one dark, looming ogre. They are reminded of their home constantly: Cuba has not been far from the national headlines nearly every day of the 40 years since the U.S.-imposed embargo went into effect. More recently, with the arrival of musicians from the documentary *Buena Vista Social Club* and the band Cubanismo, cultural exchanges between Cuba and New Orleans have become a flashpoint in this small local community.

But one thing they do share is this heartsick longing to put their hands in Cuban soil. It might be the only thing they share.

THE DRAMA OF THE DISPLACED PEOPLE — ROUGHLY 7,000 CUBAN-AMERICANS live in Louisiana, 3,000 of those in New Orleans — and the embargo help to excite passionate responses on the subject. The embargo also polarizes the topic of Cuba: one must take a moral stand on one side or the other, making it nearly impossible for a modulated exchange of ideas to occur.

All this is to say that talking to Cuban-Americans about Cuba is like walking into a minefield. "When you have two Cubans, you have three opinions," explains José Ramon Cosío, describing the essential character of his people. "And Cubans say, 'If you think different from me, then you are my enemy.'"

A former journalist, Cosío served as propaganda director for his province of Camagüey in Castro's revolutionary organization called M-26-7, named for the July 26 date Castro began his movement. "That was my romantic time," says Cosío. "I fought for something I really wanted. Cuba needed the revolution to change many things. But not to Communism."

After Castro's victory on Jan. 1, 1959, Cosío went to work for the anti-Castro underground organization called MRP ("The Revolutionary Movement of the People"), because he had become disillusioned by Castro's ties with the Soviet Union. In 1964, while walking down the street, Cosío was arrested for dissident activities; he spent 14 years in jail before receiving amnesty. Upon his release, he joined his wife and children in New Orleans, and for the past two decades has worked for Tulane University's Physical Plant. Cosío also published the Spanish newspaper *Que Pasa New Orleans*.

"Cuba still needs to change," he says. "But the Cubans on the island are the ones to make the change. Not us. Not the Cubans in exile."

"It must be a peaceful change, step by step, peacefully and gradually. The cultural relations are a good way to show the Cuban people that there are different things in the world. That's why I like what Nick is doing."

He refers to Nicholas Robins, director of the Cuban Studies Institute at Tulane. Cosío has been a resource for Robins, who develops programs that seek to promote information about Cuban culture and economic and political issues. These include a film and speaker series, on-campus lectures, and a summer studies program in Havana for Tulane students.

In January 1999, following the U.S. government's legalization of academic exchange with Cuba (while keeping the embargo on economic exchange), Robins also brought what he terms "a cultural delegation" to Havana. The group consisted of 35 civic and business leaders of New Orleans — including Jacques Morial, brother of Mayor Marc Morial; Julio Guichard and Rafael Perales, director and deputy director, respectively, of the city's International Relations & Trade Division; Lilliam Z. Regan, director of the Department of Utilities; and a brass band. Tuba Fats, Trombone Shorty and James Andrews played for a second-line parade down the streets of Old Havana, while the Americans tossed Mardi Gras throws to the jubilant crowd.

By all accounts, the Cubans of Cuba understood perfectly the *lingua franca* of Mardi Gras beads. Granted, the Black Berets did try to stop the parade because to them it appeared dangerously disorganized, but after some quick street-side, New Orleans-style negotiations, the procession continued. And Tuba Fats blatted his way into the next bar, where the New Orleans musicians jammed with a cluster of Cuban players. Robins declares the mission a triumph.

His opponents, however, regard the trip to Havana as a failure. Fearing that such trips strengthen Castro, they're working to prevent any more.

These are the staunchly conservative Cuban-Americans who maintain that any contact at all with Cuba puts money into Castro's coffers and, worst of all, gives tacit moral support to what they see as an irredeemably evil entity. Robins says he has been personally attacked and accused

of being a communist. He defends himself and his work this way: "Information is the oyster shucker of a closed society. By promoting the flow of information into a closed society, you open that society. We are not a policy group or a Cuban advocacy group. We provide information."

"So when they come after me, I look at it from a civil rights argument. People have a right to travel to Cuba and form their own opinions based on first-hand experience. And so what right do they have to deprive people of their civil liberties — their right to travel and learn?"

The "they" that Robins alludes to includes George Fowler and the conservative Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) for which Fowler serves as general counsel. Fowler acknowledges that he has asked — to no avail — Tulane's president to shut down Robins' Cuban Studies Institute. He also grudgingly allows that "in fairness to Nick, he does sometimes bring speakers in for our side. He tries to be even-handed. But he's not even-handed enough. And besides, you can't be even-handed with Fidel. He's a loony."

Fowler recently has been spending time in Miami, where he is working to keep Elian Gonzalez in the United States. The 6-year-old boy, who was found on Thanksgiving floating in an inner tube off the coast of Florida, has become a cause celebre for CANF — a poster boy for the fight to defeat Castro. At the request of the Cuban government, Fowler was thrown out of meetings with the boy's grandmothers, who had come from Cuba to retrieve Elian.

Where his home country is concerned, Fowler's moral imperative is clear and obvious. He states that Castro is a murderer who exercises absolute and pernicious control over people in Cuba. Fowler works to put Castro in jail for human rights abuses. Furthermore, he believes the only way to accomplish that is to maintain complete isolation of the island. His position on cultural exchanges and Tulane summer studies programs is that they create a dangerously false air of reasonableness around Cuba — and, by extension, Castro. Fowler takes offense that anyone would fail to treat Cuba as a country in a state of emergency.

"Those people think that if we just play music, everything is going to be fine," he argues. "That's a bunch of airhead foolishness. We've got a serious situation here. Those people have never known what it's like to have the police knock on their door in the middle of the night. Those people have never experienced a lack of civil liberties."

Robins and Fowler frequently have squared off as respected adversaries on the question of whether

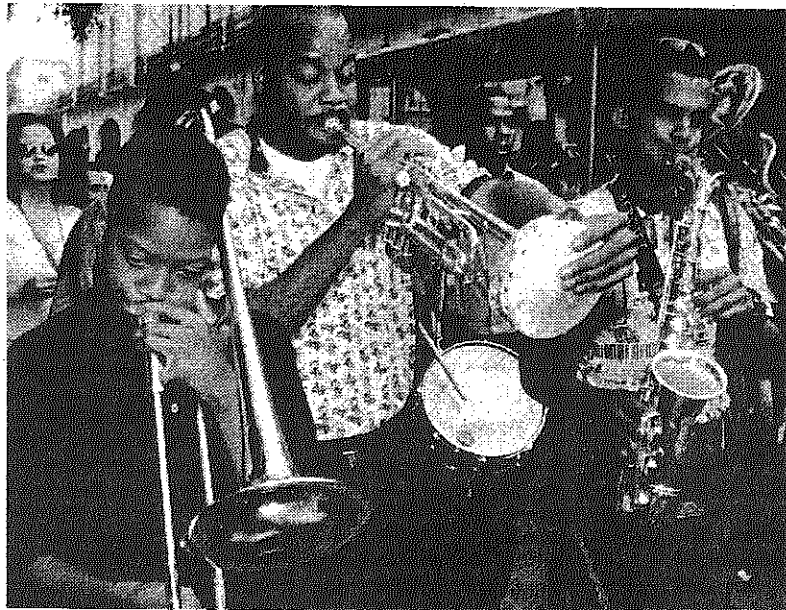
the United States should normalize relations with Cuba. Both raise the same flag of "civil liberties" in order to make diametrically opposed arguments. It's one more in a long list of Cuban conundrums.

SOME LOCAL CUBAN-AMERICANS MAKE THE ARGUMENT FOR OPENING relations with Cuba by pointing out that the embargo was designed to break the Castro regime in six months. Forty years later, it still has not accomplished that goal. In fact, the embargo arguably aids Castro by providing him a means to demonize the United States.

The twist on the situation is that ever since the Cuban government legalized dollars, Cuban-Americans (most of them anti-Castro) have been keeping the Cuban economy afloat with the estimated \$800 million they send to their impoverished families back home each year.

No one travels to Cuba from America without also bringing boxes of clothing, medical supplies and necessities such as toilet paper for their families and hosts. It would be considered inhumane to arrive without such locally scarce items. "The story we had heard from other Cubans was that people were eating flowers to get vitamins and it was a complete disaster," says Julio Guichard.

The Cuba he saw when he traveled there with Nick Robins' cultural mission was "not as bad



IN 1999, A 'CULTURAL DELEGATION' TO CUBA INCLUDED A SECOND LINE WITH MUSICIANS TROMBONE SHORTY (LEFT) AND JAMES ANDREWS (CENTER). SUCH PROGRAMS ARE A FLASHPOINT IN THE LOCAL CUBAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL P. SMITH

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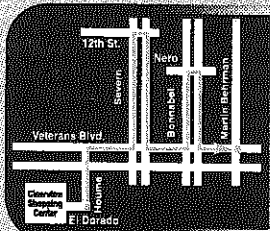
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as the Miami Cubans said it would be, but not as great as the communist Cubans say it is. The truth is somewhere in the middle."

Burdette Huffman graduated from Tulane in 1999, after spending the summer of 1998 in Havana through the Cuban Studies Institute program. He reports a palpable Big Brother-style presence by the police and says that any Cubans he spoke to often were pulled aside for questioning afterward. His view of the economic situation since Cuba opened to tourism and dollars is that "there is a kind of apartheid going on there. There are all these hotels, where they serve baked Alaska, and yet no Cuban can step foot into any of these hotels unless they work there. It's crazy."

Huffman also reports that the legalization of dollars has stimulated a brisk increase in prostitution. Can a full integration of capitalism be far behind?

"EVERY YEAR FOR 25 YEARS, AS I WAS GROWING UP in New Orleans, the toast at midnight on New Year's Eve was, 'Next year in Havana!'" says Guichard. "Well, it's been 25 years, and we're still not celebrating Christmas in Havana."

Guichard arrived here at age 5 in 1962, and Robins' cultural mission provided his first sight of Cuba since his childhood. Guichard's official purpose on the trip was as the city's director of international relations and trade; he was to see Cuba for himself and discover what infrastructure might exist for New Orleans to begin trade. The emerging belief now is that as soon as Castro is gone, either by dying or voluntarily retiring, then the United States will drop the embargo. When that happens, New Orleans will be first in line to renew business ties with this island that, in pre-Castro years, was our city's premier trade partner.

There is no shortage of historical ties between Cuba and New Orleans. The first Spanish governor of Louisiana came from Havana, and the bishop of Havana at one time had jurisdiction over the Louisiana port city. One of New Orleans' founders, Pierre LeMoyne, Sieur d'Iberville, is buried in Havana. The flag of Cuba was designed here, and Cuban national hero Jose Marti visited and wrote in this city. A statue of Marti stands on Jefferson Davis Parkway; it took nine years for members of the local Cuban community to raise the \$50,000 needed to commission and establish the monument.

Musicians traveling back and forth on pre-1959 trading ships helped make Cuba and New Orleans musical siblings. Guichard advocates building on this shared cultural legacy to pave the way for a good future business relationship. He responds loudly to charges that we should not support Cuban musicians because the money they receive goes to Castro.

"That's ludicrous, completely ludicrous," Guichard says. "Do they think these guys step off the plane in Havana and Fidel walks up to them and collects their checks? These people are musicians, not politicians. We celebrate them for their talent. This is culture we're talking about here."

In fact, says one music promoter who has worked extensively with Cuban musicians both in Cuba and the United States, things have started to improve for touring musicians from the island nation.

"It's opening up," he says, although he requests anonymity so his statements can't be used against the bands he works with. "It used to be per diems for the musicians, and it was part of their state-sponsored government job as a musician. The rest went to the cause; that was their work for the revolution. A lot of that's opening up, and they're getting to keep more of [the money], though there's still a good chunk going to Fidel."


The promoter adds that Cuban-Americans in Miami almost succeeded in canceling a performance by one of his Cuban-based bands.

"You can't see the cultural without the political," says Salvador Longoria, a Cuban-born attorney who is roughly the same



'I WANT MY CHILDREN TO
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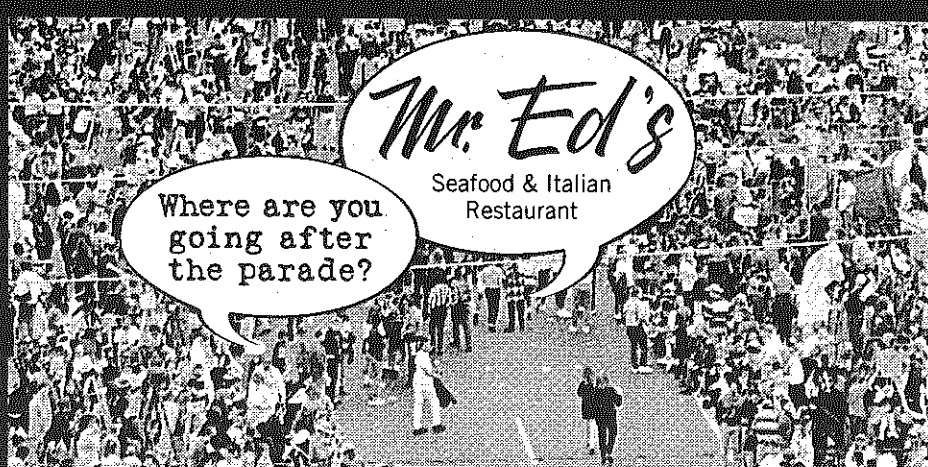
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Continued from page 28

age as Guichard and left his homeland around the same time. "When I am at a Cuban event, I refuse to forget the political undertone."

Longoria acknowledges that he is frequently torn between his ethnic pride in the great music that comes from Cuba and his determination to protest this closed society by refusing to support artists he calls "Soviet trophies." No artist gets permission to leave Cuba to perform unless they are hand-picked by the government, he says.



Dissident artists never have a chance to bring their music to the rest of the world. Therefore, how can any responsible Cuban-American support the artists who are favored by Castro?

Longoria admits the question still tears at him. While in Spain, he attended a performance by the National Ballet of Cuba and sat in the audience with tears in his eyes — all the while knowing that Alicia Alonso, the director of the Ballet, is strongly pro-Castro. Longoria navigates this question locally in the following manner: "I bought the *Buena Vista Social Club* CD, but I won't attend the concert. We all have to draw the line somewhere."

After thinking about it for a minute or two, he adds: "Of course, I'll call my friends the next day and hear all about how great it was."

Longoria, like Guichard, says he sympathizes with the emotions that fuel the fierceness of arch-conservative Cuban-Americans, but condemns the extremist methods often deployed by that sector of the community. The two see it as a painful but understandable legacy of their fathers' generation, which witnessed atrocities that the younger men have only heard in stories.

"I have traveled to Cuba, and that is already controversial. Some Cuban-Americans would call me a traitor for that," says Longoria. "The thing that bothers me the most is when Cubans are portrayed as these monolithic, intolerant, recalcitrant, violence-prone troglodytes. Ready to drop the bombs. So that whenever we express an opinion on anything, it's immediately discounted as the ranting of an intolerant recalcitrant, violence-prone troglodyte."

LILLIAM Z. REGAN WAS PART OF THE 'PETER PAN GENERATION' WHO AS CHILDREN WERE SENT AHEAD TO THE UNITED STATES NOT KNOWING IF THEY WOULD EVER SEE THEIR PARENTS AGAIN. 'DO YOU KNOW WHY CUBANS REFER TO CASTRO BY HIS FIRST NAME?' SHE ASKS. 'BECAUSE HE BETRAYED US — AT A PERSONAL LEVEL. AND WE CAN'T FORGIVE HIM.'

There is a much more subtle variation in the Cuban-American political response, he argues. Indeed, at times Longoria echoes Nick Robins' call for opening Cuba gradually by facilitating communication between Cubans and Americans. At other times, he joins George Fowler in decrying what he sees as the soft-brained, naive American approach to Cuba — bringing enlightenment and toilet paper to the Cubans who suffer so bravely and yet make such beautiful music.

"When I read about that second-line parade playing in the streets of Old Havana, I wanted to vomit!" cries Longoria. "The key to resolving the nightmare in Cuba is people-to-people contact. Not tourism. Not those Tulane architecture students. They will never get past the surface; they can't get to that depth and trust where they can learn about the realities of Cuba. They don't talk to the dissidents."

"The change will happen with people like me who go down there to reconnect with my family. And take a shower from the same bucket they do. And live with the same power outages. And talk quietly about what is really going on in case the neighbors hear us and turn them in."

"My God, what is happening?" Longoria stops himself in mid-sentence. "I thought I was such a liberal. Here I sound like my father!"

"DO YOU KNOW WHY CUBANS REFER TO CASTRO BY his first name? Why we all call him 'Fidel?'" asks Lillian Z. Regan. "Because he betrayed us — at a personal level. He promised to overturn Battista and that Cuba would blossom.

And we can't forgive him."

Regan left Cuba at age 14. She was one of the "Peter Pan children," as they are called — the ones who were sent ahead to the United States without their parents and without knowing if they would ever see them again. She describes a dramatic shift in her relationship to Cuba. As of 10 years ago, Regan says she had held an intense anger against Castro, and her views on U.S.-Cuban relations were as strict as any of the most conservative Cuban Americans. Eventually, she began to soften her position, and by the time she stepped off the plane in Havana last year — her two daughters had flown ahead and were waiting for her — she had shifted completely.

"I really closed the door on things when I put my foot on Cuba," she says. "All my pent-up emotions, curiosity and longing were released. I put away all that restlessness and anger, which was so exhausting."

By contrast, George Fowler has not returned to Cuba since he left at age 9. He is sure he would be killed if he did.

Regan believes that Castro still controls Cuban-Americans — through their own anger. They are not truly free, she argues, as long as they remain locked in this power struggle, which is expressed in political rhetoric but actually is driven by a much deeper, less coherent sense of personal vengeance.

"When I returned to Cuba, I bridged the emptiness I felt by leaving at such a young age. And now Fidel does not control my life anymore, because now I know I can go back to Cuba any time I want. And I do not feel I have to control the history of that country."

One might assume that the split in opinions among Cuban-Americans falls along class or generation lines, with the more conservative position being taken by the older and more prosperous in the community. It doesn't work quite so cleanly. Rosana Cruz, as the youngest and the only American-born in this sampling of voices from the Cuban-American community, at one point aligned with a surprising similarity to her conservative counterpart in CANF. As a musician, she was happy to play with Cubanismo because she learned a great deal about her own musical heritage. However, much like Fowler, she believes the cultural exchanges between Cuba and the United States are essentially weightless.

"They don't do anything in terms of justice," she says, adding that she wouldn't want to stop the exchanges because they are more or less harmless. She says CANF is picking the wrong battle by attacking cultural exchanges, but she fears that placing so much emphasis on the joyful music allows those on the left to feel justified in treating Cuba as if everything is fine, which is far from the truth as she sees it.

"But then the embargo question is an empty one, too. It's a decoy that provides a way for the U.S. to say, 'We're doing something,' which is crap. And the Cuban government can say, 'This is why our people suffer,' which is also not true.

"I think the situation is completely hopeless," she says with a kind of depressed calm. "I don't see any bright and shining vision for Cuba."

After some deliberation, she allows that there might be some possibility. "Imagine if there were political exchanges instead of cultural exchanges," she suggests, adding that "Miami or Washington, D.C., or the international left community [don't] have a right to determine what happens in Cuba. Imagine if both sides called for an open political process without help from the Miami Cubans."

She refers to the dissident groups fighting for human rights in Cuba who are practically invisible to the outside world because they are suppressed by the Cuban government. These are the people Cruz wants to hear from — not capitalists, not communists.

"The people who grew up in the revolution," she concludes. "Because they know the potential dream of the revolution and the nightmare it became. That is the only piece of hope."

CUBAN-BORN ATTORNEY SALVADOR LONGORIA BOUGHT THE BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB CD, BUT WOULDN'T ATTEND THE CONCERT. 'WE ALL HAVE TO DRAW THE LINE SOMEWHERE,' HE SAYS.



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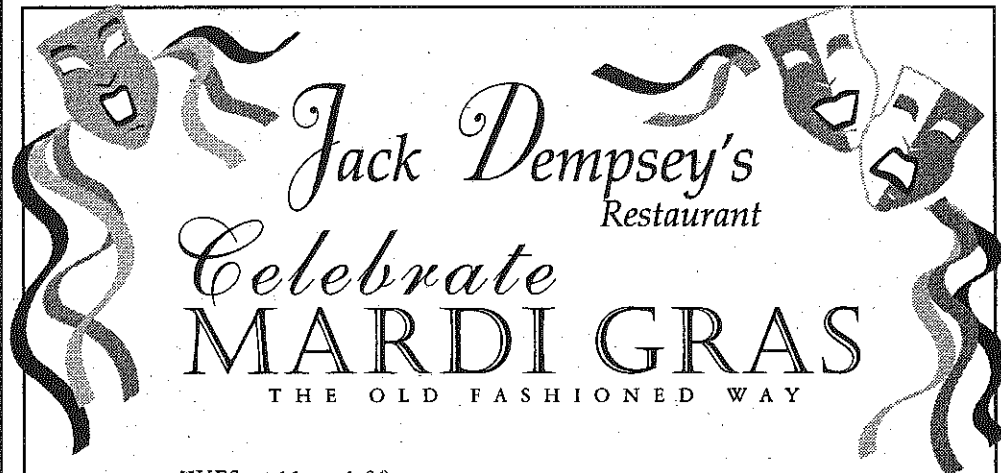


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