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NEW ORLEANS -- The bronze statues in the New Orleans Musical Legends Park point to another time. Al Hirt faces Bourbon Street, riffing on 1964's "Java," back when you could have a peppy top-10 hit about coffee. There is pride in the way Fats Domino stands behind his keyboard and clarinetist Pete Fountain is playing distant Dixieland.

A statue of Chris Owens was to have gone up in this park last fall.

Then the levees broke.

Chris Owens is to New Orleans what Marilyn Monroe was to Joe DiMaggio.

Her legend cannot be washed away.

Since the late 1960s, Owens has owned and operated her popular nightclub at Bourbon and St. Louis streets. Trumpet virtuoso Hirt performed at the club between 1995-99, the last years years of his life. Tourists think Owens is a stripper, but when she got into the business she became the only performer on Bourbon Street who kept her clothes on.

Owens is a dancer.

She danced with her late husband Sol at the Tropicana nightclub in Havana, Cuba, at cabarets in Monmartre, at the Blue Room of the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans and at the El Morocco Club in New York City.

Late Acapulco playboy Teddy Stauffer was a fan. Columnist Walter Winchell saw her at the El Morocco; he called Owens "*the eye arrester with the Presley Mambo Movement who wowed the stars in the audience.*"

These were good times.

It is little wonder that Owens doesn't want to let them go.

Her statue now will go up April 22 in the park at 311 Bourbon St. in conjunction with the annual French Quarter Festival. Owens will be the first woman inducted into the legends park. New Orleans piano player Allen Toussaint, comic Marty Allen and Hirt's widow Beverly are among the notables who will attend.

Owens rode out Hurricane Katrina in her 3-story apartment behind her club, which is simply called Chris Owens.

Her home is accented by a snow-white sofa, white marble floors, a white bar and a white baby grand piano. Bousi, her tiny Maltese, is also white. Owens keeps two

doves in her courtyard, which features a raised hot tub framed by white columns.

"White represents purity," Owens said during a conversation over glasses of an apple-blueberry-orange-cranberry concoction at her apartment bar, the same bar Nicholas Cage sat at in scenes shot for his 2002 movie "Sonny."

Although Owens reminds many of Cher, she doesn't mind circa 1960 Gina Lollobrigida as a reference point. Her every-other-year appearances at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival are legendary.

Owens will arrive with a white tuxedoed entourage in a white stretch limousine and police escort. Backed by Chippendale-influenced dancers, she takes the stage in the Economy Hall tent and belts out numbers like "These Boots Are Made for Walking" and her original "Toca Maraca." Owens dances and plays maracas. She wears knee-length boots, a bustier and garters. She designs her own costumes.

Owens is an original in a town full of them.

"Chris is the No. 1 woman in New Orleans," Beverly Hirt said from her home in suburban Minneapolis. "When anyone goes to the city, they go to the French Quarter. They'll go to Chris' club, which is a family club. She has been great to the city. She does an annual Easter parade which raises money for charities. She is always willing to put herself out for anything, anyone and any friend. She did for Al. And he loved her."

Owens doesn't appear at Chris Owens as much as she used to. She closed the club in September. Her bass player and a member of her three-piece horn section relocated after the storm. So did two backup singers and two dancers.

On nights Owens is not performing, the club is a disco. On Dec. 12 a customer committed suicide there. According to the New Orleans Times-Picayune, a man sat on a couch in the club and shot himself in the head with a handgun.

Since Hurricane Katrina, suicides in New Orleans have doubled the national average.

"A couple of Fridays ago, we had a nice little crowd," Owens said six days after the club shooting. "I do an uptempo show with audience participation. One woman said, 'I've been so depressed during Katrina -- really depressed.' She's telling me this while I'm on stage. But then she said she was in the happiest mood during the show. She was one of the people that stayed in New Orleans. You have to remain positive. There is great resilience in this city."

Within 48 hours after the levees broke, Owens was seen on CNN riding her bicycle through the French Quarter.

"But I didn't see how bad the devastation was," she said. "We didn't evacuate in 1965 when Hurricane Betsy came through. At that time, the 9th Ward flooded. I was

telling Mark, my sweetheart, that I went through Betsy, but if I lived in the 9th Ward I would evacuate immediately. My building is like a fortress.

"We have a community wall that connects to Antoine's [restaurant, where a southeast wall was blown out]. That protects me. I wasn't scared. But Mark was.

"When it hit, the wind was blowing and tiles from the rooftops were flying through the air like missiles. I went through Hurricane Bridget in Acapulco. I was in Hong Kong during a typhoon. So many times in New Orleans the hurricane would come to the mouth of the [Mississippi] and turn. It did turn a little to the east, but look what it did even with the turn. I wasn't concerned until I found out the levees had breached. Water surrounded us. We didn't know how close it would come to us. Water seeped in as close as two blocks.

"We were spared."

Chris Owens was born Chris Shaw and reared in the west Texas panhandle, about 45 miles south of Abilene. Her father, Fred, was a cotton farmer and rancher. Shaw grew up adoring the mambo of Xavier Cugat, whom she would later meet when he performed with vocalist Abbe Lane in the Blue Room of the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans.

Shaw attended Texas Wesleyan College in Ft. Worth, where she studied nursing and was captain of her varsity basketball team. "You need the same dexterity to dance that you do to play basketball," said Owens, who stands 5-foot-8. "And I always had energy. My parents taught us discipline and we came from a lot of high morals."

Shaw moved to New Orleans in 1956 to live with her oldest sister, Jeannie. Shaw was a nurse for a New Orleans surgeon when she met Sol Owens, who was one of the best automobile dealers in the city. They were married in 1957. Sol suffered a fatal heart attack in 1979, and Chris never remarried.

"He loved Latin music and loved to dance," Owens said as she sat near a wall-size tinted portrait of them slow dancing to a distant beat.

"He was very much into going to Havana, Cuba. The Tropicana [nightclub] was owned by my friend Pedro Fox. People loved to watch us dance, and they would circle around us because we had a natural rhythm. Back then people weren't moving their hips like they do now.

"Now, anything goes."

The Owenses loved to travel -- anywhere. A vintage bottle of Fockink Gin is perched behind her bar. "We were going through security in Germany and my husband took that gin through," Owens said with a smile. "The customs guy goes, 'Do you have anything to declare?' My husband said [and Owens delivered her best Texas drawl], 'Just some Fockink Gin.' I have some great memories."

In 1958 Chris and Sol Owens purchased the 809 Club on St. Louis Street and Chris resurrected her Tropicana routine.

"We had these records we bought in Havana and we put them on the jukebox, things like Celia Cruz," she recalled. "I'd dress up like I was going partying. I'd pass out maracas and conga drums. I'd dance the cha-cha. Patrons would dance. I hired girls I called 'Maraca Girls' and put them in little [ruffled] calypso blouses. I had a bonga player play to the records. There were lines out the door. Variety wrote that the only girl that keeps her clothes on was doing the biggest business in New Orleans."

The Owenses sold the 809 Club in 1967. They purchased a brick and stucco Art Deco apartment building at 500 Bourbon St. where the Chris Owens club opened in 1968 and still stands today.

"By then I started seeing strip clubs go under," she said. "Women dressed in sheer outfits during the daytime. It really wasn't so unique to see a naked woman on the stage anymore."

The club has since been enlarged and eight apartments were morphed into Owens' three-story townhouse.

After the levees broke, Owens housed 25 employees, singers, dancers and their families in the upstairs of her townhouse. The evacuees had plenty of custom-made Chris Owens bottled water, Chris Owens Hot Sauce and three cases of self-heating MRE's (government Meals Ready to Eat) given to them by the military.

"At first, people were in shock, but they thought it was going to be OK," Owens said. "But now people have been living with inconvenience for so long. So many are still displaced. It grows on your mind. That's why attitudes are like that. Still, you gotta remain positive."

The skies were gray and a steady rain fell over Owens' white courtyard. Still, she knew the city will dance again.