

“Caldonia”—Louis Jordan (1945)

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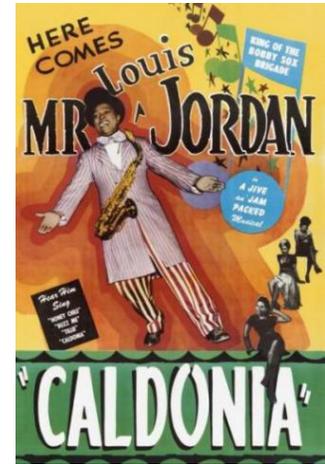
Essay by Stephen Koch (guest post)*



Louis Jordan



Original label



“Caldonia” film poster, 1945

“Caldonia” (originally titled “Caldonia Boogie”) became one of Louis Jordan and his Tympany Five’s most enduring hits. The song, with its lyrical catchphrase “Caldon-YAH! Caldon-YAH! What makes your big head so hard!?” set America on its ear and spawned endless cover versions, two of which competed directly with Jordan’s version in 1945.

The song had been in Jordan’s repertoire since at least the summer of 1944, when he recorded it for use on a December airing of “Jubilee!,” an Armed Forces Radio Service show for African-American servicemen. In January, 1945 he recorded it for Decca, but the label first released a pairing of Jordan’s “Mop! Mop!” and “You Can’t Get That No More” that became a major hit that winter, and perhaps delayed the release of “Caldonia.” In February, Jordan filmed a performance of it for a short film of the same name, which hit theaters in March. In late February, white bandleader Woody Herman recorded a modern jazz-tinged arrangement by Ralph Burns, who’d heard Jordan perform it live. Herman’s version hit the stores at about the time that African-American bandleader Erskine Hawkins recorded a version for RCA-Victor at the end of March. Decca, perhaps feeling the pressure, released Jordan’s definitive small group version at almost the same time that Hawkins’ disc came out in mid-April.

Surprisingly, all three versions of the tunes were hits. At this time it was not unusual for several versions of a song to be released simultaneously, targeting different audiences and regions. Herman’s version reached the highest position on the pop charts though Jordan’s nearly matched it. Jordan’s was also a hit on the “race” chart where it was a fixture for six months. Jordan and other performers usually shortened the official song title to merely “Caldonia.”

Jordan even did two film versions of the song—perhaps it could be said that “Swing Parade of 1946” was for white America and Louie’s short “Caldonia” film was for black America. Jordan and his band took a two-day break at the end of July 1945 to shoot “Swing Parade of 1946.”

The film “Swing Parade of 1946” has barely begun before Jordan and the Tympany Five perform their number one hit, “Don’t Worry ’Bout That Mule,” while a nightclub is being renovated. The plot lurches on until finally club headliners Jordan and band return with their grandest entrance on film—on a darkened stage with their instruments outlined in neon to the orchestral strains of “Caldonia Boogie,” re-recorded with strings and an additional outro section especially for the film. For the outro, Jordan puts down his neon-lined saxophone to join the dancers in a hoofing routine. Then, Jordan and the band aren’t seen or mentioned again.

Astor Pictures’ “Caldonia” short film starring Jordan clocks in at under 20 minutes and helped solidify his crossover appeal. In 1946, “Billboard” magazine reported that the film was “one of the few all-negro productions to get bookings in white theaters.” Headlined “Here Comes Mr. Jordan,” an advertisement for the film proclaims Louie to be the “King of the Bobby Sock Brigade” and the “Global Favorite of 11,000,000 GI Joes,” while mentioning the film’s attributes: “Solid with Jive,” “Dancin’-Prancin’ Sepia Beauties” and “4 Big Song Hits.”

It opens with Louie and the band performing the song in an upscale living room with a few showgirls, including one named Caldonia (Nicky O’Daniel), perched atop Bill Austin’s piano swinging her long, lean and lanky gam in time. Bassist Al Morgan executes the iconic looping bass line. Trumpeter Eddie Roane and Alex “Razz” Mitchell line out the group. As far as plot, a would-be film producer convinces Louis and the band to make films in Harlem rather than their scheduled Hollywood destination, but the lack of resources for the operation is a running joke. A performance of the song “Tillie” finds Louie and the band playing in the dregs of outlandish costumes hidden from repossession by creditors—clownish, mismatched outfits that the real Tympany Five would never wear onstage. Still, Louie in outsized bow tie, top hat and clashing long coat and striped pants became the film’s poster and an enduring image. In July 2008, the “Caldonia” film poster was featured on a United States Postal Service stamp recognizing US black cinema.

Following its success, many came forth to claim “Caldonia Boogie.” Blues singer Sippie Wallace said the song was based on her song “Caldonia Blues” from the early 1920s. Jordan acknowledged the lyric “Caldonia, what makes your big head so hard?” was lifted from a Hot Lips Page song. A lawsuit over ownership of the song would eventually go to the U.S. Supreme Court, but the song would remain Louis Jordan’s—or rather, his ex-wife Fleecie Moore’s. Moore, of Brasfield, Arkansas, was given writing credit for “Caldonia,” as well as a co-credit for several other of Louie’s most important songs during their marriage in a publishing scheme gone awry.

Little Richard said “Caldonia Boogie” was the first non-gospel song he ever learned. That made sense, as Louie’s “Cal-don-YAH!” shriek sounds eerily like the vocal tone Little Richard would adopt and patent to great chart success a decade later—as well as Little Richard’s Jordan-style pencil-thin moustache.

Some twenty years later, when James Brown got the chance to meet Louis Jordan, Brown told him that he’d probably sung “Caldonia” as many times as Louie had. Brown recalled, “‘Caldonia’ was a song you could really put on a show with. And I guess that Louis Jordan is

what first started me thinking along those lines... I learned the words [to 'Caldonia'] as quick as I could, picked it out on piano and started playing it and singing it whenever I got the chance."

So did others. Young piano prodigy Frank "Sugar Chile" Robinson gives the song a workout in the 1946 film "No Leave, No Love" and had his own chart hit with it three years later. Benny Goodman, Memphis Slim, Willie Nelson, B. B. King, Carl Perkins, Muddy Waters, Roy Clark, Van Morrison and Clifton Chenier are among the variety of giants in their respective musical fields who've also recorded "Caldonia." Jordan himself often returned to the song over the decades, re-recording it in the late 1950s with Quincy Jones producing and Mickey Baker on guitar. He also updated the lyrics from the original "Walking with my baby, she's got great big feet/She's long, lean and lanky and ain't had nothing to eat" to "I've got a baby with a crazy pad/Ooh! She makes me so mad!" in the 1960s. By the 1970s, the once-lean Caldonia had grown to 300 pounds in some Jordan performances. "Acres and acres," Jordan would sing of the gal, "And I love every acre."

Louis Jordan died in 1975.

Stephen Koch is a musician, playwright and award-winning reporter, editor and broadcast journalist. He is the author of the 2014 biography "Louis Jordan: Song of Arkansas, Father of R&B" (History Press). Koch lives in Little Rock, where he is creator and host of "Arkansongs," a radio program syndicated on National Public Radio affiliates.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.