

	Results
1.	<a href="#">Winning wailer *** Mournful lament of Metairie man wins festival contest</a> The Advocate (Baton Rouge, Louisiana), March 24, 2014 Monday, B; Pg. 01, 823 words, DAN LAWTON; dlawton@theadvocate.com;

[Return to List](#)

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

The Advocate (Baton Rouge, Louisiana)

March 24, 2014 Monday  
New Orleans Edition

## Winning wailer \*\*\* Mournful lament of Metairie man wins festival contest

**BYLINE:** DAN LAWTON; dlawton@theadvocate.com;

**SECTION:** B; Pg. 01

**LENGTH:** 823 words

Eric Cusimano, 26, collapsed to his knees, pulled askew the shoulders of his white tank top and poured the contents of a metallic flask on the fresh cigar burn on his chest.

He winced as the whiskey splashed against his skin, while the crowd that encircled him Sunday in sun-splashed Jackson Square cheered. Then, like a bear, he tossed back his head and unleashed a barbaric roar.

"STELLLLLAAA!"

The ear-piercing yawp boomed across the French Quarter. It was loud, domineering, unrepentant, primal and sensual. As soon as I heard it, one thing was evident to me: This man had **Brando** in his bones. This was a victory cry.

The 28th annual Tennessee Williams Festival came to a close Sunday with what has become its signature event, the Stella and Stanley Shouting Contest. About 25 aspiring Stanley and Stella Kowalskis gathered in Jackson Square to put their own spin on Marlon **Brando's** famous howl in the film version of Williams' play "A **Streetcar Named Desire**."

I was one of them.

According to Peggy Scott Laborde, who founded the festival, the idea for the contest began in the mid-1990s as a way to attract media coverage.

"It was very special, but at the end of the weekend, there wouldn't be much media about it," she said of the festival. "It wasn't visual enough."

Laborde wanted to add something with flair that would appeal to anyone, even if they didn't have much literary knowledge.

Thus, the Stella-yelling tradition was born.

Sign-up on Sunday was swift, with the event limited to 25 people. After receiving my number, I sized up the competition.

"My lady friend said something about ripping my shirt off," said Sonny Cunningham, 40, who was entering the contest for the first time.

"Why enter?" I asked.

"I'm a New Orleanian," he shrugged. "It should be done."

Brian Buckles, 52, said he won the event a few years back.

"I drove down my Harley and was getting some bloody marys at Muriel's when one of my friends dared me to do it," he said. "I told the waitress, 'Just wait, I'm going to come back with the trophy.' "

An hour and a half later, he did.

There were mostly men performing Sunday, many packed into tight-fitting T-shirts that would be sliced in half, torn asunder or ripped to shreds when the moment arrived.

But two women did enter. One, Cheria Scaffidi, a 29-year-old with fire-engine-red hair, participated along with her boyfriend, Marc Trembley.

"I just took a shot of tequila," she said, settling her nerves moments before the contest began. She then spent a few minutes watching YouTube performances of past winners.

I was not fresh to the Stella fray, having participated in 2011. The results then had been less than spectacular, my voice cracking like a pimply-faced teenager's on my final yell.

Earlier in the day, I had tried to warm up with a few practice runs. But where does one scream "Stella" at top volume without disturbing the peace?

I opted for my red Saturn, which I considered a safe space. While circling Audubon Park, I pulled at my hair, pounded my fists against my chest, tore at my T-shirt - playing the part of someone in a state of psychosexual distress so desperate that the only option was total surrender to the most basic response of any jilted lover: pleading and screaming.

I received a number of strange looks from fellow motorists. I also realized this ritual was not something you could practice.

"It's all about being in the moment," said Mark Lee Smith, who lives in the French Quarter and had black chest hair crawling out of his cut-up T-shirt.

He then lectured me on the facts of the Napoleonic Code in perfect Kowalski jive.

"It's all about the lust," shouted another man. "You got to get primal with it!" he barked.

As each contestant screamed, my number grew closer to being called.

Finally, I was up. Onstage, all I could hear was the eerie silence of hundreds of people waiting for me to perform.

There was a lightning-fast twinge of nerves, but then something wild and unruly arose within me and I began to caw mightily, eventually dropping to my knees.

With Stella clad in a slim-fitting blue dress and swigging a cocktail on a Pontalba Apartments balcony above me, I unloaded my most guttural, passionate, love-stricken yelp.

It was, sadly, not enough for the victory, but it did net me fifth place, and the realization that nothing in life feels as good as being momentarily terrified and then bull-rushing through that fear to the other side.

Cusimano, a 26-year-old graduate of Loyola Law School and a 610 Stomper, was the victor, which was hardly a surprise. The Metairie resident had, in successive rounds, burned himself with a lit cigar and then doused his wound with booze, all in a fit of passion.

"I started seeing the competition and said to myself, 'If you're gonna go, you got to go!' " he said afterward, brushing away tears that appeared genuine.

He then hoisted his trophy high.

"This may be the best thing that ever happened in my life," he exclaimed.

Oddly, I felt the same way.

**LOAD-DATE:** April 28, 2014

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**GRAPHIC:** Color photos: Ladies admire Eric Cusimano, of Old Metairie, as he yells his winning 'STELLLLAAAA!' at the Stanley and Stella Shouting Contest on Sunday in Jackson Square. The contest traditionally brings an end to the weeklong Tennessee Williams Festival honoring the playwright who wrote 'A **Streetcar Named Desire.**' In '**Desire,**' character Stanley Kowalski yells to his wife, Stella Kowalski, who is standing on a New Orleans balcony. Greg Saurage and his kids spell S-T-E-LL-A! as he yells 'STELLLLAAAA!' at the Stanley and Stella Shouting Contest, part of the weeklong Tennessee Williams Festival. The Saurage family placed second in the contest that recreates the famous New Orleans balcony scene in Jackson Square. Paul David Carpenter, of Algiers, takes a turn at the famous shout. (Advocate staff photos by MATTHEW HINTON)

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newspaper