

LOUISIANA MUSIC: A PRIMER

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Zulu parade and prized coconuts.
Photo: Alexey Sergeev

New Orleans African American communities and taking to the streets on Fat Tuesday — known popularly as Mardi Gras.

The Zulu organization, a benevolent association, remains best known for its Mardi Gras parade that kicks off at South Claiborne and Jackson avenues at 8 a.m. First presented in 1909, the procession mocked the stately white Carnival krewes like Rex by presenting Zulu's black-faced members hilariously dressed in grass skirts, with King Zulu proudly wearing a lard can crown and carrying a banana stalk scepter. Back then, the parade limited its travels to back-of-town New Orleans neighborhoods. In 1968 its route dramatically changed to include St. Charles Avenue and Canal Street.



Zulu costume.

To be gifted with a Zulu cocorut, one of the most coveted "throws" (trinkets tossed by krewe members) of the Mardi Gras season, gives one bragging rights for years — "I got a coconut!" The tradition of members decorating and handing or flipping out the often metallic-gold painted coconuts, which are referred to as a "golden nuggets," began in 1910.

all of that with the Zulu club presenting a festival along the Mississippi River. It's an all-day affair with bands performing on three stages and the fully costumed Zulu characters — the King and Queen, Mr. Big Stuff, the Witch Doctor and more — roaming along the riverfront. At the end, a second line ensues with King Zulu heading to the Spanish Plaza to ceremoniously meet Rex, King of Carnival.

Until 1987, the day before Mardi Gras (historically known as Shrove Monday) was rather a quiet day following a weekend full of parades. The introduction of Lundi Gras changed

To catch the Zulu parade and the Mardi Gras Indians on Carnival Day, the place to be is the intersection of North Claiborne and Orleans Avenues in New Orleans. The Black Indians, how-

ever, do not run on anybody's timetable but their own and do not travel along any specific routes. The tribes, commonly called "gangs," remain freewheeling and usually take to the streets from their Chiefs' homes or favorite barrooms in the neighborhoods with which they are most associated. For example, the Wild Magnolias, a gang headed by the legendary Big Chief Bo Dollis and now led by his son, Lil Bo, as well the noted Big Chief Monk Boudreaux and the Golden Eagles, can usually be found at their "headquarters" at Second and Dryades streets.

The tradition of the New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians is one of the most significant and unique in the United States. The history of this culture is primarily an oral one told through songs and chants much like the way stories of the past are told by African griots. Interestingly, Mardi Gras Indian chants are the basis for much of New Orleans' traditional R&B. Most agree that the custom of Blacks "masking" (costuming) Indian began in the mid-19th century as a way to honor the Native Americans with whom slaves found refuge when they sought freedom from their (mutual) oppressors. Some returned to tell their tales of their philosophical union with the Native Americans.

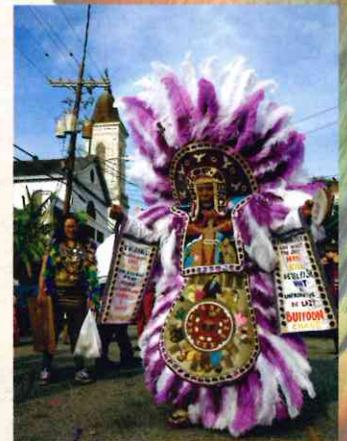
Ostracized by the white New Orleans Carnival krewes and festivities, the Black Indians found a way to celebrate the holiday in their own way, in their own communities, by taking to the streets donned with feathered "suits" (outfits), "crowns" (headdresses), and chanting songs relevant to their lives. In early decades, the Indians used what they had to create their suits. They'd find bangles from discarded dresses or a mismatched earring to make their suits sparkle. Inventively, they'd use circular metal industrial cutouts to make their suits ring along with their tambourines.

Nowadays, the some 30 to 40 Mardi Gras Indian gangs with names like the Creole Wild West, the oldest tribe on the streets, the Yellow Pocahontas, the Fi-Yi-Yi and the Mandingo Warriors and the Mohawk Hunters, compete for recognition with their spectacular, elaborately adorned, feathered and hand-sewn beaded suits as they ceremoniously met and danced with other tribes. On Mardi Gras Day, many can be caught at the Backstreet Cultural Museum in Treme, a museum that uniquely celebrates Mardi Gras Indian and street culture.

It takes the Black Indians all year to create these works of art which, by those gangs that hold to tradition, are only worn on one Mardi Gras Day, again on St. Joseph's night (March 19), for the Indian Super Sunday Parade (the third Sunday in March), the Jazz Fest, and perhaps a few other occasions. As the song goes, "Every year at Carnival time we make a new suit..."

The Black Indians and Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club carry on the traditions because of strong community and family ties and the passion for continuum: a major factor in the fascinating world of Louisiana music.

To learn more about MARDI GRAS INDIAN rhythms and the many more genres that define Louisiana music, check out LouisianaSoundtrack.com.



Chief Alfred Doucette's new suit.
Photo: Kim Welsh

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