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**Whole Wild Creation: An Examination of the Mardi Gras Indian
Culture of New Orleans**

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**Whole Wild Creation: An Examination of the Mardi Gras Indian
Culture of New Orleans**

by

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2010

Preface

In the fall of 2007, I made my first trip to New Orleans with a carload of photojournalism students headed to photograph the lives of musicians after the storm of 2005. Before we even made it into the city, while driving over the Atchafalaya Basin, the thick air with its pungent smells of salt water entered my body and immediately felt known.

As we pulled into the city at three in the morning under the thick fog of one hundred percent humidity, with Spanish moss dripping off the Live Oak trees that taunt the roofs of shotgun homes painted in a myriad of colors, the feeling of fluency intensified. In less than twenty minutes I found myself standing outside in the courtyard of the old orphanage turned hostel where we were staying, and saying out loud, with total conviction, “This is where they’ll bury me.”

The next morning while driving through the 8th Ward, an unfamiliar sound began to rock the car windows. A tuba boomed and gurgled its way around the fits and taps of trumpets and trombones somewhere in the neighborhood. With cameras in hand we jumped out and followed that sound until we found its source. Photographing a Jazz Funeral as it organically wound its way through a neighborhood of skeletal Victorian homes with piles of debris that lay like corpses in the streets more than two years after the storm; I fell fully in love with this god-forsaken place.

By February of 2008, during Mardi Gras, I was already set into my current routine of travelling to the Crescent City every month to go explore, learn, photograph, and revel in the rich culture. That Fat Tuesday, I was fortunate enough to have a guide who knew

that on the backstreets of the city's predominantly black neighborhoods, a lively tradition that borrowed from both African and Native American cultures would be happening. After a few failed attempts to find these elusive "Injuns," as they are locally called, in different neighborhoods throughout the city, we made our way to a neighborhood that buttresses the French Quarter called the Treme. We arrived at a house that looked like any other house on the block to my untrained eyes, but that was actually the Backstreet Museum, a congregation spot for the downtown Mardi Gras Indians. There were at least fifty other people waiting outside in the street in front of the museum. Like my guide and myself, they had all come and were patiently waiting to hopefully catch a glimpse of the men in their feathered costumes.

May 2010

Abstract

Whole Wild Creation: An Examination of the Mardi Gras Indian Culture of New Orleans

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

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The Mardi Gras Indian culture of New Orleans, Louisiana is a unique tradition that blends African spirituality, Caribbean spirituality, African music and dance, with Native American style dress. The Mardi Gras Indians engage in ritual battle and ancestor worship as a part of their tradition of using cultural expression as a means for social protest. While many tourists to the Crescent City may have the opportunity to witness the Indians in full dress, even few native New Orleanians ever learn the depth of the phenomenon.

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Wall of Feathers

“You can ask us about the Indians and we can tell you what we know, but nobody knows the whole story. Ain’t nobody around that can tell you the truth. We all just got our own truths.” –Barbara “Yaa” Strickland of the Wild Magnolias

Crouching on the cement steps of the Backstreet Cultural Museum in the Treme neighborhood of New Orleans during Mardi Gras 2008, a swarm of feathers lime green hit my face, covering my camera. There were tambourines being played just above my head and a chorus of maybe fifty people singing, “Shallow water oh mama/ Shallow water oh mama” repeatedly. I had come to this spot because my New Orleans friend and guide, Paige Royer, a board member for Sweet home New Orleans, a non-profit set up after flood waters from Hurricane Katrina ravaged the city to help musicians get back on their feet, told me that no Mardi Gras was complete unless we got a glimpse of the Indians. I honestly had no idea what that meant, but she had shown me a good time already and I trusted her. Just as the intensity of the song and action in front of my lens was heating up, Paige leaned over and yelled into my ear, “Another Big Chief is coming!! This is a big deal! It’s a real big deal!”

We had been hanging out in front of this small museum waiting for Indians for a little over an hour when the first tribe had come down the street. The men dressed in cloaks of brightly colored feather costumes had marched right up to the front porch of the museum and began singing into the microphone as their band of drummers who had been following them played a steady simple rhythm. The crowd all seemed to know the songs and soon everyone was singing the chorus lines as the man on the microphone seemed to make up lyrics. When the sound of more drums coming down the street was identified,

the man on the microphone as well as all his tribes' members leaped of the porch and stood in the street with their arms crossed.

I later learned that another tribe was headed toward the museum and that the first tribe needed to stand in the street to meet them and "battle." Just as the second tribe was nearing, the sound of yet another group of hands drums could be heard. "This is really big, Reno! This never happens! More than two tribes at a time?! Wow. We are really lucky!" And then, yet another set of drums could be heard coming form the other direction. The four tribes and their Big Chiefs all stood with their arms folded as some hollered out the name of their tribe. "Fi-Ya-Ya!!!!" "Congo Nation!!!" "Yellow Pocahontas!!!" "I'm the Big Chief! I sewed all day and I sewed all night. Your Spyboy step to be, there sure gonna be a fight!!!" After a few moments of this banter the Big Chiefs all began singing together and the circle they were loosely standing in became very tight. "They call that the Wall of Brotherhood, the Circle of Feathers," said Paige. "It's a spiritual thing, but I don't really get it."



I was enthralled. Everything about these mysterious Indians seemed beautiful and full of pride. Circle of Brotherhood? Spyboys? Big Chiefs? Indians- even though these were clearly African-Americans? “Battles”? What did it all mean? Was this just a Mardi Gras thing or did it happen all the time? Why were they dressed up as Indians and why were the feathers so bright? Also, where in the world did they get those seven-foot tall costumes in the first place? And, more importantly, what does “koo-nah-neh” mean? While I had no idea who I was seeing or what any of it meant, I was certain that, like all the other cultural gems I had recently discovered in the Crescent City, this one was based on ritual and was something I had to learn about.

My curiosity led me to go back to the city nearly every month for the last two years; talking to everyone I could about who and what the Indians are. In October of 2009 my persistence finally paid off and I was invited in to photograph the practice of the Wild Magnolias Mardi Gras Indian tribe. My experience that night solidified my perception, that I will never fully understand the Indians. “We only know what we was taught. Them other Indians, they mighta been taught something different, but we all Indians. Ya’ heard me,” explained Barbara “Yaa” Strickland, a member of the Wild Magnolias? There is really no way to understand the Indians because they are not a formal group. They are a rather inclusive secret society that is meant to foster community and self-worth and celebration. This is a tradition that is part African, part Caribbean, part spiritual, part social protest, part Creole, part uptown, part downtown, mostly male, but partially female. This tradition is about a lot of things to a lot of different people and finding one solid answer to the question, “What are the Mardi Gras Indians?” is beautifully impossible.

Origins of the Tradition

“There are no clear understandings of the origins of this tradition and perhaps that’s part of the beauty of it, that you have to just accept them as they are.”¹

–Tom Piazza

The Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans are a secret society and fraternal organization for African American men who use Mardi Gras day as a day to don their handmade-feathered costumes to engage in a form of ancestor worship and ritualized social protest. However, the Indians are not merely a costuming organization for Mardi Gras. In reality, the “Mardi Gras” part of their name is simply derived from the fact that Mardi Gras was traditionally the only day that African-Americans could take freely to the streets of New Orleans in masks. The Indians are a cultural tradition that evokes hints of ancestor worship, spirituality through costuming transcendence, as well as a social organization that strengthens the community. The tradition of Mardi Gras Indians began in at least 1880, when it was first documented, but since similar traditions can be traced to West Africa as well as throughout the Caribbean, it is believed that this tradition is far older.²

The actual origins of this cultural group are still hotly debated. It is known that the Indians have been masking on Mardi Gras and St. Josephs’ Day for at least one hundred and twenty years. However, there are some who claim the tradition goes back two hundred years. Some believe the tradition began after Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show

¹ Tom Piazza, *Why New Orleans Matters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005) 47..

² Ned Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square*. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2008) 287.

came to New Orleans in 1884, inspiring those of African decent to take on the persona of the rebellious and independent Native American. By the 1880s the immediate threat of Native American aggression had been dissuaded and the Native American image had already begun to be co-opted into the American tapestry. It was possible for that identity to be adopted by African Americans and whites alike in a non-confrontational way.

However, it is notable that the first known tribe did not take on possible offensive names such as Apache, but rather, made up a more neutral name; The Creole Wild West. Today, the Creole Wild West, Wild Tchoupitoulas, Wild Magnolias, Red hawk Hunters, Comanche Hunters, and the Golden Eagles, along with approximately 25 other invented tribes names are still in use. In yet another instance of black double speak, these New Orleanians figured out a way to continue their African traditions partially disguised as Native American homage.

Others claim that the tradition dates back to the early days of New Orleans colonization as runaway slaves would find refuge with the Choctaw, Seminole, and other Native American Tribes. The surrounding Native American tribes would not only give refuge to run-away slaves, but they also taught the fugitive slaves how to survive off the North American land. It is believed that the descendents of these runaways and their friends and family began masking as a way to show affiliation with the Native Americans who helped their people. In addition, it was also as a way to tap into the strength and sense of self-preservation that Native Americans came to represent in the African American community.

Herreast Harrision, widow of Big Chief Donald Harrison of the Golden Eagles, said that while she could see how all of these factors could have contributed to what the

Indians have become, she feels that the real origins are more personal. “When you got to this place and it wasn’t your home and it wasn’t a friendly place, but they gave you that one day to be free, you wanted to do what made you feel like yourself. You wanted to do what you used to do at home.”³ There is certainly some validity to what Harrison believes because many similar traditions can be seen not just in West Africa, but also throughout the Caribbean where West Africans were enslaved in large numbers. For example, the root beat of all Mardi Gras Indian songs is the bambula beat which is a direct connection to West Africa and is used in Carnival celebrations throughout the Caribbean, where in some place, like Haiti for example, Carnival includes blacks dressed in Indian-like costumes.⁴ These similar developments in Carnival traditions have been described as sibling developments.⁵ It does not appear as though one came from the other, but rather that they both derived from the same origin.

One example of a sibling Carnival tradition to the Mardi Gras Indians comes from Haiti. A large number of blacks dress in skeleton costumes during Carnival time to pay homage to the god Ghede. Ghede is the guardian of the cemetery and is known as the controller of all things because he reminds people that death is imminent and they need to get right and get out and enjoy themselves. (Ghede is also considered to be an overly

³ Herreast Harrison at "Congo Square: Crossroads of the Afro-Atlantic World An Afternoon Symposium." Tom Dent Congo Square Lecture Series. Jazz And Heritage Center, New Orleans. 14 Nov. 2009. Speech.

⁴ Bruce “Sunpie” Barnes in *All On a Mardi Gras Day*. Produced by Osborn, Royce Osborn. New Orleans: Spyboy Pictures, 2008.

⁵ Michael P. Smith, *Mardi Gras Indians* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1994) 115.

sexual gluttoness spirit.) The skeletons form into groups and roam about their neighborhoods, representing Ghede's spirit.

In New Orleans, where an influx of Haitians came to live in the city in the 1800s, this Haitian tradition has become local tradition as well. Mardi Gras Day starts every year with the Skull and Bones Gangs coming out into the streets at daybreak to announce the arrival of Fat Tuesday. The gangs run up and down neighborhood streets banging on people's doors at day break with bones yelling out, "You next!" The Skull and Bones Gangs are organized in a very similar way to the Mardi Gras Indian tribes, with a Big Chief leading the group of African American men and their children in a procession through the community. As Robert Farris Thompson, African Art expert, explains, "The African tradition emphasizes literally moving through the community in a procession- not the other way around as the Europeans do."⁶ The reliance on the concept of proceeding through one's community to make the culture and celebration accessible to all members is fundamental to both the Skull and Bones Gangs and to the Mardi Gras Indians. In ways, the two traditions are very different. The Skull and Bones Gangs are focused on reminding community members of the brevity of life while the Indians are focused on building the self-worth of the community. However, the two traditions certainly share some similar structural and influential roots and, whenever one sees the Skull and Bones Gangs on Mardi Gras Day, it is the signal that the Indians are coming soon.

⁶ Robert Farris Thompson "Congo Square: Crossroads of the Afro-Atlantic World An Afternoon Symposium." Tom Dent Congo Square Lecture Series. Jazz And Heritage Center, New Orleans. 14 Nov. 2009. Speech.



No matter how it started, the tradition manifests itself in the marriage of Native American dress, an African color pallet, beaded artwork, African rhythms and body movements, hand sewing, living theater role-play, prayer, and soulful resistance to racist oppression.

Basic Structure of a Tribe

“This is a warrior culture and every warrior culture has its roles.”⁷

- Kalamu ya Salam

Each Mardi Gras Indian tribe has the same basic structure. There is always a Big Chief who is the undisputed leader of the tribe and he is total command over the whole gang at all times. Sometimes a gang may be only four or five people and sometimes it may be as many 30.⁸ There seems to always be a Spyboy and a Flagboy as well. In addition, many tribes have a Wild Man and they may have more positions such as Trail Chief, Second Chief, Third Chief, Big Queen, Little Queen, Little Chief, Gang Flag, and other general Indians.

Each titled position has a very specific role to play. The Big Chief is the leader of the gang. It is his decision where the tribe will go on Mardi Gras and St. Josephs' night even though he actually walks at the back of the tribe. In front of the Big Chief is the Wild Man, who has the freedom to roam anywhere around the Chief behind and in front of him. The Wildman, who always has some sort of bone and/or horns and a stick of some sort clears the path around the Big Chief and is responsible After the Wildman is the Flagboy. The Flagboy carries a feathered flag that he lifts high in the air and uses secret signals to communicate with the Big Chief, who is often a block or more behind him. The Flagboy is responsible for using his flag to communicate between the Big Chief and the front of the tribe, the Spyboy. keeping people from getting to close to him.

⁷ *All On a Mardi Gras Day*. Produced by Osborn, Royce Osborn. New Orleans: Spyboy Pictures, 2008.

⁸ *ibid.*





The Spyboy used to always carry binoculars or a spyglass to keep lookout for other tribes. However, the Spyboy used to also be as far as ten blocks away from the Flagboy and today there is often less than a two or three block distance between the two so the binoculars are unnecessary now. In spite of this, there are still some Spyboys that carry a spyglass for tradition's sake.

Once two tribes meet each other on the street a ritual warfare takes place in which each position must play their role appropriately. In years past, the meeting of two tribes on the street o Mardi Gras day typically turned violent. While the competition today is actually one of pageantry and artistry, the tensions are still very high when two tribes meet and can easily turn hostile if any member of the tribe fails to maintain the responsibilities of his position or if he simply does not stand the right way and show the appropriate amount of respect. However, it is the role of the Big chief to make sure that each member of his tribe is properly prepared for the ritual and that each member is submissive to him. "It's a tribal thing. You gotta have a pecking order in order to have stability," says Ronald Lewis who runs the House of Dance and Feathers, a Mardi Gras Indian and Social Aid and Pleasure Club museum in the Lower Ninth Ward.

When two tribes meet each other on the street the highly ritualized play begins first with Spyboy to Spyboy. The Spyboy from each tribe hollers out the name of his tribe and the name of his position. For example, "I'm the Spyboy! Uptown rulers, the Wild Magnolias.... Spyboy!" During this time boisterous body language is punctuated by confident gestures, with the arms flailing wide open and the head tilted slightly back so the chin is pointed straight outward toward the opponent at the end of each rant. The opponent listens with chin up and pointed outward but with his hands folded defiantly

across his chest while he listens. The two Spyboys may engage in an improv rap session. All prominent Mardi Gras Indians are revered because of their ability to improvise in a rhyming scheme. Often these rhymes are just further boasts of self-importance, the tribe's place in the greatness of the world, and the Big Chief's prettiness, but can also be addendums to the many traditional Mardi Gras Indian songs that glorify the Indians of the past in heroic tales. For example, one Spyboy may say to the other, "I'm with the Wild Magnolia's from way uptown, if you don't move out my way, I'm gonna have to knock your ass down. My suits so pretty and all brand new, from looks of your rags you can't say the same is true for you."⁹

The man-to-man competition goes down the line with Flagboy facing Flagboy, Wildman facing Wildman, and so on until the two Big Chiefs are face to face. The same basic interplay happens between Big Chiefs who announce their position and tribe, but between the two Big Chiefs there is almost always an improv rap session. In addition, the Chiefs may use their suits to guide their rant and therefore they may lift up a section of their suit to show off another part underneath. They will often spin in circles so that the opposing Chief can see the full splendor of their suit. The entire time each Chief will profess the prettiness of his own suit. If however, a Big Chief demands that another "humbow" to the beauty of his suit, there will most certainly be a physical fight between the tribes.¹⁰ More often, each asserts his own beauty and may certainly challenge the other Chief by asking if all his pieces are new for this year, if he personally sewed them all, how long he took, etc... but will eventually concede that he is pretty as well. At this

⁹ Recorded by the author at a practice of the Wild Magnolia tribe October 13, 2010.

¹⁰ Ned Sublette, *The Year Before The Flood* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2009) 296.

point, the Chiefs will shake hands and so will the other members of their tribes Often, the two may join in traditional songs together before parting ways to go on the look out for other tribes.

There was a time where it was rare for two tribes to peacefully walk away from one another. In fact, Mardi Gras Day was, for a long time, the day to settle scores.¹¹ As late as the 1950s, Mardi Gras Indians would often engage in violent altercations with one another. Occasionally these fights were personal between two men, but often, the violence was rooted in the uptown/downtown split. By the 1970s nearly all violence had been eradicated from the tradition in exchange for pageantry and competition of the artistry of the suits. The suits used to be loose interpretations of Native American dress and they were generally lightweight suits that made physical altercations possible.

However, Big Chief Allison “Tootie” Montana of the Yellow Pocahontas helped lead the tradition to become one where a man’s artistry determined his place in the hierarchy of respect. Tootie, who is considered the “Chief of Chiefs” because he masked for over fifty years and was one of the most influential Big Chiefs because of his insistence on removing violence from the tradition was quoted as saying, “Don’t fight me physically, fight me with the needle and thread.”¹² Today’s suits are more like armors of feathers and beads. The suits out on the street today are monstrous pieces of artistry that can weigh up to two hundred and fifty pounds.

¹¹ Tootie Montana in *All On a Mardi Gras Day*. Produced by Osborn, Royce Osborn. New Orleans: Spyboy Pictures, 2008.

¹² *Tootie’s Last Suit*. Produced by Lisa Katzman. New Orleans: Lisa Katzman Films, 2007.



The amount of effort and money put into the suits is overwhelming. Most Indians talk about sleeping only two or three hours per night in the months leading up to Mardi Gras. It often takes at least a year to make an adult suit. Sometimes Indians take years off from masking in order to finish a suit that is actually taking two years or more to finish.

Michael Tenner Jr, a six-year-old boy masking Indian for the first time in 2010 as Spyboy of the Comanche Hunter's father, Michael Tenner Sr., reported that it took a full six months of nearly nightly sewing to complete his small (approximately three and a half feet tall) sons suit. In addition, the suits cost anywhere from \$2,000- \$20,000 to make. Today a fight between two men wearing such expensive suits would be extremely rare not only because of the money and time put into the suits, but also because punching and

kicking would be extremely difficult in such heavy often, motion constricting pieces of wearable art.



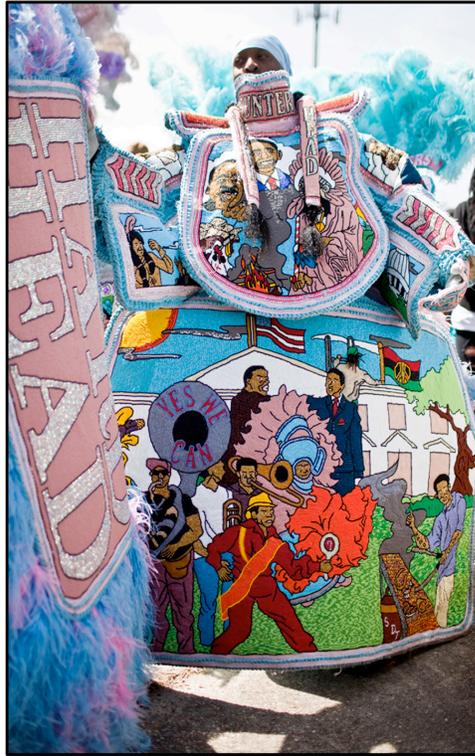
In years past, an Indian became famous, even legendary based on how tough he was and how many other men he and his tribe had physically fought. Starting in the 1960s Big Chief Tootie Montana began guiding the tradition away from violence and toward becoming a competition for who is the “prettiest”. The rivalry today is not about physical strength and violence, but rather, it is a competition of artistry. Craftsmanship, originality, creativity, and dedication are all considered when deciding who wins a “battle”. Now days, even the boastful songs tend to emphasize the time and effort put into sewing as indicative of a stronger sense of manhood. In addition, because each suit is handmade and a new one is made each year, there are inevitably Indians who simply can’t get the suit finished in time. Indians talk about this being the worst feeling in the world and the traditional Indian song, “Hey Pocky Way” emphasizes the point that if you aren’t ready, you better get out of the way of the men who are; *“Well, the prettiest thing that you ever did see is a Mardi Gras Indian down in New Orleans. They sewed all night and they sewed all day, If you ain’t ready, better get out da way.”*

Interestingly, the divide between the uptown and downtown tribes that once evoked violence can still be seen in the contemporary tradition. The downtown tribes use sequins and make three-dimensional geometric shapes that protrude off their bodies. The uptown tribes tend to create suits that use rhinestones and feature flat panels on the suits that use hand-beaded scenes to tell a story. (These beading techniques are strikingly similar to the Yourba beading traditions from Nigeria.¹³) Occasionally these are biblical



stories re-interpreted or they may be simple visions of Indian warrior fight scenes. In 2010, the Hard Head Hunters tribe created panels that featured President Obama, Dr. Martin Luther King, and a large fantasy scene of a barbeque on the White House lawn.

¹³ Robert Farris Thompson. "Congo Square: Crossroads of the Afro-Atlantic World An Afternoon Symposium." Tom Dent Congo Square Lecture Series. Jazz And Heritage Center, New Orleans. 14 Nov. 2009. Speech.



There are some older Indians who get upset that some downtown tribes are using flat story panels with beaded images and that some uptown tribes experiment with three-dimensional designs. Some of the older Indians seem to get very upset whenever anything within the tradition is changed too drastically. For instance, the word “tradition” is used quite often in these sorts of conversations about evolution of the customs in a way that alludes to the importance of ancestor connection to maintaining the culture’s spirituality. For example, Barbara “Yaa” Strickland, who has masked since she was five years old, for over thirty years, as a part of her uncle, Big Chief Bo Dollis’s Wild Magnolias, explained, “If the tribe ain’t coming out the door at 5 a.m. on Mardi Gras morning, that ain’t right. You see it’s tradition to come out at 5 a.m. That’s what they

always done. But, some of these guys they come out at 11 a.m. because that's after the Zulu Parade come roll through they neighborhood and some of them want to cross over the Zulu and some just want to wait until they gone." While there is a rationale for some of the newer tribes to come out after the Zulu parade, the older Indians still grumble about the lack of tradition in an 11 a.m. departure.

Interestingly, there are at least two tribes that actually stopped masking in the Plains Indian style, but rather dress as predominantly African styles. The Fi-Ya-Ya Tribe, led by Big Chief Victor Harris only masks African, while the Congo Nation, led by Big Chief Donald Harrison Jr., masks in a predominantly African style with some Native American echoes. The general reception to these tribes is one of respect, however, most tribes choose to pay homage to the Native Americans who helped their ancestors in their style of dress while maintaining the African practices of spirituality. And in reality, it is the maintenance of the tradition at large, of its homage to Native Americans and of its African spirituality that makes the Mardi Gras Indians such a unique cultural tradition no matter how the specific styles evolve.



Big Chief Donald Harrison of the Congo Nation



Big Chief Victor Harris of Fi-Ya-Ya and drummers for the tribe.

Tribe Functions/Activities

“It’s not just this year’s suit you’re looking at; it represents hundreds of years of tradition and it brings families together.” Daryl Montana¹⁴

“Mardi Gras Indians provide a unique window into how a culture that is African in form but local in content grows, adapts, and serves the needs of its community.”¹⁵- Ned Sublette

“You don’t go to these lengths for folklore. This was a sacramental act. These men who had fought all their lives against the amnesia that is slavery’s legacy.”¹⁶ -Ned Sublette

The unique practice of masking Indian in New Orleans is at least one hundred and twenty years old in its current form. However an examination of the Carnival traditions of the Caribbean and the spiritual celebration of the tribes in West Africa reveal that the origins of this culture are much deeper rooted than a mere one hundred and twenty years. In its current day manifestation, the Indians embody a form of ancestor recognition, a public display of artistry, defiance against racism, an exertion of masculinity, and an insistence on freedom. The rituals associated with the Mardi Gras Indians are what make this tradition more than just a simple part of Mardi Gras. This tradition is an integral part of the African American community’s sense of worth and pride in New Orleans. And more so, it is a platform for social dissidence, that like many early forms of Afro-American protest, is literally masked in another more palatable form for unassuming white observers. This tradition is about the ritualized behavior of a group of largely underprivileged African-American males who come from and represent underprivileged, underserviced neighborhoods in a city that still suffers from the entrenched racism and

¹⁴ *All On a Mardi Gras Day*. Produced by Osborn, Royce Osborn. New Orleans: Spyboy Pictures, 2008.

¹⁵ Ned Sublette. *The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2008) 295

¹⁶ *ibid*, 303.

classism of the past. Participation in this culture offers them a few days each year when they are not merely poor black men, but are beautiful and strong warriors who are both feared and respected by their community. As Michael P. Smith stated in his book *Mardi Gras Indians*, “The activities of the Mardi Gras Indians, like the religious services of the Spiritual Churches, invoke a heightened, other worldly consciousness and an alternative experience of power.”¹⁷

As much as the tradition is about public displays of freedom, strength, beauty, and masculinity, it is just as much about personal development of self-worth. “In New Orleans, for some participants, masking Indian is not just a means of claiming public space for ritual; it is a means of recasting interior space as well,”¹⁸ explains Reid Mitchell, author of *All on A Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival*. Reid went on to explain that early on Carnival in New Orleans created a space where things that normally would be prohibited were actually licensed. Men could dress as women, women could dress as animals, and everyone bathed in the anonymity that wearing a mask on the street offered. Still today, Mardi Gras is a day when people behave in ways they would normally never even consider in their normal everyday lives.

However, no one behaves anyway on Mardi Gras that they don’t wither always want to or that they believe they can act like. For the class of disadvantaged African-American

¹⁷ Michael P. Smith, *Mardi Gras Indians*, (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1994) 17.

¹⁸ Reid Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995) 126.

males who originated and who still predominantly make up the majority of the participants, they were and are still able to not only behave powerful behind the Indian mask, but they are able to actually believe in their own power. The communities response to the Indians is certainly one of respect within in their own community and now days, scores of New Orleanians from all classes revere the Indians for their awe-inspiring artistry. Big Chief Charles Taylor of the White Cloud Hunters explained that, “Even though they are poor in other ways, they can be rich in pride for being able to create something as wonderful as a Mardi Gras Indian costume, which embodies art, culture, and history.”¹⁹ And, it is interesting to note that the most palpable emotion out on the street amongst the parading Indians or even in just the photographs of Indians is the pride that is undeniable in the eyes of each masked tribe member. Even the smallest children seem to transcend their youthful immaturity once the crown is placed on their head and exhibit body language and facial expression that communicate nothing but pride, strength, and unshakable confidence.

Part of the reason that even the young children masking Indian all know how to carry their bodies to communicate their own confidence is because of the weekly “practices” that are held every Sunday by each tribe. Practice is really more of a church-like experience. Although, unlike most churches, except for the Spiritual Churches that are also based in New Orleans, these rituals happen at night. Like many things that happen in New Orleans, the reason why the practices are held at night is rooted in a set of

¹⁹ Big Chief Charles Taylor in *Tootie's Last Suit*. Produced by Lisa Katzman. New Orleans: Lisa Katzman Films, 2007.

law passed hundreds of years ago and simply put, it has just always been done that way. The Black Codes were a set of laws passed in the 1800s when the city was still a French colony. The Code Noir, as it was known, allowed for blacks to have Sundays as a day of freedom, even if they were enslaved.²⁰ The blacks of New Orleans would congregate on Congo Square (what is today called Louis Armstrong Park) just outside of the city walls where they would play hand drums and dance and sing in their homeland styles. After the Civil War all the weekly celebrations were forced to move in doors and often, under the cloak of nightfall within their own segregated neighbor hoods, these traditions were kept alive.



²⁰ *All On a Mardi Gras Day*. Produced by Osborn, Royce Osborn. New Orleans: Spyboy Pictures, 2008.

And so it is still Sundays that are the day for black music in the street of New Orleans. Every Sunday September through May still hosts a Second Line Parade that Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs put on with the help of hired brass bands who lead hundred to thousands of people dancing through the streets in predominantly black neighborhoods for three hours.²¹ And then, every night small bars are host to groups of Indians who sing the traditional songs, improvise new lyrics, and practice the ritual warfare that takes place on Mardi Gras day, St. Joseph's night and Super Sunday.



Practice starts off with a singing of “Indian Red”, one of the most sacred of all Mardi Gras Indian songs. In fact, some tribes refer to this as the prayer song. While most songs are all structured around a general chorus and then have improvised lyrics, “Indian Red” is almost never altered in any way. The song is actually sung in a typically African call and response style. The lead singer sings a line and then the crowd echoes him or her. “Indian Red” generally starts off with the Big Chief being sung about and then the same lyrics are sung but replacing “Big Chief” with other tribes members, such as Spyboy, Flagboy, and so on.

Mighty, mighty/ Coo-di-fiyo/ Oh how I love to hear you call/ My

²¹ A Social Aid and Pleasure Club is a benevolent fraternal organization, originally established as an insurance provider for African-American in the event of death or loss of wages. Today, S & P Clubs mainly function as cultural activist groups that maintain parading tradition in New Orleans, organizing and hosting Jazz Funerals and Second Line Parades. A Second Line Parade is the anniversary parade of an S & P club.

*Indian Red/ I got a Big Chief/ Big Chief/ He's the Big Chief of
the Nation/ The wild, wild creation/ He won't bow down/ Not on
that ground/ Oh I love to hear you call/ My Indian Red*

At some point the song breaks from the repetitive stanzas and explodes into a jubilant reprise of tambourines and the whole crowd dancing while singing:

*Jackamo hono hono hono/ Jackamo hono hono hono/
My Indian Red/ My Indian Red*



After the prayer song is sung to a chorus of voices, tambourines, and drums packed into a small bar, another traditional song is sung as the Big Chief sings into the microphone. The crowd then divides into two sections creating an aisle in the bar. One tribe member will stand at one end and other will either stand at the opposite end or, if space is

available, they will enter the aisle pretending to be a member of another tribe. Usually, just one song is sung for twenty to thirty minutes while the role-play goes on. The Indians practice their stances, their insults to one another, their physical demonstrations of confidence and how they will display their suits.

At a practice of the Wild Magnolias a young man of about fifteen stood at one end of the aisle and behind him stood Barbara “Yaa” Strickland. Strickland has masked as an Indian for thirty years and as the opponent entered the aisle she could be heard telling the young man to, “Open up your shoulders! Lift up you chin! Don’t let him see nothing in you but pretty, pretty!” The opponent entered from outside the bar and came into the aisle standing about twenty feet from the young Indian. He began by ranting a boast about his suit and his Big Chief. The young man in front of Yaa did the same and the two engaged in a verbal battle. All the while they were gesticulating wildly and running right up to the other man’s face, almost touching it and then jumping back, but never letting go of each others eyes. Although the competition seemed tense at points and could easily be interpreted as real aggression, this was just practice and these men were of the same tribe. Even out on the street, the tension can be felt, but as Ned Sublette explained, “Though they might appear to be celebrating disunity by challenging each other as rivals, in the aggregate, their tradition has come to mean the opposite: A statement of black unity.”²² They also each threw up hand signals that seemed to communicate something uninterruptable to the outside observer. These hand signals were the secret codes used during procession to communicate with the other members of their tribes. The entire

²² Ned Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2008) 297.

confrontation between two men took about fifteen to twenty minutes and then another set of men entered the aisle. Practice that evening went on for nearly three hours. After this practice, some other men left and went to another bar in the neighborhood where another tribe's practice was just beginning.

In addition to these weekly practices, the Indian ritual becomes all encompassing. According to Ashley Keaton, an entertainment layer who works with Mardi Gras Indians, young children who mask are required by their tribes to stay out of trouble and to maintain a 3.0 grade point average at school. What this effectively means is that for a young man who is part of a tribe, his weekdays consist of school, homework, whatever chores his parents may give him, dinner, and then sewing for the rest of the night. On weekends, a young Indian will be doing whatever schoolwork or other activities are demanded of him, sewing, and practice on Sunday night. Donald Harrison Jr., explained that sewing is not nearly as painstaking as it may appear to outsiders. In fact he stated that, "It's a manifestation of spirit when you start sewing; it transcends."²³ The focus and commitment it takes to make a new Indian suit each year no doubt helps build these young men into stronger individuals who fulfill their obligations to a commitment and dedicate their lives to the participation in a cultural tradition that both builds and maintains a deeper sense of community. As Kalamu ya Salaam, a New Orleans poet teacher and activist stated, "Secret codes, a specific hierarchy, plus regulation and obligation to be met serve as major focus of socialization by organizing and teaching

²³ *All On a Mardi Gras Day*. Produced by Osborn, Royce Osborn. New Orleans: Spyboy Pictures, 2008.

young men how to be responsible members of their community.”²⁴ In this way, the tribes are not unlike the Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs that exist in New Orleans as mutual aid clubs that offer African-American males fraternity and a place for self-expression and celebration.

All of the practicing, learning of the secret codes, singing, dancing, designing, and sewing are done for not only the enjoyment and fulfillment found in simply doing each activity, but also in preparation for the parading days. Mardi Gras day is the first day that the suits are worn in public. However, there are a few other times that the suit is put on.

First comes St. Josephs night which happens on March 19th every year. This day is particularly interesting because the Indians come out at nightfall to look for each other on the streets. Ronald Lewis, founder of the House of Dance and Feathers museum explains that, “It’s a special thing cause it’s done in the dark. It have a different spirit than Mardi Gras.” The night parades are special because not only do they happen in the dark as Mr. Lewis stated, but also because St. Joseph’s night brings tribes from all over town together. The uptown Indians and the downtown Indians participate together despite their rivalry. In fact, the streets of the third ward, where the majority of Indians come to seek each other out, end up lined with U-Haul trucks that the downtown Indians rent to transport their large heavy costumes across town. The parading starts around dusk and then carries on well into the night. The typical pageantry is certainly a part of the festivities, the Indians are all in the same neighborhood, it has less of a spontaneous feel than Mardi Gras does, when the whole city becomes the Indians war field.

²⁴ *ibid.*

The origins of why the Indians began masking on St. Joseph's night are also very significant. St. Joseph's day is a Catholic holiday celebrated mainly by Sicilians in New Orleans. The Mardi Gras Indians, who have traditionally been from predominantly lower income households, celebrate the holiday to show their allegiance to the Sicilian store owners who would allow people to buy food items on credit. As Sylvester Francis of Backstreet Culture Museum stated, "They (the Mardi Gras Indians) celebrated St. Joseph's cause that was always an Italian thing and the black and the Italians in New Orleans have always been like this (As he gestured by crossing his fingers)."



St. Joseph's night has been a point of contention with the local authorities in the past. The Indians never purchase city permits to hold their parades, but because Mardi Gras is such a prolific celebration throughout the city with millions of people taking to the streets for various reasons, the lack of permitting for the Indians relatively small processions on that day is generally tolerated. However, St. Joseph's night is an interesting circumstance. The Indians predominantly congregate in the third ward near the intersections of Dryades and 2nd St. This neighborhood is home to numerous Mardi Gras Indian practice sites, including Handa Wanda's which was made semi-famous by the Wild Magnolia funk bands song of the same name, and is also a very rough part of the city.

Despite the neighborhood's reputation, it is still home to many uptown Indians. Part of the Mardi Gras Indian social dissidence is that by refusing to get permits they are effectively testing whether or not a black man in New Orleans can freely roam the streets of his own neighborhood without asking permission from anyone. The Indians argue that a part of their intentions is to test their freedom.²⁵ Michael P. Smith explained that, "As in colonial times, they still deny outside authority and refuse to subject themselves to the financial burdens and humiliation of being monitored and controlled by the city."²⁶ Furthermore, purchasing permits would drastically alter the organic spontaneous nature of the tradition. This is not a cultural event that is merely symbolic. The Indians could not buy a permit and stick to a fixed route and still maintain the seeking and ritual combat with other tribes. In effect, the nature of the custom is directly against permits on both ideological and logistical points.



²⁵ Ned Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2008) 297.

²⁶ Michael P. Smith, *Mardi Gras Indians* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1994) 51.

However for the city police, the whole event can seem like quite a potentially dangerous affair. Without permits, there was traditionally no police presence on the streets as scores of young men cloaked in feathers roamed the streets at night in a crime-ridden part of town actively seeking each other out to engage in confrontations.²⁷ Today the Mardi Gras Indian Council works closely with local police authorities to involve them in the planning of the night. In 2010, there was a heavy police presence although no permit was actually purchased. Ashley Keaton, an entertainment lawyer who works pro-bono for Mardi Gras Indians in New Orleans, explained that after a particularly tense situation between the police and Indians in 2005 on St. Joseph's night, an extreme effort has been made to involve the city officials in the planning and preparations for the event yet still maintaining the Indians insistence on not paying for the right to roam their own streets.²⁸

²⁷ Robertson, Campbell. "Want to Use My Suit? Then Throw Me Something Mister." *New York Times*, March 23, 2010.

²⁸ In 2005, the New Orleans Police Department drove through the procession in the third ward and demanded that the men remove their suits and go in doors. According to the Indians, the police were using derogatory terms and aggressive behavior, which greatly offended the community and led to a number of City Council meetings to mediate between the Indians and local law enforcement.



While the effort to include the police in planning for Indian holidays recently became a focal point for the Council, the Indians did make an initial attempt to smooth relations with city officials in the 1970s by instituting a holiday when all Indians would come out and parade together in the public on an established route and they even purchase permits. Super Sunday starts off with a formal parade of all the tribes and culminates with a festival in a city park. The event offers an opportunity for all members of the public to see the Indians and hear their songs. For many New Orleanians, particularly for white New Orleanians, the first two holidays that are celebrated are not necessarily accessible. Mardi Gras day is a hectic day in the city and with so many festivities to attend to; the largely spontaneous Indian sightings can be difficult for many people to squeeze into their day. More importantly, the Mardi Gras Indian tradition is a

part of black Carnival. Whereas today's Mardi Gras celebrations are nearly fully integrated, there had traditionally always been two different Mardi Gras in New Orleans: One black and one white. Part of the Mardi Gras Indian's influence in their community stems from their localization. "We are out there in our own communities, in our own image, doing our own thing," explain Ronald Lewis. The Indians roam from their own neighborhoods to the neighborhoods of other Indians, effectively bypassing the predominant culture's celebrations by literally taking the back streets. Super Sunday on the other hand, is a formal city event that happens at a certain time and along a certain parade route. Also, because the event happens during the daytime, a great deal more people who would normally be too afraid to go to the third ward during the St. Joseph's night celebrations come out.



The festivities start off with the tribes lining up one after the other and parading on the established route. While they do sing their traditional songs, there is very little ritual warfare at this event. In some ways Super Sunday feels manufactured compared to the other holidays, however, it is clear that for the Indians who choose to participate, the event is taken seriously. All the Indians who come out dress in full suit and sing and dance for hours as they proceed through the streets. Super Sunday is also interesting because unlike the other masking days, there are hundreds of people out on the street to see the Indians. Unlike, most other New Orleans cultural traditions, the Indians do not draw crowds nor do they, for the large part encourage participation like other traditions. (The Second Line Parades in contrast proceed through the streets drawing hundreds out of their house to come join the parade. However, the Indians are a more secretive, insular, and spontaneous custom.) On Super Sunday there are people literally lining the streets to see the Indians and then following them until they end the parade some three hours later at a city park. In addition to merely wanting to see the Indians, many people come out to photograph the Indians in their suits. In fact, often times the photographers swarm tribe members.



The issue of photographers taking images of the Indians has recently become a tense issue amongst the tribes. The Indians are getting fed up with seeing the images taken of them by photographers when they are out parading on the street ending up in calendars and books without any compensation. Lawyer Ashlye Keaton is trying to get as many Indians as possible to register their suits for copyright protection. The whole idea is questionable as a legal tactic because clothing cannot be copy written in the United States. However, Keaton is convinced that because the suits are the intellectual property of the Indians who created them, that it is unlawful for photographers to make money of images that are predominantly of the suits. The idea of intellectual property has been spread throughout the Mardi Gras Indian community as Keaton and others, such as the non-profit Sweet Home New Orleans, encourage the tribe members to copyright all of

their suits. On one hand, this movement has helped educate the Indians about business practices and about how to both protect and promote their art. On the other hand, the level of aggression toward photographers has certainly risen. It is not uncommon for some Indians to aggressively demand that photographers stop shooting or pay for taking the image. Unfortunately, while Keaton emphasizes the difference between commercial and editorial photographer, the Indians themselves have no way of knowing the difference when someone puts a camera in their face. In this way, the copyright movement is actually disabling a multitude of interested photojournalists from exploring the culture and trying to give it visibility.

While the tradition has always been about self-expression and not about making money, some have suggested that the Indians themselves hire photographers to make images that they themselves can put into books and calendars and make the profit for themselves.²⁹ However, there has been a certain resistance to this idea because the Indians don't want to sell out their cultural tradition.

Notably, despite this desire to keep profit making out of the central focus of the tradition, since the early 1970s a number of tribes have formed into musical acts by employing funk bands behind them while they sing their traditional songs, complete with improvised lyrics, and while wearing the suits. The Wild Magnolias, The Golden Eagles, The Wild Tchoupitulas, and The Flaming Arrows all tour internationally and have recorded albums. There are a number of Mardi Gras Indian tribes who show up at New Orleans' Jazz and Heritage Festival in full suit to sing on stage. In this way, the Mardi

²⁹ Christopher Porche West quoted by Campbell Robertson in "Want to Use My Suit? Then Throw Me Something Mister." *New York Times*, March 23, 2010.

Gras Indians acquire an international audience while right at home. However, for most tourists, and for many New Orleanians, alike, the spirituality of the tradition is lost. None-the-less, the Mardi Gras Indian music has proliferated even American pop culture.

The bambula beat as well as other African beats used in Mardi Gras Indian songs are standard beats in nearly all rock and roll songs. In addition, the Mardi Gras Indian songs have made their way into the American musical language with many not even knowing it.³⁰ When the Dixie Cups recorded “Iko Iko” no one outside of New Orleans would have even understood the lyrics: “*My Flagboy to your Flagboy/ I’m set your flag on fiyo/ Hey now/ Iko Iko ah Ne/ Jocka-mo-fi-na-neh/ Jocka-mo-fi-na-neh.*” In fact, many people in New Orleans may still not understand those lyrics. The hybrid Creole-African based language used is untranslatable in formal terms. However, “Iko Iko” is definitely about Mardi Gras Indian tribes doing verbal battle down by the “fiyo” (This is one of the few translatable words meaning “fire”.)

³⁰ Bruce “Sunpie” Barnes in *All On a Mardi Gras Day*. Produced by Osborn, Royce Osborn. New Orleans: Spyboy Pictures, 2008.

The Future

“Through the tsunami that we done went through, we out here showing that we still all right- we all right.” –Ronald Lewis

Because of the secretive nature of the Mardi Gras Indians and the conglomerate of traditions it embodies, the culture can never be clearly defined and understood in formal contexts. Even being present around the Indians rituals does not give an observer the whole picture. What the Indians provide for the men and women who mask is something so internal and personal, it is doubtful that this culture will ever be boxed into a specific definition. Further more, one can feel the sense of spirituality while present at an Indian ritual.

On St. Joseph’s night 2010 while visiting the House of Dance and Feathers in the Lower Ninth Ward, Mr. Ronald Lewis, the owner of the home museum invited me to stay and photograph as some Indians from the Comanche Hunter tribe dressed in preparation for the night’s festivities. A little boy had been running around all afternoon. In fact, he was so excited that I was rarely able to catch him in my lens without him appearing as nothing more a blurry spot. His name was Michael Tenner Jr. and he was six years old.



His father told me that he had been excited all week long. Since they did not manage to get his suit done in time for Mardi Gras, St. Joseph's night was going to be his first time ever masking Indian, as Spyboy for the Comanche hunters. When it came time to get dressed, the rambunctious six-year-old's demeanor drastically changed. First he put on his boots and under clothes (a pair of shorts and a shirt that were the same color orange as his feathered costume). He immediately began to walk slower and his face revealed the embarrassed but prideful emotions he was feeling. "I wanted to be an Indian all my life," he told me. As his father put on his apron and bib, the small child stood perfectly still. Once it came time to put on his feathered crown, I saw a glimpse of nervousness wash over his face. However, once the crown was placed on his head, a different child filled my frame. He took his place in front of Vernon Freeman, the Flagboy for the Comanche Hunters, as his face contorted into that of warrior. In many ways, I feel that what I photographed that day was the transcendence that the Indians talk about feeling when they engage in the rituals.





Right after the storm in 2005 there was a real concern that the tradition would die out because so many people had been displaced. However, the storm seemed to reinvigorate enthusiasm for the culture, with some thirty tribes taking to the streets by 2007. And interestingly, this tradition that had predominantly been a place for men, saw the inclusion of more and more women and children after 2005.³¹ However, as Cherise Harrison stated, women are there solely to help make the Big Chief look prettier. None-the-less, the Mardi Gras Indians out on the street today are numerous and there seem to a great deal of children participating in the tradition. As Ronald Lewis said, “You got to

³¹ Ned Sublette at "Congo Square: Crossroads of the Afro-Atlantic World An Afternoon Symposium." Tom Dent Congo Square Lecture Series. Jazz And Heritage Center, New Orleans. 14 Nov. 2009. Speech.

have the younger generation out here cause that's how the culture lives on." And from the looks of it in 2010, it appears as though the Mardi Gras Indians will continue to be a part of the cultural gumbo of New Orleans well into the future.

Coda: The Hip-Hop Connection

It could easily be argued that the original Mardi Gras Indians were the grandfathers of the hip-hop movement of the 1970s. Just like hip-hop, the Indian culture was an adaptive musical culture that was extremely African in expression, but American in content. And both were expressed by a group of young black men who grew up in a particularly disillusioned generation. The Indians may certainly have existed in some form in New Orleans far earlier, but it is generally accepted that the first tribe as we know it today was the Creole Wild West gang, organized in 1888- beginning the city-wide proliferation of the tradition and the development of more and more tribes. The young men who organized themselves into these first tribes were claiming public space as their own, exerting African-American masculinity in public, and displaying black beauty and artistry and were all part of a generation that had experienced the many freedoms of the Reconstruction era in the Deep South. However, by the 1880s the post-Reconstruction era took hold of the Deep South and stripped all the previous freedoms away in exchange for Jim Crow limitations. Similarly, hip-hop was born of a generation of young black men in the Bronx who had been milk fed the empty promises of the post-Civil-Rights-Era. That generation of young men used African rhythms and dances married with Caribbean influences to again, take to the streets and claim public spaces for black celebration, expression, artistry and the undeniable exertion of masculinity through the boasting that still defines hip-hop. Both groups did not ask permission of anyone, but rather used the streets as the setting for cultural development. This is significant because the street is accessible to all and yet, it's technically the city's. However neither group, the Indians

using the streets of their own neighborhoods for procession, and the early hip-hoppers who used their own streets for block-parties (Interestingly, a strong Caribbean tradition), asked permission or acquired permits. These two musical cultures are platforms for social dissidence that emphasize strength through artistry, African roots, and self-worth. While each has had negative influences of violence affect the overall perception of the culture, ultimately, these forms of self-expression are inherently American forms of artistry that deserve recognition and further study.

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Vita

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