

New Orleans: Cultural Revitalization in an Urban Black Community

by Andrew J. Kaslow

Vitality and exuberance are two adjectives that describe the expressive culture of Afro-Americans in New Orleans. While the homogenizing effect of global marketing and telecommunication erodes indigenous folk traditions almost everywhere, Black New Orleans seems to have stemmed the tide, drawn on its own bountiful cultural wellspring and erupted in song, dance, ecstatic religion- and social clubs. The much publicized revival of traditional New Orleans jazz through such efforts as those of the Preservation Hall bands which have toured the United States and traveled extensively abroad is only one fragment of a sweeping revitalization which continues to gain momentum.

The neighborhood is one component of the elusive urban "community" which nourishes the Afro-American traditions of New Orleans (Kaslow, 1981). It is the place for a great deal of social and cultural

Andrew J. Kaslow is an anthropologist who has done extensive fieldwork in New Orleans and the Caribbean. He has taught at the University of New Orleans and consulted with the National Park Service in the development of the Jean Lafitte National Park. Dr. Kaslow is currently a management consultant specializing in organization development and corporate culture change. He received his doctorate from Columbia University.

The Scene Boosters, a marching society, parades in New Orleans. Photo by Michael P. Smith from the book *Spirit World*





Zulu, the only official Black Mardi Gras Krewe, parades on Carnival day in New Orleans. Photo courtesy Louisiana Office of Tourism

“action” and provides a backdrop for some of the most colorful outdoor and indoor pageantry in America. While tourists are spellbound by the glitter and gala of Anglo Mardi Gras, with its endless parades of gaudy floats and plastic beads, they tend not to notice a tradition of Black Carnival societies with roots in African and Caribbean cultures, which turns ghetto neighborhoods into a showcase of visual splendor and ritual theater. These male associations of Blacks, who sew together elaborate suits using American Indian motifs, are hallmarks of an Afro-Caribbean legacy which continues to thrive in New Orleans of the 1980s. This suit-making tradition goes far beyond the frivolous costumes of Halloween, for the artistry required to fashion these spectacular garments is considerable. Built around “patches” of multi-colored beadwork requiring hundreds of hours to produce, the suits are constructed of feathers, rhinestones, sequins, ribbons and taffeta — carefully designed and constructed into unique patterns, only to be dismantled and rebuilt each year.

The Mardi Gras Indian associations are organized into groups of a dozen or so individuals who carry such titles as “Chief,” “Spyboy,” “Flagboy” and “Wildman.” Their music is cast in an improvisational call-and-response style in which a chief tells his special story, while his tribe and other “second line” followers chant a rhythmic refrain. Weekly practices are held on Sundays in local bars for the four or five months leading up to Carnival. On Mardi Gras day the tribes wend their way through the insular Black neighborhoods of the city. They encounter one another in a ritual dance and engage, mostly peaceably, in a verbal banter which is rich in vocabulary and elevated to a highly stylistic form of expression. The greeting ritual evolved in the 1950s



from previous streetfighting encounters, which herald back to the 19th century and the Caribbean.

Carnival associations are only one of the myriad social clubs which form the infrastructure of Black neighborhood life in New Orleans. Still other thriving traditions of affiliation with deep roots in the past are represented by the benevolent and mutual aid societies, which began as insurance and burial organizations. Groups like the Zulus and the Young Mens' Olympians continue to transform the neighborhood streets each fall with magnificent attire, brass bands and enthusiastic crowds of second liners. These second liners are joyous, dancing masses who invade the thoroughfares and claim them for their own for a few hours of "hard-nosed boogie" in the streets to the "hot licks" of the "funky" brass bands that fill the air with music. In New Orleans, people still dance to the sounds of jazz with liveliness and ecstasy.

Such social aid and pleasure clubs as the Young Mens' Olympians are organized into more traditional hierarchies, but there any comparison with other social clubs ends. Clad in matching pinstripe suits, borsalino hats, fine leather ankle boots and white gloves, the members proudly dance through the streets of the city. Many carry elaborate three-foot high baskets adorned with yards of ribbon and crested with a black baby doll. Inside the basket, a bottle of champagne is waiting to be imbibed at the end of the long day's activity. While the bands belt out choruses of "Down by the Riverside," "Little Liza Jane," "Go to the Mardi Gras" (a Professor Longhair original), "My Indian Red" (a Mardi Gras Indian traditional composition) and "Second Line," hundreds of people are dancing. Some of them perform "the gator," an undulating dance in which the legs are spread, knees bent, hips shaken, back

Chief Charles Taylor of the White Cloud Hunters Mardi Gras Indian Tribe is flanked by Spyboy Keith Barnes (left) and Little Chief Tony Gilbert. Photo by Nicholas R. Spitzer, courtesy Louisiana Folklife Program

arched and arms held high. A decorated umbrella may be held aloft, as all the while the dancer's whole body moves forward, progressing with the flow of the parade. Some enthusiasts jump on top of parked cars; as many as four to six of them may be seen rocking on one car while letting out shrieks of frenzied delight as the roof bends in and out, threatening to collapse at any moment. This torrential hoedown sweeps through the neighborhood, engulfing the street in its currents of rhythmic body-motion and sound.

Many of the actors in these spring and fall rites are the same. Largely organized into male associations, the men are the undisputed rulers of the streets — neighborhood heroes who pave the way for the less motivated to have a good time. Their investments of time and money in these endeavors underscore the high level of dedication to self-presentation and public image, according them a prestige in their own communities which they rarely achieve in mainstream society, where leadership and status are acquired by attaining totally different objectives.

A curious conjunction of traditions occurs on March 19th, which is St. Joseph's Day. Midway between Ash Wednesday (the beginning of Lent) and Easter, St. Joseph's Day is viewed by some as a break in the routine of abstinence. This holiday, originally from Sicily, was brought to America in the late 19th century (see article on Florida Parishes). St. Joseph altars are constructed in the homes of the descendants of these immigrants and represent one aspect of folk Catholicism, i.e. traditions associated with the religion that are highly localized, sometimes idiosyncratic and oriented to patron saint devotions.

The religious folk tradition of Sicilians became a significant influence on the Spiritual Church, a syncretic Black religion containing ele-

Musicians perform at Preservation Hall in New Orleans. Photo by Al Godoy, courtesy Louisiana Office of Tourism



ments of folk Catholicism, American Spiritualism, African *vodun*, Pentecostalism and Southern hoodoo. In the 1920s the Louisiana Spiritualist associations were integrated, and worshippers of Italian descent introduced the saint-oriented Afro-Americans to St. Joseph and the construction of altars dedicated to him. This tradition of altar-building survives in the contemporary Black Spiritual Churches, whose members also make feasts to the Indian spirit of Black Hawk, to the spirit of Queen Esther, to St. Patrick and to St. Michael, among others (Kaslow and Jacobs, 1981).

In a further coincidence, the Mardi Gras Indians don their suits on St. Joseph's Eve and, in some instances, on St. Joseph's Day. Thus a common reverence for St. Joseph by both sacred and secular celebrants occurs despite the two groups' mutual disregard for each other.

These unique traditions are connected by the common language of music, as well as through the overlapping membership of participants in different organizations. The forceful rhythm-and-blues traditions of Black New Orleans have become widely known through such luminaries as Fats Domino and Professor Longhair. The decidedly Afro-Caribbean flavor of this music clearly reflects New Orleans' location in the northernmost sector of the Caribbean simultaneously with its position in the southernmost segment of the North American continent.

The melding of French, Spanish, African, West Indian and American cultural traditions in an urban setting creates an extraordinary pastiche of "The Crescent City" on the Mississippi River. The transformation of this backwater community into a cosmopolitan city through such venues as petrochemical industries, tourism and the port, however, has not eroded its vibrant folk cultures. On the contrary, New Orleans has the potential to preserve its rich cultural resources while marching into the 21st century.

Suggested reading

Kaslow, Andrew J. "Oppression and Adaptation: Social Organization and Expressive Culture in an Urban Afro-American Community in New Orleans." Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1981.

_____ and Claude F. Jacobs. "Prophecy, Power, and Healing: The Afro-American Spiritual Churches of New Orleans," unpublished manuscript, National Park Service, Jean Lafitte National Historical Park, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1981.