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Historical Mardi Gras Roots in Black Community

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Black Mardi Gras
Traditions Lives On

By Edwin Buggage

Mardi Gras and African-American Traditions

It is that time again where people from around the world converge on the Big Easy for the biggest street party in the world. Mardi Gras is a time of year where the City becomes engulfed in the spirit of parades, balls and revelry. While New Orleans has a rich history and a gumbo of people have contributed to it. It is undeniable that the African-American population is the roux that gives the City its unique flavor.

Zulu is a social aid and pleasure club that's been around for over a century, where their parade and ball have become a must see. In addition to their coconuts their annual poster has become a collector's item. This year the poster is called “Doing Footwork” done by renowned New Orleans Artist Terrance Osborne speaking of how the culture of New Orleans inspires his work he says, “When I created this piece I remember the way people dance in our community, it was a natural dance everyone understood, but I didn’t realize it was so unique until I saw outside the community that everyone didn’t do what we did, but I feel it is great. In my work I have been able to give a window to people to see our great cultural traditions.” To view the entire 2014 Zulu poster, visit www.ladatanews.com. Photo Credit: Seth Osborne

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Dated material two weeks in advance. Not responsible for publishing or return of unsolicited manuscripts or photos.

Data News Weekly
www.ladatanews.com
March 1 - March 7, 2014

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Looking back at his youth growing up in New Orleans Treme’ neighborhood as the inspiration and show that our kids would have something to pass down to their children.”

New Traditions Renew the Spirit of Mardi Gras

For a long time Zulu was the only African-American Krewe that paraded during Mardi Gras, but today there are many others who either are holding balls or parading. One is called Oshun; it started out in 1997 as an all-female club, but now has both male and female members. The Queen this year is Laquina Ladimirault-Brown and her husband Christopher Brown Sr. is King. Elated about her reign this year she says it has been amazing and incredible. It has been a great experience and I couldn’t have done it without my husband and my family and friends by my side. It was great to share that with the people who are important in my life and inspire our City to build on top of our history with new traditions.”

The “Rebirthing” of a City

Rebirth has been around for over three decades. Their brand of Brass Band music has gained them legions of fans across the globe, their hard work dedication and determination garnered them music’s highest honor with them receiving a Grammy Award in 2012. Phil Frazier, the band’s founder says they are ambassadors of Mardi Gras year round playing the music that Terrence Osborne’s “Doing Footwork” displays. “We are Black Mardi Gras every day, because we bring the music that is our culture to people around the world, with our shows giving them a taste of our Black tradition in New Orleans.”

New Orleans is a City that celebrates life, it seems like every second, minute and hour on any given day there is a festival or occasion for celebration and in Black New Orleans traditions are a major part of that. Whether it is any festival many of the performers, artists etc. are Black New Orleanians. In the Black community “Under the Bridge” means something special for African-Americans as the historic meeting place for Blacks during the days of segregation on Mardi Gras Day. On Orleans and North Claiborne where Zulu ends its parade, people gather in a celebration of Black New Orleans complete with second lining, brass bands, live entertainment and the Mardi Gras Indians. Phil Frazier recalls these traditions as an important part of his life and how he came to creating a band to celebrate local traditional music. “I grew up inside this culture and it’s as natural as breathing to me, so I feel good that for 31 years we have been able to expose people from all over the world to our City and our culture.”

The Future of Black Traditions in the “New” New Orleans

After Hurricane Katrina the City lost some of its Black population, but the traditions continue and its future has taken on a different meaning for some. Laquina Brown now uses this time to reunite with friends and family passing on the traditions to the next generation. “Katrina took so much from us, because we always got together, so now we get together and reminisce about the times we were growing up and tell our kids about the good times we had. And every year we try to make it better and better so that our kids would have something to pass down to their children.”

Cover Story, Continued on page 7.

Oshun 2014 Queen Laquina Ladimirault-Brown says this is a dream come true, “Since I was a little girl I would dream about this day but when I was young it was something that seemed out of our reach as African-Americans but today that is not the case.”

The Mardi Gras Indians is a centuries old tradition dating back to the 1700’s is an important part of the black New Orleans culture that continues into today. Photo Credit: houseofdanceandfeathers.org

One of the first women’s organizations to mask and perform during Mardi Gras, the Million Dollar Baby Dolls redefined the New Orleans carnival tradition. Photo Credit: Getty Images

Black is an integral part of the Mardi Gras tradition. Reflecting on the important role her family and friends throughout this experience she says, “It was breathtaking and amazing being in the parade, I felt like a part of something that was amazing and incredible. It has been a great experience and I couldn’t have done it without my husband and my family and friends by my side. It was great to share that with the people who are important in my life and inspire our City to build on top of our history with new traditions.”

Traditions in the “New” New Orleans

Looking back at his youth growing up in New Orleans Treme’ neighborhood as the inspiration for the poster he says, “When I created this piece I remember the way people dance in our community, it was a natural dance everyone understood, but I didn’t realize it was so unique until I saw outside the window to people to see our great culture. For a long time I have been able to give a place for Blacks during the days of segregation on Mardi Gras Day. On Orleans and North Claiborne where Zulu ends its parade, people gather in a celebration of Black New Orleans complete with second lining, brass bands, live entertainment and the Mardi Gras Indians. The “Rebirthing” of a City

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Cover Story, Continued on page 7.
You know your rights!

Or, well, at least you’re pretty sure you do. Laws can change quickly and they’re often up for interpretation. Sometimes, there’s a gray area, too, and...

So you know your rights. But how to enforce them is perhaps another matter - especially if you’d once been a slave. In the new novel “Worthy Brown’s Daughter” by Phillip Margolin, that’s one man’s struggle.

Facing a noose-waving lynch mob would terrify anyone.

Matthew Penny knew that to be a fact: as a lawyer, he’d seen many men strung up and his new client, a traveling salesman, was meant to be next. Penny was sure the man wasn’t guilty, though, but it was 1860 on the frontier, corruption was common, and the man’s beautiful, exotic accuser seemed to have the judge under her spell.

And as it turned out, the salesman was convicted and harshly punished but things could have been worse. He would’ve hung, were it not for the quiet black man who approached Penny and whispered that the trial was rigged.

Weeks later, in Penny’s Portland office, it was time to pay for that information.

Worthy Brown had once been a slave in Savannah, and had traveled west with his owner, Caleb Barbour, who was escaping debt. But slavery was illegal in Oregon and Brown was now a free man, though Barbour still held Brown’s only child, Roxanne. The law was on Brown’s side but Barbour was smart, and well-connected.

Brown needed Penny’s help.

Penny understood loss all too well. Traveling westbound two years prior, his beloved wife had drowned during a river crossing, and he sorely missed her. He knew Rachel would want him happy – but what would she say about his growing romance with the daughter of Portland’s wealthiest citizen?

That vexed him greatly, but there wasn’t time to dwell on it. Saving Brown’s daughter from her captor was more important. And since Barbour had started collecting supporters, there was no chance for error on Penny’s part...

Good and bad. That’s this book.

Author Phillip Margolin admits that he took license with history in order to write “Worthy Brown’s Daughter” and, indeed, the premise of this novel bears rather small resemblance to the true events it’s “loosely” based upon. The real-life tale of “several” unlawfully-held former slave children is surely one of fascination and outrage - but here, it’s watered down by fiction that mostly seems to get in the way, and that turns what might’ve been a stellar novel into just another courtroom drama.

And yet – there’s Worthy Brown.

Margolin makes his title character someone who’s steadfast and solid, someone you desperately want to win. Brown is just one man in this well-populated story, but his presence alone will keep your nose buried in this book.

Overall, I think that if you’re looking for historical accuracy, you’ll be happier looking elsewhere. This ain’t what you want. But if you need a decent enough novel to pass the time and you think “Worthy Brown’s Daughter” is it… you might be right.

“Worthy Brown’s Daughter” by Phillip Margolin

c.2014, Harper

$26.99 / $33.50 Canada

352 pages
Femme Fatale’s Inaugural Gala Event

Photos by Terry Jones

The Mystic Krewe of Femme Fatale is a newly formed female organization that was organized to offer women the opportunity to promote New Orleans cultural in a variety of aspects. Their first Annual Gala was held Saturday, February 22, 2014, LACE, The Grand Ballroom. The ladies came out in grand style in amazing costumes.
Blacks Have More Reasons to be Fearful than Whites

In the years after enslavement, Southern Whites did all they could to return to a manner of slavery. No White “owned” a Black person, but many Whites behaved as if they did. Theoretically, Blacks were free to come and go as they pleased, but if they went to the wrong store, sat in the wrong part of the bus, or engaged in White people’s fantasies. When the myth of White superiority did not work, too many Whites hide behind their so-called fear as a way force deference or provide penalties for those who will not engage in White people’s fantasies. If Michael Dunn were so afraid of Jordan Davis and his friends, why did he get out of his car and confront them about their loud music? None of us of a certain age loves loud music, but most of us know how to close a window and tolerate it for a moment or two. Dunn says he was afraid of teens playing “thug” music. Those teens might well have been afraid of him, just as the World War II veterans had been afraid of the KKK. Jordan Davis and his friends might have been as frightened as farmers slaves were when they refused to cross the sidewalk in the streets so that Whites could go first. Some of the Black folks ignored their fear and attempted to exercise their citizenship rights. Some were lynched because they would not defer to outmoded customs. Gary Pearl could be Michael Dunn’s evil twin, with a pecuniary twist. In 1983, Pearl left his job as a city sanitation supervisor in Louisville, Kentucky because he says he had a nervous breakdown, which he attributed to having to work with Black people. A psychiatrist testified that Pearl was suffering from paranoid schizophrenia; judge ordered that he be paid $225 per week. The state appealed the award, which was eventually overturned, and Gary Pearl returned to the obscurity he had before the “fear” defense. What would happen if every Black person fearing White people got to file for unemployment compensation, or carry a gun around to assuage himself of his safety? Would a jury be as lenient toward that Black man as they were with Michael Dunn? Would they acquit all the men who killed Medgar Evers (it took decades for a jury to finally do the right thing). A hard read of history suggests that Blacks have more to fear from Whites than the other way around, but it is Whites, rationalizing their fear, who get to shoot without justification.

Run, Jesse, Run – 30 Years Later

In the years after World War II, 12 million soldiers returned home. Seven percent of them — nearly 800,000 Black soldiers — got something less than a hero’s welcome. Indeed, thousands of Black World War II veterans were beaten, often because these men wanted the same rights at home that they fought for abroad. Their sense of dignity and equality seemed to embolden the Ku Klux Klan, which was responsible for soldiers in uniform being pulled off buses, beaten and shot. In some cases, these soldiers had their eyes gouged out; in some cases they were castrated, tortured and lynched.

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New Jazz Market Breaks Ground

Facility to Provide Music Education, Live Jazz Performances and a New Orleans Jazz Archive

The New Orleans Jazz Orchestra (NOJO) hosted two groundbreaking events on Tuesday, Feb. 25, to celebrate their new building project, The New Orleans Jazz Market. The new market will be housed at the intersection of Orella Castle Haley and Martin Luther King Boulevards in Central City in the former Gators Department Store building. The Jazz Market will feature music education experiences for all ages, a New Orleans Jazz Archive, tributes to current and past Jazz Masters, and performances by Irvin Mayfield, NOJO and other renowned musicians.

Partners for the project include Community Development Capital, Goldman Sachs, Louisiana Economic Development, the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority, Prudential, Reddell Restoration and Development, and the State of Louisiana.

The Groundbreaking celebration hosted by Councilmember LaToya Cantrell and NOJO Board Chairman Ron Forman; event featured musical performances by NOJO’s Artistic Director Irvin Mayfield, Honorary NOJO Board Chair and legendary vocalist Dee Dee Bridgewater, and Jazz patriarch and pianist Ellis Marsalis. Marsalis and 102-year-old Lionel Ferbos – the oldest working trumpet player in the world – became the first inductees into The Jazz Market’s Walk of Fame during the festivities. Speakers included Charles Brown, New Orleans Public Library; Jan Singleton, New Orleans Redevelopment Authority; Margaret Anadu, Goldman Sachs; Neal Morris, Reddell Restoration and Development; Ronald Markham, NOJO; Scott Hutcheson, City of New Orleans; and Steve Perry, New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The Presentation & Town Hall meeting hosted at Ashe Cultural Arts Center by Councilmember Cantrell and Chairman Forman featured a presentation led by Ronald Markham and Neal Morris about NOJO’s plans for the Jazz Market.

New Orleans is a City that is a Gumbo and as stated earlier it is the African-American people and culture that gives it its "Je ne sais quoi." It is the special quality of this experience that has given New Orleans its distinct character. And it is something that has transcended its origins and has reached people around the world and become universally known how people identify what is authentically New Orleans. Speaking of his approach to his art and the African-American impact on the City he says, "I didn’t think it so much about incorporating the New Orleans experience in my work in a conscious way, but this is what I knew and my work is simply a reflection of that. It is who I am and what I do is not intentional it is an extension of who I am." Continuing he says, “You can’t speak about the culture of New Orleans without speaking about our large contribution to it that all people enjoy. Whether it is in the food, music, or the arts we are a large part of what makes this City special.”

The City in a post-Katrina environment is experiencing changes, as continuous indigenous culture is finding itself up against people who move into neighborhoods interrupting and challenging traditional ways of life. While most believe that change can be good in some respects, economically, educational and the like, but when it comes to traditions in art and culture it becomes problematic. With the question becoming what would the City be without those culture bearers who are the innovators and holders of long standing traditions? How important are they in our City moving forward?

Terrance Osborne takes a balanced view understanding that the City must change, but cautions against interrupting longstanding traditions and the City’s unique culture, “I believe it is important for the City to grow and move forward in some respects, but at what expense if the City loses its culture and identity in the process you’ve gained nothing.” Continuing he says, “If you take the things that make the City special and that is the people and their traditions then although you may gain in one area the losses are more significant.”

The City in what next year will be a decade since Hurricane Katrina has risen from the ashes. It continues to change and its direction is still uncertain, but Rebirth Brass Band Founder Phil Frazier feels regardless of what happens nothing will kill the spirit of Black New Orleans in continuing to shape the larger identity of the City. Reflecting on his band and what has become larger purpose than simply playing music, but bringing people together to uplift the City. “When I started the band we were revitalizing Brass Band Music and now after Katrina our name has taken on a greater mission as inspiration for a City coming back better than ever and we are glad to be a part of a tradition that is in spite of everything that’s happened in our City our impact now goes far beyond New Orleans and the world can see what the Black people of New Orleans have to offer is something special that will never die.”

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NOW THAT MOM LIVES WITH US, We miss her MORE THAN EVER.