

*Mardi Gras:
Playing a Game
Of Kings, Queens
and Peasants*

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The Mardi Gras parade in 1873, just 16 years after it all began when "a group of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants from Mobile, Ala., started a secret organization and had a torchlight parade."

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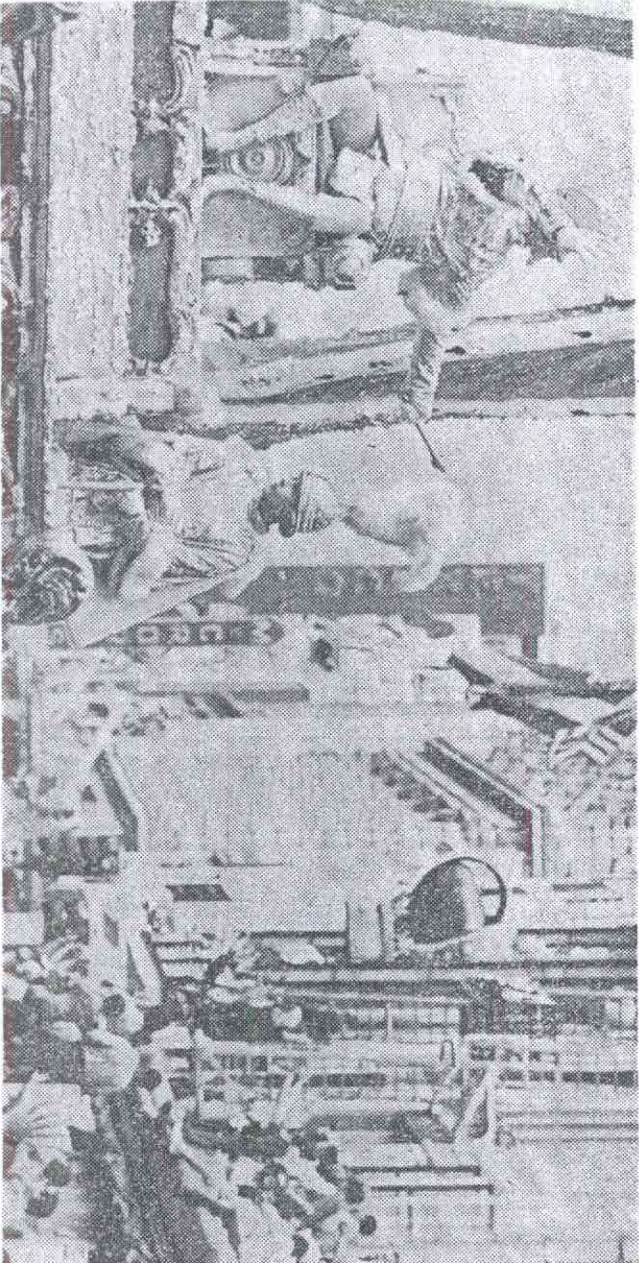
By Sally Quinn

NEW ORLEANS—A well-placed young man in New Orleans society was telephoned by a reporter who asked for guidance to the Mardi Gras celebration. He graciously agreed to act as escort and en- tree to various exclusive events. Then he paused, "I just want to ask you one question, honey," he said hesitantly. "Are you white?"

A city councilman, a native of New Orleans and a member of a prominent and well-to-do Jewish family also offered to help. He suggested the Bos-

ton Club, an exclusive WASP men's club as the perfect place to watch the big Mardi Gras Day Parade. "Call my best friend and tell him I sent you," he said. "He'll be glad to take you." The council- man, of course, could not go.

"I'll tell you something honestly," said a wealthy restaurateur involved in a middle rung and rela- tively democratic Mardi Gras organization. "We have many, many, many Jews. But everytime I sug- gest taking in a Negro the other members balk.



Rex, the Mardi Gras king, gestures expansively toward an enthusiastic crowd in the Mardi Gras parade of 1972.

By Eddie Adams—Associated Press

They keep saying to wait a while and let's not rock the boat for a couple of years."

"New Orleans is a city of aristocrats and peasants," said an artist from a socially undistinguished background. "The middle class find it very uncom- fortable here. Maybe the big society Mardi Gras balls discriminate but the middle-ring ones don't. They'll take Jews but the upper class Jews don't want to join them because they're just as snobby as everyone else. But it's the snobbery, politics and intrigue that make Mardi Gras great."

In 1950 the Duke and Duchess of Windsor wrote a dear old friend in New Orleans—a proud mem- ber of the local Jewish aristocracy—and invited themselves down for Mardi Gras. She wrote back instructing her royal friends that she personally could not have them as she was not included in the festivities. They should try some other friend. They did. The Windsors are considered in New Orleans to be the most truly elegant out-of-town guests to come to Mardi Gras since Grand Duke Alexis Ro- manov appeared in 1872 and inspired the idea for "Rex, King of Carnival."

"They were Comus' most popular guests," said a local admirer. "They got right into the spirit beautifully of the 'court,' bowed to the king and queen and everything and let's face it, they have class. No one's interested in hawing some tacky little celebrity who wants to be treated like a queen."

When Lynda Bird Johnson came to New Orleans and got herself invited to Comus, the most social ball, there were some grumbles from the insiders. "She's just country people, even if her father was President," said one of them. What was worse, Lynda Bird added insult to injury by bringing movie star George Hamilton along with her. At least she got in. Bess and Harry Truman, and Joan and Teddy Kennedy never even made Comus.

See MARDI GRAS, C3, Col. 1



By Eddie Adams—Associated Press

An onlooker stares vacantly during the 1972 Mardi Gras, the celebration that "transcends all classes . . . It's hypnotic, fantasy and enchantment, violence, chaos, mystery."

MARDI GRAS, From C1

"These are private parties," said a member of one of the best krewes. "If any nice dignified person wants to come and is invited by a member, that's fine. But no one is dying to have them and we don't go looking for those people. If President Nixon came, for instance, that wouldn't be considered a coup. Nobody would get excited." Nobody got excited about Gen. John J. Pershing, Gen. George Marshall or Gary Cooper, other past Comus guests.

Mardi Gras means "Fat Tuesday" in French and is the last day before Lent begins. It signifies the end of Carnival (Latin for "farewell to the flesh"). It begins on the twelfth night (Jan. 6) and ends at midnight before Ash Wednesday.

It actually began in 1699 when French-Canadian explorer Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville, named a spot 30 miles up the Mississippi "Point du Mardi Gras," after his national holiday. Spontaneous celebrating was conducted after that by the largely Catholic Creoles, the original inhabitants of New Orleans, until 1857. That year a group of Anglo-Saxon Protestants from Mobile, Ala., started a secret organization called "the Mystik Krewe of Comus," and had a torchlight parade without, of course, calling attention to themselves. Their theme was "The Demon Actors in Milton's Paradise Lost." They were considered *arrivistes*.

In fact, anyone whose family hasn't lived in New Orleans for decades is considered a newcomer, and that's not a compliment. "Hell," said one would-be social young man, "my family has been here for over 50 years and we're considered newcomers."

WHAT IT IS: One thing newcomers will never understand is what Mardi Gras is all about. Not that those who've been here any length of time understand. The main difference is in attitude. For New Orleanians Mardi Gras is a *serious* affair. It is serious for those whose families have controlled the city for two centuries, serious for blacks who have their own important place in the Mardi Gras, serious to the Jews who originally were part of the celebration and are now excluded, serious to those who in recent years have started their own krewes, marching groups and truck floats, and serious to those newcomers who are social or political climbers.

No one in New Orleans doesn't care one way or the other about Mardi Gras and what it should be. They will describe themselves as impassioned, vehement, crazed, frenzied or freaked-out. They might also say, as one socialite kept insisting coolly, "It's all nothing but a lot of foolishness and nonsense." Just ask him though how he feels about outside criticism and he flares, "It's none of their goddamned business. Why don't they stay away and leave us alone and let us have our Mardi Gras to ourselves."

Whether they are "in" or "out" most New Orleanians, while proudly explaining that tourism is the town's sec-

ond largest industry, hate tourists who come for Mardi Gras. They're either dirty or pranksters or maybe just curious bystanders but they don't seem to fit in. Tourists and "hippies" are not that distinguishable from one another to the locals. They're all outsiders. The whole point of Mardi Gras is group participation," says George Schmidt, a local artist and carnival buff.

"It's a derived esthetic; responses are ingrained since childhood like sights, sounds and smells. It transcends all classes. The masking lets you live out an alternative lifestyle. It's hypnotic, fantasy and enchantment, violence, chaos, mystery. Tourists and itinerants can't possibly get involved so they try and destroy it."

A local socialite says the carnival is like "an enormous encounter group, a

huge emotional orgy, a catharsis where you act out your feelings only because you are masked. The last thing in the world you want around," he says, "is someone who's not with you all the way."

Leon Irwin III, a national Democratic committeeman whose family members for generations have been leaders in all the best krewes, a member of the exclusive Boston Club and an outstanding civic leader and businessman, feels out-of-towners don't fully understand Mardi Gras. "This is a local tribal festival; it's expressly for fun," he says, "and enjoyed by those members of the community in different ways. When it ceases to become this, it should itself cease."

"New Orleans is not part of America; it's a colony, part of the third world. Americans can't understand this," says George Schmidt.

"My momma says," said a lawyer, "Mardi Gras is so important that even if all of New Orleans had chicken pox, we'd still have it. And maybe it would be a good thing too. Keep the tourists away."

There have been rumors about the possibility of Mardi Gras violence stemming from the Howard Johnson's sniping incident in January. One rumor is that Rex will be assassinated at Canal Street. "Maybe it would be a good thing," pondered an old-time reveler. "That might just be what we need to scare the tourists away."

HOW IT'S DONE: New Orleans is the only city in America where social status is determined by men. All of the social organizations for Mardi Gras are called krewes and are men's clubs. (Not to be confused with the exclusive and restricted Boston and Pickwick Men's Clubs.)

The krewes are responsible for or-

ganizing the Mardi Gras balls and the parades.

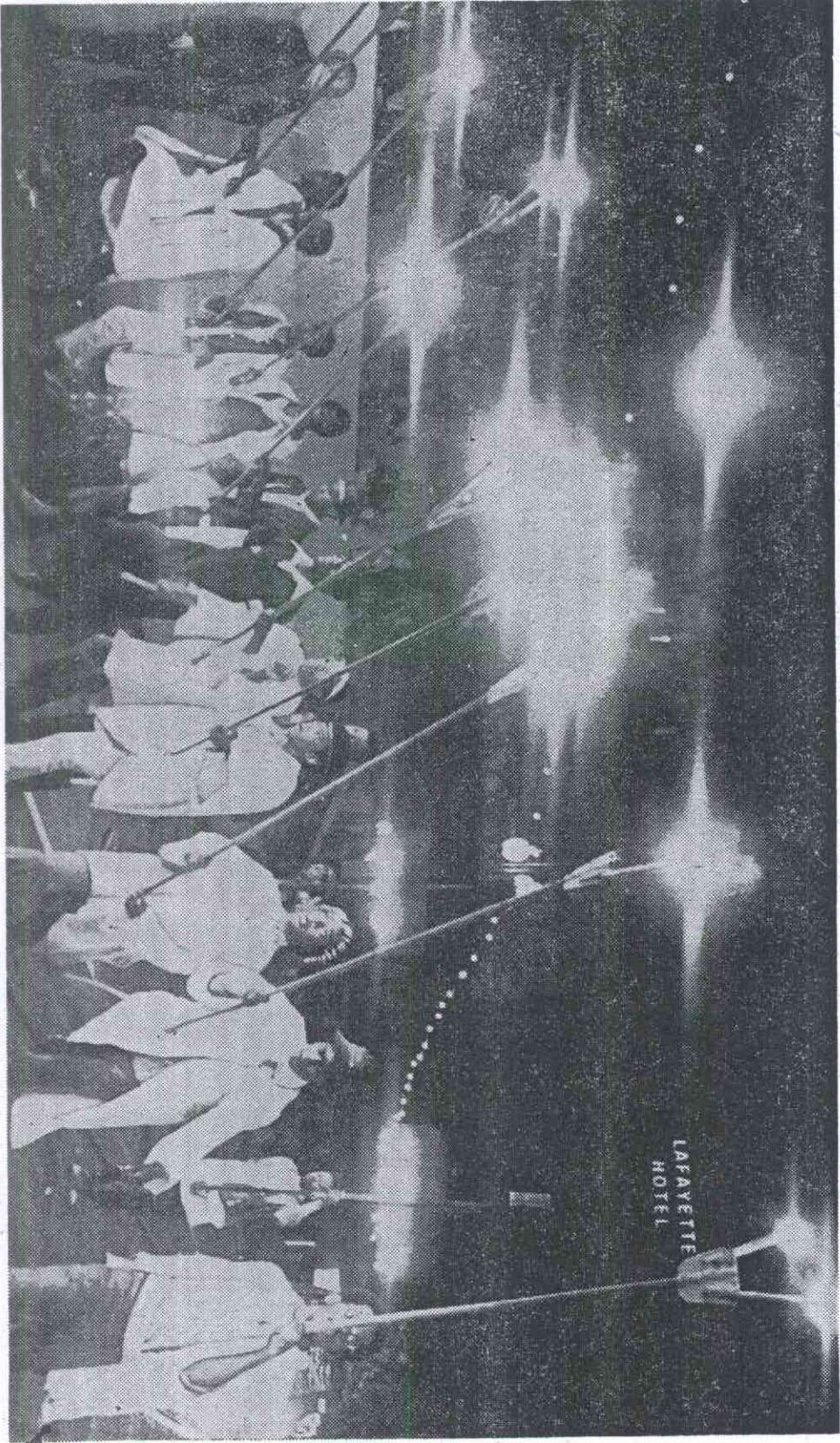
Anyone can belong to as many krewes as he likes. Dues range from \$250 to \$300 per year and all the



Restaurateur Owen Brennan Jr.: "We started Bacchus because a lot of tourists who come to New Orleans couldn't parade or dance because everything was private. We even have a celebrity king flown in from out of town."

krewes are shrouded in secrecy. There are only four krewes one really needs to know about: Momus, Comius, Proteus and Rex. "We kind of feel it has the sound of a law firm," said a stodgy member of M,C,P&R.

Each krewe has The Captain and he has his lieutenants, or The Committee. There is almost no internal organization and some members of some krewes don't even know who's on The Committee. A strange laxity, consider-



In the March 1 Momus parade, flumbeaus precede a float moving past Gallier Hall.

By G. E. Arnold

ing it's The Committee which has absolute power and decides who will be asked to join, which women will be invited as special ("call-out") guests, who will be banished to the balcony merely to watch and, most important, whose daughters will be chosen as queen and maids of the court. This is equivalent to a debut and the only deadly serious aspect of Mardi Gras.

Balls begin sometime around Christmas and lead up to Mardi Gras day when the Comus and Rex balls take place. Invitations are as coveted as those to Buckingham Palace. Krewe members must fill out forms with information explaining who their guests are, and include two references. Krewe members are the only ones allowed to wear masks and costumes. Invitations to guests come in two forms. Well-placed ladies—wives, mothers, friends, debutantes — get "call-outs." These allow the invitees to sit in a special section so as to be easily called out to dance. Nonmember male guests (always in white-tie and tails) may be invited as floor committeemen and are instructed by the master-members to call out the ladies. Floor committeemen may never, never dance themselves.

Gentlemen are allowed to drink only between certain "call-outs" and women are not allowed to drink officially at all. Hence the custom of getting drunk beforehand, bringing one's own flask and sipping in the parking lot, or slipping off to the ladies' room. "If you don't have a little "buzz" on you'd never make it through all this a socially-prominent participant pointed out. Some of the men probably would have gotten a "buzz" on riding to the ball on floats. Even some of the more aristocratic floats are notorious for having so much booze on the floor that the riders can't stand up and have to be tied to the floats. Two men have died in the last several years from falling off floats with "a little 'buzz' on."

"Fantastic," said a krewe member of one of the deceased. What a terrific way to go."

THE PROBLEMS: There's this awkward thing about discrimination. No Jews, Italians or newcomers have much to do with the real carnival. Of the top four krewes, only Rex, which is more civic than social, accepts Jews and then only as members not in the

inner circle. It seems odd, since the first ruler of Rex, in 1872, was a Jew named Louis Salomon. Some Jews were even partly responsible for keeping Carnival alive financially during the Depression. But somewhere along the line things didn't work out too well socially for the Jews. No one is quite sure why.

Members of the exclusive krewes feel the Jewish problem is overstated. "This whole thing is just for fun and very democratic," said one. "The Jews could start their own krewe if they wanted to. Everybody else has. (There are now over 50 krewes including Ital-



City Councilman Peter Beer: "The discrimination drains away good will."

ian krewes, black krewes and women's krewes.) Anybody from a bank president to a garbage collector can have his own club. And besides it's a religious holiday."

However, Leon Irwin III feels strongly that "a sense of exclusiveness that the Jewish community feels about Mardi Gras is unfortunate and regret-

table. I think that this situation is unacceptable to growing numbers of members of some of the traditional Mardi Gras organizations, particularly young people. I think this question like so many others is progressively and slowly changing."

Rumor has it that Rex might even be a Jew in the next four or five years. However, this could create problems. Rex is traditionally a member of the restricted Boston Club; at midnight of Mardi Gras Rex traditionally goes over to the restricted Comus ball and bows to the King of Comus.

City councilman for New Orleans' silk stocking district, Peter Beer, is a Jew who has lived here all his life. His father belonged to Rex and was one of those who helped during the Depression. Beer has spoken out publicly against Mardi Gras for its waste of public funds (over a million dollars for maintenance, police, fire protection and clean-up) and its discriminatory aspect.

"The discrimination drains away good will," he said. "A large percentage of the leaders of the community are Jewish. So you have a guy, who, but for Mardi Gras, would be in a position of complete acceptability. He can't help but feel hurt or react less responsibly in the community if his best friends and business associates 360 days a year can't associate with him the other five."

With all the talk about no tourists there is one group which goes all-out to attract as many people to New Orleans for Mardi Gras as possible. They have even started their own krewe, Bacchus. "Dedicated to wine and good times. It's most appropos of our group and we do stand up for that," says one of its founders, restaurateur Owen Brennan Jr.

"We started this group because a lot of tourists who come to New Orleans couldn't parade or dance because everything was private. The whole purpose is to promote New Orleans and Mardi Gras. We even have a celebrity king flown in from out of town."

"A celebrity king from out of town!" shrieks a Bacchus detractor. "Do you realize how that is the antithesis of everything Mardi Gras stands for? This is our celebration. Even the local peasants don't want a celebrity king from out of town." Brennan knows he is criticized. He is a member of Hermes, a

less elegant, more democratic krewe "for business reasons."

Those against Mardi Gras say big-business opportunities suffer here because companies won't send big executives who aren't able to make it socially as newcomers. "Come 1975," says Brennan, "when the Super Dome opens, we're going to package Mardi Gras for tourists. We'll have a continuing parade inside the Dome for 75,000 people while simultaneously in the four adjoining halls, we'll have four supper dances going on with four name bands. Terrific publicity!" Brennan plans to donate the proceeds to the police and fire departments.

This year's big celebrity king of Bacchus is Bob Hope, who is doing an NBC special on Mardi Gras. (Comus has allowed itself to be filmed only for network news shows and one story goes that they mistakenly allowed a Walt Disney film crew to film the ball and discovered later that the film was to be spliced with shots of Annette Funicello. The idea was killed.)

Of all the problems concerning Mardi Gras, the one that is rarely mentioned is the black problem. It is still not much of an issue in New Orleans. The blacks have their own krewes in various degrees of social acceptability and they traditionally carry the flambeaus in the parade. "The Jewish problem is far more serious here," said a white krewe member. "There's been very little pressure to integrate the balls." He dismisses the subject with, "We're just not ready for that yet."

There are those who feel Mardi Gras is on its way out, that with all the financial problems, violence, itinerants and discrimination it cannot possibly continue. But if what one Momus, Comus, Proteus, Rex member says is true, it will probably never cease to exist. "It is a game of kings and queens. You can do or see whatever your fantasy is for a day. And if a guy is not very successful at the office, if his father is president of a bank and he sits and reads the paper all day, it gives him a sense of power and importance to be on a committee of a good krewe. What the hell, he can dress up like a king and ride a float to the stadium and have millions of people clamoring for a wave or a favor from him. Everybody loves a king."