

W. Post 3/6/73

The Diversity of Mardi Gras

By Sally Quinn

NEW ORLEANS—Traditionally the Sunday before Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday) is a free day, time to rest up from the preceding months of partying, time to prepare for the climatic celebration today.

But there was nothing for the tourists, out-of-towners, newcomers and socially not-so-acceptables to do on Sunday. So Owen "Pip" Brennan Jr., enterprising owner of Brennan's Restaurant, decided to "package" Mardi Gras for the outside world to bring even more recognition to his hometown. Not to mention himself.

The first thing he did after forming the "Krewe of Bacchus" was to get on the phone and find a celebrity. The first year, 1969, he found Danny Kaye; in 1970 it was Raymond Burr, in 1971 Jim Nabors, in 1972 Phil Harris and this year he snared the king of kings, Bob Hope.

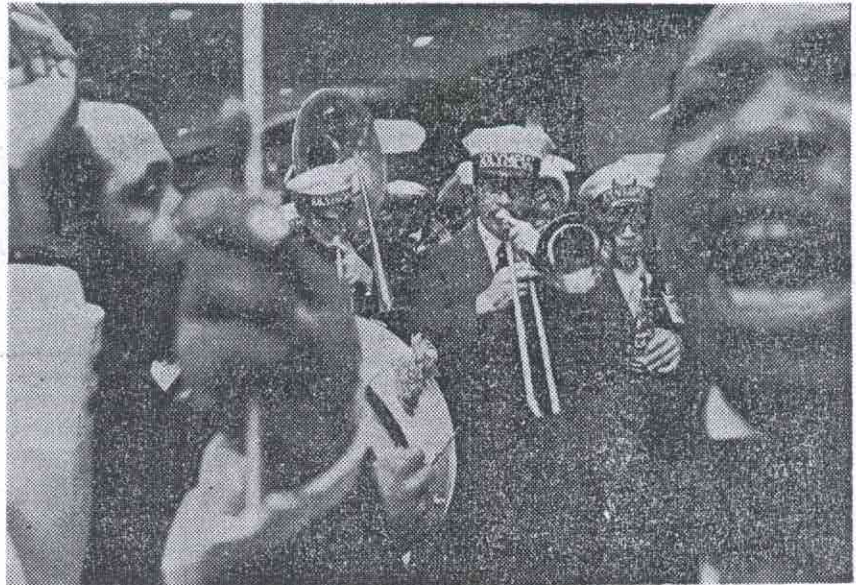
"We thought about asking President Nixon," said Brennan, "but he's only 75 per cent popular with the people and Bob is 100 per cent popular."

Hope, who had never been to Mardi Gras, was thrilled. So thrilled he brought NBC with him to do an hour special. Pip Brennan was thrilled too. "How much higher can you get," he asked.

The local snobs were not thrilled. "How much more declassé can you get?" sniffed one. (They use a lot of French words in New Orleans.)

Sunday, the evening of the Bacchus parade ("We have the biggest floats in Mardi Gras"), Hope donned his silver lame, rhinestone studded tunic silver boots and his grape, gold and rhinestone crown and climbed aboard his float for the hour ride to the Rivergate coliseum where the ball for 4,000 was being held.

Nearly four hours later, when his float rolled in to the large hall, Hope had to go to the bathroom. He was lowered by crane to the floor and rushed



The Olympia Brass Band marches back into the ballroom of the Marriott Hotel early Sunday morning during the Zulu Ball.

to the men's room by two plume-helmeted dukes of his court. "We couldn't get my costume off and we finally had to tear it off," said Hope. "Did you ever see a god with safety pins?" And he pointed to the pins holding his royal costume together.

The security at the ball, with special-hand stamps and armed policemen with night sticks, was tighter than that at President Nixon's Inaugural Balls. The enormous room, with its concrete floors, was freezing, TV lights were blinding, the floats were brought into the hall, and ever high school band in the Sout marched through the dance floor with blaring marshall music non-stop until at least 1:30 a.m., when Harry James took over for dancing.

The VIP platform was crowded with celebrities—Gen. and Mrs. William Westmoreland had flown down at

Hope's request, former New Orleans Saint and current Redskin Billy Kilmer, Pete Fountain, New Orleans Mayor and Mrs. Moon Landrieu, and Louisiana Gov. and Mrs. Edwin W. Edwards were among the guests.

They were all being interviewed by a "Bob and Ray" team of local broadcasters. "Mardi Gras is the envy of every state," said Gov. Edwards, preening for the cameras.

"Why, I was in Washington, D.C. for the Louisiana Society's annual Mardi Gras festivities last week and do you know that that's the highlight of the Washington social season."

The black-tie guests were lined up 20 deep, pushing and shoving to stare at the celebrities, scream and beg for autographs and take pictures. There was no coronation ceremony of any kind and when Hope was asked how he felt

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Photos by United Press International

Bob Hope, king of Bacchus: "I really didn't expect this great honor and I don't know whether I can handle it. I may defect."



Bob Hope, left, was this year's king of Bacchus, the fifth person to reign since the Krewe of Bacchus was formed in 1969.

Photos by United Press International

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about the honor, he replied, "I really didn't expect this great honor and I don't know whether I can handle it. I may defect." He did shortly thereafter, with no fanfare, leaving his wife to carry on for him on the platform.

There were no blacks at the "democratic" Bacchus ball (which boasts many Jewish members), except those invited to perform or to serve. The blacks had had their big ball, Zulu, the night before.

The major white balls — Rex and Comus — are tonight.

As the Olympia Brass Band was winding its way Saturday night through the dancers at the Black Zulu Ball in the Mariott Hotel, an out-of-town guest expressed surprise at how many white people there were. "Some are, some aren't," smiled a member of the club.

In New Orleans where no one's background is ever totally accounted for, even the most socially prominent white people will speak of having what they call a "touch of the tar brush" in



Lucille B. Armstrong: "I was queen when I was married to King Louis Armstrong all my life. He always called me his queen."

them, with certain pride. The words 'quadroon and octaroon are still used here, mainly because it's hard to call someone whose skin is white, a "black." In New Orleans the socially elite of the black community are said to be determined by whether one can pass the "paper bag test." If your skin is lighter than a brown paper bag.

Mardi Gras is considered by those not from New Orleans to be a white carnival; tourist brochures refer generally only to the white festivities; local newspapers concentrate on the white balls and most of the tourists are white. What people don't realize is that blacks account for almost 60 per cent of the New Orleans population, and there are more than 185 black "social and pleasure Mardi Gras" organizations with as much or more, intrigue, snobbery and politicking than in the white groups.

The original Illinois Social and Pleasure Club, its off-shoot, the Young Men's Illinois Club, and "The Bunch"

are considered the most elegant. Zulu, the best known because of its large parade, has been the peoples' ball of the black community. There is surprisingly little impetus to join the exclusive, segregated and often restricted white clubs or krewes.

"The general attitude among us," says Dr. Leonard L. Burns, a physician, a member of the local government and of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People "is that we'd like to eventually have integrated balls and parades but we enjoy ourselves so much and feel so relaxed among ourselves that it's not a major issue. It's in the back of our minds and when it happens it will be applauded and accepted but in the meantime we're going to kick up our heels and have a hell of a good time."

All of the blacks denied any militancy among their local youths. "To be against Mardi Gras is to be against mom and apple pie," one said.

The Zulu Social aid and Pleasure Club, the largest black group, has around 185 members and has just taken in 3 white members in the last two years. It began in 1916 with horse-drawn wagons for floats, King Zulu and his court in grass skirts carrying spears and everyone blackfaced with white mouths and eyes. That had to end.

"we felt that was degrading, especially as many of us had become more affluent and had risen in status, and that we were portraying the Negro in unfortunate light. We felt we should upgrade our image so we eliminated all the jungle element . . . though we are proud of our heritage," Burns said.

There have been, of course, a few problems involving the white community which have been divisive to both groups. For one thing, the Zulu parade, the only black parade in town, was never allowed until recently, to parade on the main streets. A group of prominent black businessmen put pressure on city hall and that was changed.

Another problem was hiring a hall. The Municipal Auditorium, where all the exclusive and not so exclusive

white functions take place, is booked up solidly and permanently by whites so that only the Young Men's Illinois Club can hold their debutante ball there.

There is some resentment that so many of the Mardi Gras activities center around the exclusive segregated men's Boston Club. "The only thing a black man is allowed to do there is serve a white man, said Burns.

But he noted that those servants are not criticized by the blacks because they are working to make their children's lives a little better. "We have a waiter there whose son is president of one of the leading banks in New Orleans," said Burns. "And that young man has reached heights and surpassed professionally many of the wealthy members there. Some of those dodos don't have the ability and intelligence this boy has in his little finger."

Traditionally at Mardi Gras parades, flaming lights or flambeaux are carried by black men, dressed in rags and jiving along the streets in the manner of the old "darkies." The whites locally are defensive about this role, insist that it is a great honor, and that they "have so much rhythm no white person could do it anyway."

The black community is unhappy about the role these people play but won't interfere because the participants are usually poor, ex-convicts or addicts who need the \$20 an hour they get paid. "Those poor unfortunates need that money so bad they'll stoop to any demeaning act to get it," said one black.

Mardi Gras organizations for the blacks are not strictly for fun as they are for the whites. They are in every case, civic organizations and each one has a \$500 life membership in the NAACP. Between \$5 million and \$10 million are spent every year on black Mardi Gras and a major split in the community developed in the mid-'50s when the state legislature was passing pro-segregation legislation.

The black social and pleasure organizations all decided to stop Mardi Gras functions and raise money strictly to

fight the legislation, supported by the NAACP. But the whites realizing that it would look bad for New Orleans, persuaded the members of Zulu (with a \$500 donation) to present their parade. The black community boycotted the Zulu parade and a heavy white police escort was necessary to protect the black float riders and the king who was gingerly throwing golden coconuts and doubloons to the white crowds. Zulu shaped up the next year. Some of the black community leaders, including those in the Illinois Clubs, infil-



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trated Zulu and have tried to elevate its status in the community.

One of those is school teacher Harold Doley Sr., a member of the Young Men's Illinois Club. The original Illinois Club (which lost members to the former because of an alleged mishandling of funds) was started in the kitchen of Doley's great-aunt, Bola Doley, in 1894. Doley is very proud of his affiliation with the Illinois.

"The Illinois Club started out being cooks and butlers and we are now totally professional men," he said. "We are the Rex (the largest white group) of the black community. Our group is terribly exclusive, very, very highly screened. We don't take in just anyone. We are white-tie only and we present our debutantes each year the way the white groups do." Doley was himself in white tie, tails, white kid gloves and black patent pumps.

"I was highly criticized by the Illinois for joining Zulu five years ago," said Doley. "You see, they (Zulu) were a bunch of uneducated people from the ghetto. But we have upgraded this club tremendously. We got the community to allow us to parade on Main Street right before the Rex Parade. (Both parades are on Mardi Gras day even though the Zulu ball is earlier.) We got it out of the little halls and into the Marriott Hotel. We picked it up from where it was before. But they are afraid that we educated ones will take over so they won't let me be king. I was supposed to be king this year. I personally was the one who got Mrs. Louis Armstrong to come down from New York to be our queen."

Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong had been King Zulu in 1949 and the coronation of his widow Saturday night was a big event. But she insisted that title was nothing new to her.

"I was queen when I was married to King Louis Armstrong all my life," she said. "He always called me his queen."

The Zulu Ball is hardly like the white balls. Jazz singer Ellyna Tatum sang spirituals, Albert "Papa" French's original Tuxedo New Orleans Jazz Band and the Olympic Brass Band had people jumping up and down, removing their frock coats, waving their even before the coronation. In the hands in the air and wiping their brows midst of the noise and the hilarity a local D.J. grabbed the mike and screamed into it, "You say black is

beautiful, you're looking at it right now."

"Some people make yearly pilgrimages to St. Anne de Beau Pres," said New York decorator Alex Kahn. "I come to New Orleans."

Kahn was being entertained in the French Quarter by local designer Roland Dobson of the Salon de Roland. Roland, as everyone in New Orleans calls him, dresses the governor as well as many of the town's leading citizens — of which he is one.

This year Roland, at age 35, was king of four balls, turned down invitations to be king at two others, turned down countless dukedoms ("Once you've been on a throne I just don't think you should go back") and is the captain of the mystik Krewe of Apollo, the "it" gay ball of New Orleans.

New Orleans has six gay balls. It has to in order to take care of the French Quarter alone, which some say is about 40 per cent gay. Not to mention the out-of-towners who flock here every year with outrageously expensive costumes to show off. It has been noted that Mardi Gras in New Orleans is the Harvard-Yale game of homosexuals.

But if there's one thing Roland hates, it's bad taste. That's why he and a group of "upper class" friends, "mostly business and professional men" started Apollo five years ago.

"It's held at the Municipal Auditorium where all the good "straight" white balls are held, the floor is carpeted white, the format is the same, with carefully screened invitations, white tie, call-outs for the court (where a lady is called out formally to dance by a floor committeeman), coronation of the king and queen and presentation of debutantes. The difference is that they're all men.

"We don't do it as an everyday drag thing," insists Roland. "These are respectable professional men who are doing it as a take off on Mardi Gras. We used to do it in private until we formed our own Krewe. These men are not drag queens. And if we catch any of our members outside the ball in drag, he's out. Thank goodness that's only happened once."

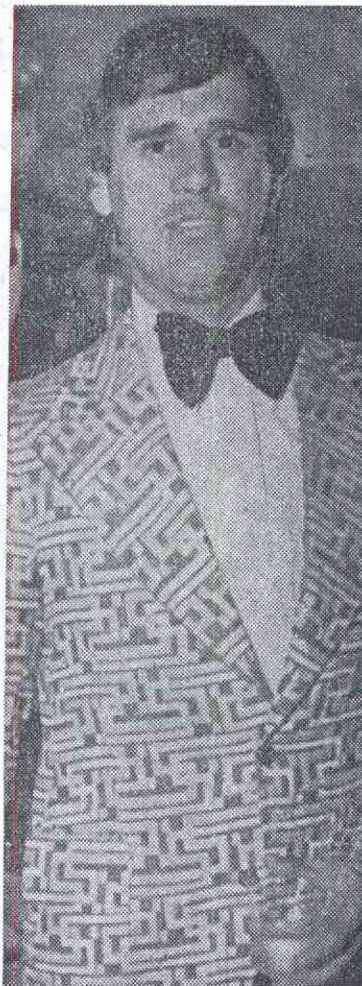
The gay groups have been readily accepted in the community as a colorful part of the Mardi Gras but there is still some snickering among the old

timers. "We are not to be laughed at," says Roland.

"If anyone in our audience laughs at us those people are automatically excluded from the guest list forever."

Needless to say, the local society pages do not run pictures of the Apollo queen, maids or debutantes as they do with other Mardi Gras krewes.

Even so, it is a fact that there are members (some very prominent) of the super-exclusive, secret, restricted, segregated, white krewe, who are also secret members of the Mystik Krewe of Apollo. Roland won't say who.



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