

Boozy Revelry, Genteel Ritual

By Sally Quinn

NEW ORLEANS — In New York people go "shrinks." In California they have group encounters and sexually liberated communes. In other places they have religion.

In New Orleans they have Mardi Gras.

Everything that leads up to Mardi Gras night is only preparation and anticipation for the great spectacular—the Tuesday

night balls of the Krewe of Rex and the Mystik Krew of Comus and the meeting of the two courts at midnight, marking the end of the week-long Mardi Gras celebration and the beginning of Lent. And if only the elite, privileged white Gentiles may take part that's okay too. Somehow the people on the street like to know it's going on.

The Comus parade, the most elegant of all Mardi Gras, starts at night and winds its way through the streets to the Mu-

nicipal Auditorium where the court of Rex reigns on one side and the court of Comus sits on the other.

The Rex side of the auditorium is larger because more people are allowed to come. Rex is the democratic elite—Mardi Gras organization to which politically ambitious or civic-minded citizens belong and in which Jews (but not blacks) are allowed as members and as guests.

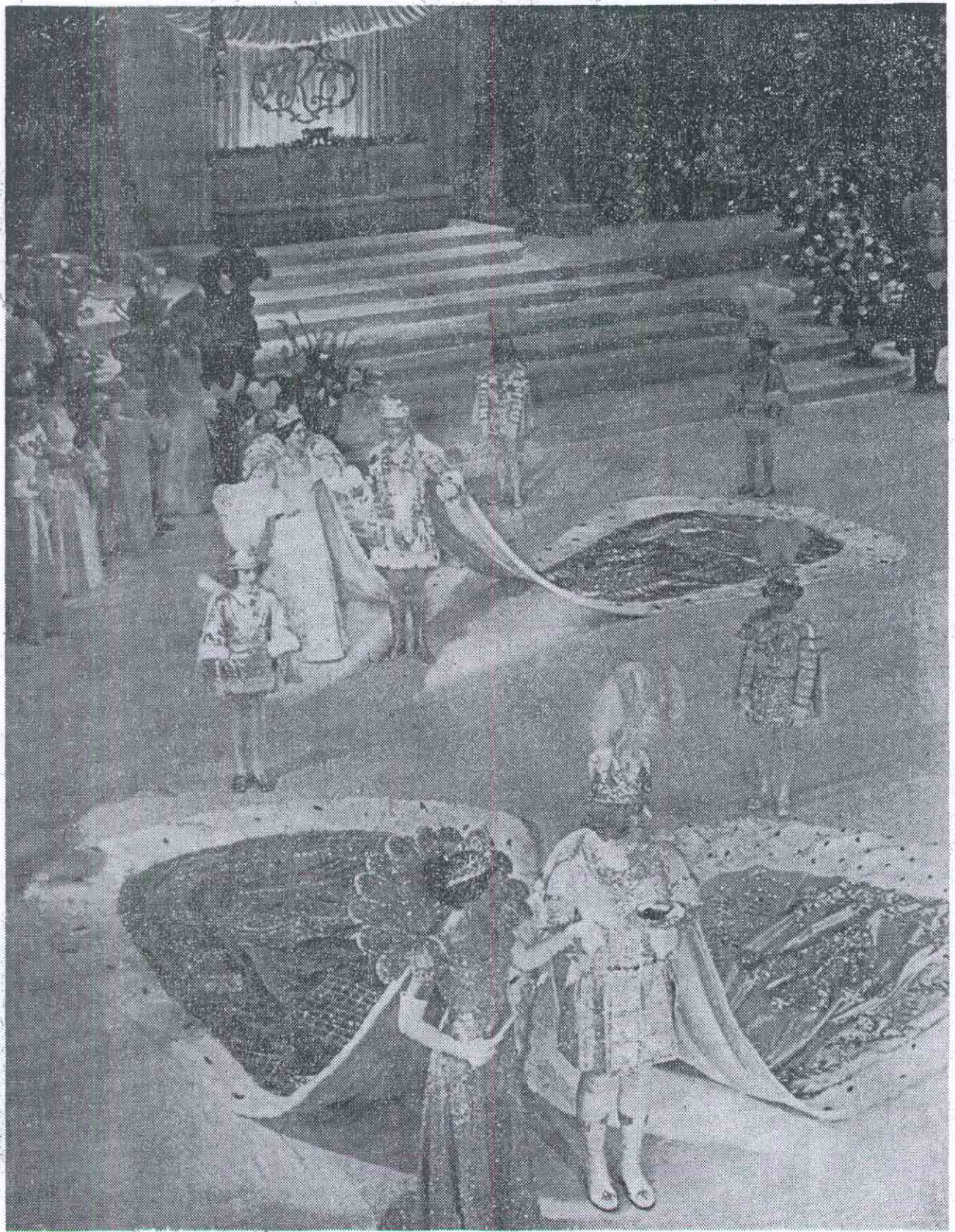
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Accompanied by the masked court, the Queen of Rex and King of Comus, followed by the Queen of Comus and the King of Rex, at the meeting of the two courts which marked the end of Mardi Gras, left. Earlier Tuesday, thousands packed Canal Street as the float bearing Rex, King of Carnival, passed, right.



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CARNIVAL, From E1

"This is worse than the inaugural ball. Anyone but anyone can come," said a pained member of Rex who also belongs to Comus. "You'll see anything here, but it's a good place to pay off social obligations to business acquaintances and people from the office."

Tuesday night someone even sneaked in a Cajun (not very socially acceptable in New Orleans society). There was also a woman in her 60s who was outfitted in hot pants with a long half-skirt. "Disgusting, but what can you do?" said a member.

"That would never happen at Comus," said a horrified member of both Krewes. "They don't even allow women in evening pants." People are still talking about the time several years ago when socialite musician Peter and Cheray Duchin were thrown out of Comus because she wore pants. There was a minor flurry Tuesday night when the town's two most socially prominent women, Mrs. Leon Erwin and Mrs. Brooke Duncan, appeared in the same dress.

Rex is not a masked event as is Comus. It is a white-tie affair. Consequently, the King of Rex is announced, while the identity of the masked King of Comus remains a secret. Everyone at Rex is allowed to dance as opposed to the "call-out" system at Comus and the other traditional balls. There is no drinking or smoking on the floor of Rex but there is a "punch room" upstairs where men and women can drink (even if it is out of plastic glasses).

The court of Rex appeared at 9:30 p.m. for the Grand March after resting from the Rex parade that afternoon. The King wore a gold rhinestone-covered tunic, blond wig, rhinestone crown and enormous mantle embroidered in rhinestones and trimmed with ermine and carried a large scepter. The Queen wore a golden gown intricately embroidered with beads, crystals and rhinestones and had a crown, scepter and mantle identical to the King's.

After the Grand March the King and Queen took their seats on the purple,

gold and ermine-draped throne surrounded by their pages and masses of yellow and white flowers and awaited the big moment when the Captain of Comus—masked, of course—would come over to escort them to the other side. There the court of Rex would pay homage to the court of Comus. It should not escape anyone that this gesture signifies the acknowledgement not only of the Comus sovereigns but of the their entire community; the acknowledgement that in New Orleans supremacy is determined by lineage.

At Comus, meanwhile, where only the night before the Krewe Proteus had had its ball against an underwater backdrop, the maskers were dancing with their ladies in the "call-out" section, while people in white-tie watched from the balcony.

Comus had been transformed into a breathtakingly exquisite fairyland with white-carpeted dance floor, gold, red and white draperies, gold candlelabra, white and gold thrones and white flowers everywhere. On the throne sat the King (identity unknown) and Queen (Miss Clara Pollard Walmsley), both in white satin, bathed in rhinestones with rhinestone and ermine mantles, she holding a scepter, he a silver goblet. All of the members of Comus were masked and in costume including the Captain of Comus who was in white satin and rhinestones.

As midnight approached, the Captain of Comus appeared at Rex to escort the monarchs to the other side. That meant most of the Rex guests had to go home. Only those who are members of both Krewes or very, very special guests are allowed to watch the spectacle. Several little cards with one's name on them are issued and the crossover is done quietly and with dignity so as not to offend the uninvited.

A hushed silence fell as the band struck up "If Ever I Cease to Love", the Rex theme, and the King and Queen of Rex approached the King and Queen of Comus. Little pages, the children of prominent members, scurried about arranging the mantles.

Along with the masked court and the dukes, the four monarchs, joined by five debutantes from each court, made a procession around the dance floor waving their scepters and goblets



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A winner in the Gay Costume-Judging Contest in the French Quarter was Four Seasons, a Washington, D.C. entry. Three of the Seasons, from left, Fall, Summer and Winter.

to the reverent applause of the guests, then took their places on the throne.

Now, any other day of the year any social person in New Orleans will tell you this whole business is all foolishness and nonsense. But on Mardi Gras night, when the courts of Comus and Rex meet, each person in that audience is as deadly serious as if he were watching the coronation of Henry the VII.

This is their fantasy. And if you close your eyes for just the tiniest minute, you can almost believe in it. As one Comus member put it, "If you can make believe, it might just get you through another year."

Luncheon at Antoine's, New Orleans' world-famous restaurant, is the thing to do the day before Mardi Gras. Antoine's is closed to the general public on Monday so it can seat all the "best" people in town. Tables are inherited and some people can't even count the number of years they've been sitting in the same place.

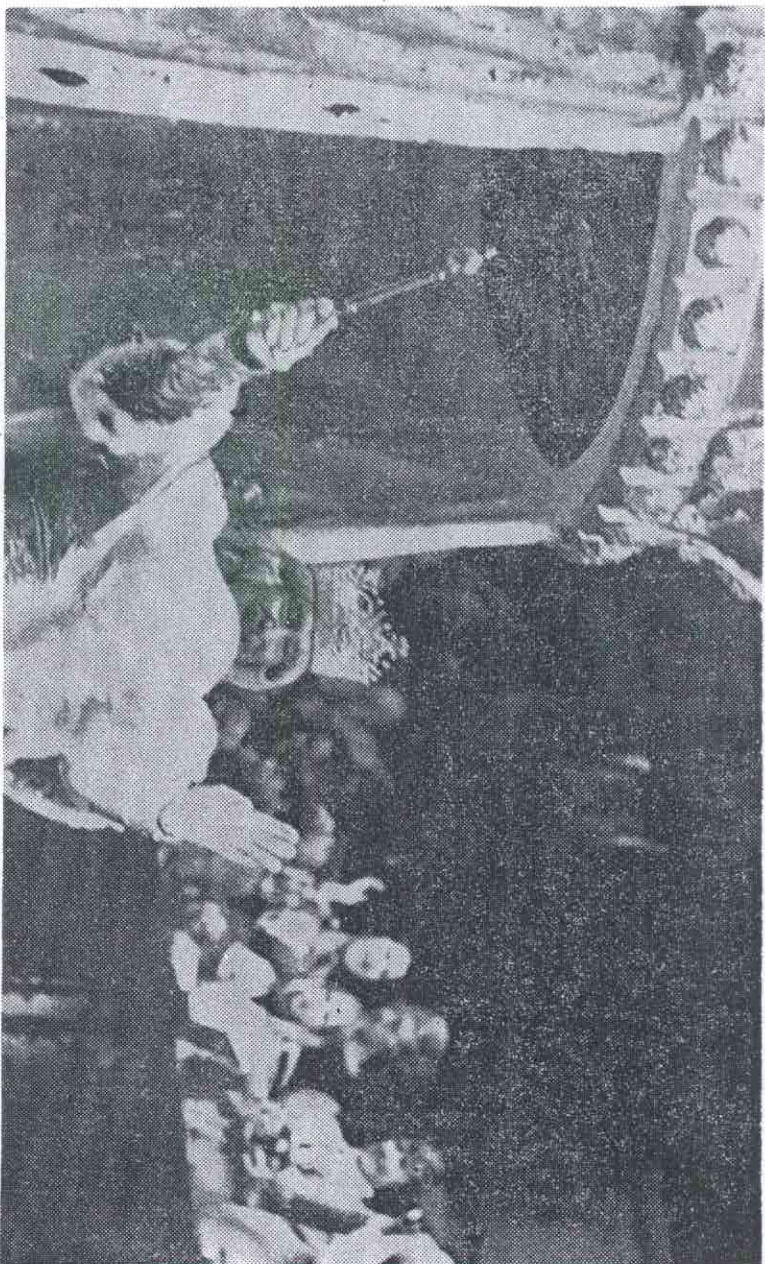
Even though Antoine's has become a tourist trap, the locals still go there, requesting their own waiters by name rather than making reservations. Waiters are inherited too. Everybody knows that you never order what's on the menu. Special creole dishes are to be asked for.

Monday before Mardi Gras at Antoine's is the annual luncheon of the Krewe of Proteus, the second most social men's Mardi Gras organization. The men lunch and drink in the back room. Later, with the aid of some of the more musical waiters on trumpet, they form a conga line and snake dance through the tables in the front room. Then the ladies are invited back to join the gentlemen.

The luncheon begins in an atmosphere of strict Southern gentility and ends up hours later in a boozy brouhaha.

"You wouldn't believe these are refined, respectable businessmen the rest of the year," said one flushed Portean, kicking up his heels.

Many New Orleanians who know



Dr. Howard Mahorner, who reigned as Rex, King of Carnival during Mardi Gras greets crowds lining the balconies on St. Charles Avenue.

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say that lunch at Antoine's is the most fun event of Mardi Gras. For one thing, it signals, for the upper-class crowd, the beginning of the festivities.

Monday it poured all day as young people arrived by the thousands, many without places to stay. The Mardi Gras Coalition, formed several years ago, was going crazy. Many of the churches which had opened their doors to young people last year refused to do the same this year and placement was impossible. For the first time in years, however, the drug situation was under control. "I can't believe it," said a Coa-

lition worker, "but most of these kids are suffering more from an overdose of alcohol than an overdose of drugs."

The streets were beginning to trash up, even though for the first time glasses and beer cans were prohibited.

Monday night was the proteus ball, held, to be sure, in the Municipal Auditorium where all the top balls are held. There, the Queen, a debutante of the season, was presented in front of a fabulous underwater tableau with smoke rising from the fishnet floor, seaweed hanging from the ceiling and bubbles coming out of a bubble machine in front of her seashell throne.

Proteus is the most structured of the traditional balls. The favored ladies of the community in "bas couture" receive special invitations or "call-outs" to sit in the orchestra section off the dance floor. There they await the non-member floor committeemen in white-tie and red carnations to call them out for a dance. The floor committeemen, after shouting the ladies' name until she appears, then present her to the masked member who requested her as his dancing partner.

The floor committmen are never, never allowed to dance. Once the dance is over the lady gets a favor and sits down. Most of the ladies spend most of the evening sitting down. For one thing there are more ladies and for another, many of the men are slipping back and forth to the back room to get a little nip.

There are also those guests who get only a straight invitation and must sit in the balcony in white-tie and long dress and just watch, relieved only by an occasional favor thrown up to them by a masker below.

"The masked ball always bores out-of-towners to death," said one member, "And I don't blame them. But to us this is a ritual of great significance. It is a Southern ritual of paying homage to our ladies. Each event at Mardi Gras is a ceremony of paying court to our Queens. The men love it and the ladies love it even more. It is elegant, romantic and chivalrous." The Comus Ball follows much the same structured "call-out" system.

It is true that no one, even those who didn't dance much, seemed bored. It is also true that they were lined up three deep by 11:30 in their mink stoles waiting for their limousines to transport them out of the Kingdom of the God of the Sea and to the watering hole of the Queen's supper, given by the parents of the debutante "Queen."

Everything starts early on Mardi Gras Day. For blacks, the Zulu Parade begins at 8 A.M. and precedes the Rex Parade, the major parade of Mardi Gras.

Rex is King of Carnival, always a noted civic and social leader, always announced to the public on Mardi Gras Day, this year a prominent doctor. He is always a member of the exclusive Boston Club. His Queen is always the debutante daughter of another prominent member of the Krewe of Rex, also a member of the Boston Club.

The only place to watch the Zulu and Rex parades is the Boston Club, ideally located in the center of downtown Canal Street.

It is at the Boston Club that the Queen of Rex—this year, Miss Lynn Agnes Favrot and her debutante maids (all in similar pastel "ensembles") join their escorts who are dressed in morning coats for a musical champagne breakfast.

On Mardi Gras morning, people begin to gather at the Boston Club at about 11:30. Their invitation cards are carefully checked at the door by a member in morning coat and white gloves. The ladies, in mink stoles (it's too hot for a greater show of affluence), simple little dresses, pearls, Davidow suits, hats and gloves begin to gather on the covered platform for the parade.

The grandstand, constructed for the parade, overlooks Canal Street and is set up with a throne for the Queen and her maids who appeared at 12:30 to watch the festivities and wave to the thousands thronging below.

There was an atmosphere of anticipation and excitement shared by those milling and crowding the streets and those on the Queen's platform, as though there really were going to be a coronation and everybody believed it. The people wanted, clamored for royalty. Those so designated for a day assumed the role with relish. Miss Favrot, the shy debutante, waved regally and confidently at her subjects and Dr. Howard Mahorner, riding on his float became, for real, the benevolent Rex.

Brooke Duncan, a tall and distinguished looking social and civic leader and Captain of Rex recalled his reign the year before last. "I remember when I first got in my costume with my crown," he said. "I got terribly embarrassed when the first people bowed to me."

"Then when we got around the first corner and I could see the crowds, I waved a little self-consciously. When I got out into the main street and saw those thousands of people waving to me and screaming, I never wanted to stop being King. It's amazing how quickly megalomania will overtake You." Duncan saus one of the hard things to remember about being Rex is that he is just a symbol: "The King belongs to the people for one day and their affection for him is for the symbol. they don't really give a damn who he is."

The Zulu Parade passed by the Boston Club where Rex, with Queen Lucille Armstrong, Satchmo's widow, reigned. Next came the floats. There is a major division in the black community as to whether the maskers should go black-faced with white eyes and mouths, grass skirts and jungle attire as they have in the past years. The old times won out again this year and they went balck-faced.

The highlight of the Rex Parade was the arrival, to a near frenzy, of His Majesty's float. His toasts to the Queen, the people of New Orleans, and his presentation of flowers to the Queen and "dear Stella", his wife,

brought cheers and tears from those on the stand and down below.

Then it was time for luncheon and a little nap before the Rex Ball and/or Comus, the most exclusive ball of the season.

For those who are members of both, which ball to attend is a trying decision, and worse, if one has the opportunity to be King of both making a choice is just too awful. To be secret King of Comus and arrive at the pinnacle of social acceptance or to reap the glory and public recognition of being rex . . .

Meanwhile, down in the street of the French Quarter, another part of Mardi gras was taking place. The Gay Costume-Judging Contest which packs thousands of mostly street people, rather than tourists or straight locals, into Bourbon Street each year, is to many what Mardi Gras is all about.

Every year the contest has been held by "Jake" Jacobs, owner of a Bourbon Street bar. This year Jacobs cancelled the contest to protest the city's new ordinance forbidding the parades to go through the French Quarter—highly unpopular, though instigated as a fire and safety measure.

Instead, a gay bar across the street, Lafitte's in Exile, one of Truman Capote's hangouts, was the scene of this year's contest. Upstairs at Lafitte's was a private luncheon where ladies (real ladies) were invited. Downstairs, no ladies are allowed during Mardi Gras. "There's just too much going on, you know."

A platform was set up outside with people upstairs handing over the balcony to watch the Lafitte's bartender, the "Bert Parks of Mardi Gras" carry on. Waitresses upstairs were hustling customers to drink.

Representatives from a Washington, D.C., gay bar, the "Lost and Found" ran away with all the best prizes. A feat they have accomplished for the past four years. Representing the Four Seasons—Summer, Fall, winter and Spring—were Jerry, Mame, Sybil and Phyllis, first-prize winners of the "entourage" contest.

"We're so excited we can hardly stand it," said Mame. "Mardi Gras is fabulous for gays. Last year I really lived for the first time in my life. For gay people it's a coming of age. It's

like getting a degree." Mame said they hadn't had any hecklers this year on the way to the contest but that regular street people were not as receptive as "our own kind."

Nasty catcalls came from the balcony as the judge gave a trophy to an "inferior contestant," and a quarrel broke out between two onlookers who began hitting each other with their Mardi Gras beads and had to be torn apart. Another group from the "Lost and Found" had just walked off with the best female costume award with a portrayal of Martha Washington and her pages. And a third Washington contestant who had appeared last year as "Flambeau Fantastique" was outfit-

"Have you even seen so many beautiful girls in your life?" cried the judge. The crowd erupted.

For the street people, the costume-judging contest was the only really Mardi Gras event beside the parades and once they were over, so was Carnival. For them there was nothing left to do but roam around, try to find a place to sleep and try not to get busted. For the gays, it was just beginning, with private parties all over the Quarter.

For the wealthy and civic elite there were the Rex and Comus Balls at the Municipal Auditorium where the culmination of Mardi Gras would take place.

For everybody there would be the terrible anticlimactic feeling, the let-down, and for those who actually observed Mardi Gras as a religious festival, there would be Lent.

Some people think this year's Mardi Gras was deadlier than ever, that not having it in the French Quarter has killed it, and that the Superdome "packaged Mardi Gras" for tourists in 1975 will ruin it if the freaks and hippies don't first.

If Mardi Gras ever does end, it won't be the people of New Orleans who put a stop to it. It will be from outside influence, they feel.

"Hell," said a local politician, "whenever I travel the only thing people ever ask me about is Mardi Gras. That's our whole identity and our lifestyle. If we ever lost Mardi Gras we'd be nothing."