A Brief, Candid Introduction To Carnival: Its History, Customs, Quirks, Sociology, And More

Photo by D. Eric Bookhardl

One of the three grand monarchs of the so-called "society krewes"—Protea, that most malleable and changeable of deities. He is one of the grandest of King's Floats—aquamarine sea-horses bedecked and garlanded on the front of his Float, while Protea himself rides on a throne set within a sea shell that rides the crest of the waves.

By James K. Glassman

In previous years, I've begun this introduction to Mardi Gras by saying, "There are two Carnivals." Now, I've become convinced that there's only one Carnival—the structure, or system, around which all social (and perhaps economic) activity in the city is built.

People react to this system—fitting into it or rejecting it—in scores of different ways. But it can't be ignored. Washington's Birthday, even Christmas, can be ignored. Mardi Gras can't.

ON THE SURFACE, to the average visitor to the city and to a good many people who live here, Carnival is a public spectacle—the so-called parades all over the city and the nearby suburbs, plus the dozens of neighborhood parades and marching club marches. These parades begin roughly two weeks before Mardi Gras itself (this year, the first major parades were on Feb. 11) and continue every day thereafter until the big day, Fat Tuesday itself (a bit of fun on the day after the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday—this year Mardi Gras is Feb. 22).

The parades go on all over town—including suburbs like Kenner, Chalmette (which has a parade just about every night), New Orleans East, and Gretna.

The best sources for parade maps are Arthur Hardy's "New Orleans Mardi Gras Guide" ($2.95 at stores all over town), and the special Mardi Gras issue of the Clarion Herald ($25 cents), a Catholic weekly that is available at coin-operated boxes in the Canal Street area or at its office at 321 Natchez.

The daily papers, the Times-Picayune and States-Item, run maps on the day of each parade, so they're not so useful for advance planning. This special section of FIGARO contains maps for some of the more popular parades and brief route descriptions for nearly all the others.

There are two things that make these parades different from Rose Bowl parades or St. Patrick's Day parades.

First, they are not put on by the City or the Fire Department or the American Legion, but by private clubs, called "krewes," the sole purpose of nearly all of which is to stage parades and put on balls during Carnival.

Second, what makes these parades truly public (and truly fun) is that the people who ride the floats throw things to the spectators. Mostly, they throw specially-minted coins called doubloons. More than 3,000 different variations of doubloons have been minted since they were first thrown—by the krewes of Grele and Rex—in 1906. Some of the doubloons have acquired considerable numismatic value (you can pick up a catalogue listing the going prices for various doubloons at Lazard's Coins and Stamps, 3416 Canal St.).

In all, about 10 million doubloons will be tossed from floats this Carnival, and one of the great questions is, What happens to them all? A month after Mardi Gras, 90 per cent of the doubloons—not to mention the millions of strings of beads, the little dolls and other trinkets that float riders throw—seem to have disappeared from the face of the earth. The only substantial repository for beads from April on is the rear-view mirror of certain Chevrolets, from which they dangle in clusters of eight or ten.

The doubloon-tossing and trinket-tossing makes Carnival participatory. And that's important. You don't merely ooh and aah over the floats; you don't merely wave to your pals riding them; it's hard enough to tell who your pals are, with those silly masks that riders wear; you get to scramble for the beads and doubloons. Adults often find themselves screaming just as loud as kids: "Throw me something, mister!"

ANOTHER PART of the public celebration is the general debauchery that goes on, most of it in the French Quarter, centered on Bourbon Street.

The debauchery isn't all that debauched. Mostly, it involves a lot of drinking—in recent years, mainly a lot of drinking of cheap wine (beer is the "class" drink for Mardi Gras). There are arrests in the French Quarter, to be sure—usually more than 5,000 during the five peak days (Friday through Tuesday), but the lack of real violence is one of the amazing aspects of Carnival, and a tribute to the local police, who frequently work 16-hour days during the season.

The French Quarter is also the scene of most of the masking (that is, dressing up) that you see on Mardi Gras. The popularity of masking in general has declined over the years, and along the Uptown and Metairie parade routes you rarely see more than one person in ten with a costume on (families dressed as clowns, perhaps). In recent years, the masking scene has been dominated by homosexuals, who come to New Orleans from all over the country for a day of travesty (in its literal sense).

The best place to see costumes—gay and otherwise—is at the annual Costume Contest at the corner of Bourbon and Dumaine, in front of Lafitte's-in-Exile, a well-known gay bar. Judging generally begins a little before noon, and there are prizes, an emcee, the whole bit.

The Quarter rowdiness builds to a crescendo on Sunday night, then

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UNTIL RECENTLY, Carnival was touted far and wide as "the greatest free show on Earth." It is still, for the most part, free (though it does cost $6.50 to sit in the Superdome on Sunday night to watch Bacchus parade through—but then, you get to hear Chuck Berry, Irma Thomas, and lots of other performers). The point here is that the city doesn't want to encourage the sort of people who travel the country in search of free thrills to flood New Orleans for Carnival. Thus, the "free" bit has been toned down.

The trouble began around five years ago after the movie "Easy Rider." The city was invaded by hordes of hippies (is there a better word?) who had either seen the movie or had at least heard about all the free fun. The Tourist and Convention Commission felt constrained to put out a pamphlet entitled "The Real Mardi Gras" that read in part:

"Mardi Gras has been called 'the greatest free show on earth.' It is the greatest, but it's not free. It's paid for by private organizations. Come and enjoy our fine restaurants, our entertainment, our shops, and our Mardi Gras. But please come as a paying guest as you would to any other great city or event . . ."

The pamphlet went on to say: "... the whole Carnival season is actually a rollicking family party given by the people of New Orleans for themselves."

Now, that really is a bit harsh and selfish. If you're a money-spending tourist, don't think that New Orleans doesn't want you. What New Orleans doesn't want is clearly defined in a June 1972 Tourist Commission report by a blue-ribbon panel:

"Related closely to the first problem (drinking on the streets—which, by the way, New Orleans permits year-round) is the problem of large numbers of undesirable visitors. These persons in most instances were young people in their late teens or early twenties, who came to New Orleans with no place to stay and with little intent of spending money on other than personal gratification . . ."

Personal gratification? But isn't that what Mardi Gras is all about?

IT'S CLEAR THAT for the past two or three years, the number of "undesirables" has declined considerably from what it was in '71, '72, and '73. The "discouragement" policy may have helped, but, then again, the Youth Culture ain't what it used to be.

What the problems of the early '70s did was to cause the city to inject a little rationality or order or harshness—all of which are alien to Carnival—into the celebration. This was an unfortunate development, especially when coupled with new rules restricting the number of new parades and preventing all parades from going through the French Quarter. These actions may have been sensible, but sensibility really has no place in Carnival. The sensibility—perhaps temporality (as opposed to...
spirituality) is a better term—has begun to undermine the system in other ways too. For good or ill.

At any rate, from the Tourist Commission’s point of view at least, the measures had the desired effect: hotel occupancy rates, which during Carnival in 1972 and ’73 were considerably below the year-round average, soared to between 90 and 95 per cent in 1976 and will probably stay there for some time to come.

But to return to the private side of Carnival—the more interesting side...

The krewes that stage the balls (about 100 of them) and the parades are closed organizations, whose selectivity is often a badge of honor. Until very recently, the importance of a krewes was measured by the company it kept—or didn’t keep.

Yeats, the poet, put it very well: “I want to create for myself an unpopular theatre and audience like a secret society where admission is by favor and never to the many.”

That, in a nutshell, is Carnival. The “unpopular theatre” is the ball, which, for the top krewes, is nothing if not archeaic and boring. There is no drinking on the floor. Dances are by call-out. And the privileged guests (that is, the non-members) get to sit up in the cold Auditorium (in formal dress) watching the members dance.

The krewes is also Yeats’ “secret society.” The identity of the King of Comus, the oldest (1857) and most exclusive krewes, is never announced. And the top krewes (Comus, Proteus, and Momus, plus the balls of Mystic, Atlanteans, and a few others) are very exclusive, with few (and in some cases, no) Jews and no blacks at all.

Rex is another story. It is the most important krewes in the eyes of the public—the “civic” krewes. Its membership does include a fair number of Jews, but no blacks (though blacks have attended the Rex Ball as guests during the past two years). And its upper echelon is composed mainly of members of the top social krewes (multiple membership is common).

Virtually since its founding in 1872, Rex has been the Carnival parade. It takes place at the height of the festivities on Mardi Gras itself, and its King (nearly every krewes has a King or Queen or both—or some other monarch, like an Emperor or Pharaoh) is considered the King of Carnival (of all krewes) and is called simply “Rex.”

In addition, being chosen Rex is said to be the highest civic honor that an Orleanian can achieve. But a little black boy or Latin boy or Jewish boy would have a better chance aspiring to be President of the United States than he would aspiring to be King of Carnival.

Ironically, the first King of Carnival was Jewish—but none who succeeded him were. In addition, a few years ago, there was a big stir about a well-connected Jewish businessman becoming King, but it never happened.

Really, all Rex is, is the particular middle-aged man that his peers in the upper echelon of the organization decide to honor in a particular year. He’s probably served on various hospital boards and Chamber of Commerce committees—he may be even more distinguished. But the point is that he needn’t be.

In recent years, Rexes have had a rough time of it. One of them ran for public office and lost, another was found guilty of price-fixing and sent off to federal prison for a spell, and a third lost control of the bank he had built from scratch (it eventually failed). Certain progressive figures like Rex Captain Brooke Duncan (whoops; the Captain of Rex is supposed to be a secret, so keep it quiet) have emerged in recent years and there has been a slight—very slight opening-up of the organization (e.g., inviting a few blacks to the ball). Still, it’s doubtful that Rex will change very much in the years to come.

If Rex is becoming a little more open-minded, it is perhaps in part a reaction to the success of another krewes, Bacchus, which can best be described as a non-exclusive, “show-boat” krewes.

Bacchus was begun in 1969, and since then it has produced by far the most elaborately paraded with the most generous trinket-tossing and the most famous king. In fact, Bacchus introduced the idea of the celebrity-king, which has since been adopted by several other krewes but which has been eschewed (“disdained” is probably a better word) by Rex, Comus, and the rest.

Bacchuses have included entertainers like Bob Hope, Jackie Gleason, Danny Kaye, and Perry Como. Each of these men had a generalized, jolly appeal. But this year’s Bacchus breaks tradition, continued on next page.
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A matron, in some way connected with the Zulu Social and Pleasure Club and their parade, hands out beads to besieging crowds—close to that grand forbidden-city of matrons, the Pontchartrain Hotel on St. Charles Avenue.

Photo by Jack Pickett

The big wheels in Bacchus include Blaine Kern, who designs floats for many of the parades, including Bacchus and Rex, and Pip Brennan of the Brennan's Restaurant family.

Bacchus, which broke tradition by holding its balls in the River-

Four Kings Beats Three Aces

A gentlewoman of Atlanteans in a certain year was chosen Number One and sworn to secrecy—an old man of carnival, of the sort who back its good works to the utmost of their powers.

He had accepted, when the Knights of Momus asked him to ride and reign as Momus; sworn, he could not acknowledge the reason why he should refuse, and he was sworn again.

No sooner this oath taken than the Krewe of Proteus told him that he was to be Proteus, and he had no get-away except consent and, third time, solemn oath of secrecy. Next came the Mistick Krewe to whisper that the highest honor of carnival was his—they believe it—and, with three sworn secrets now, to be three just and righteous kings, he had to swear a fourth, to lift the cup of Comus to the multitude on carnival's last night, to reign as carnival's last king.

This sounds like a made-up tale to gloriify that gentlewoman, but the next fast move was by the Captain of the Royal Host to tell him that he would be King of Carnival—Rex—and never a grander Rex could have nodded at the masses. But Rex holds court that same night of mardi-gras as Comus does, and at midnight does reverence at that merry monarch's throne, so here was an impasse that nothing but a firm and unexplained refusal could resolve.

Therefore, he was not Rex, that night or ever. On the Tuesday he was Atlantean's king, Momus on the Thursday, on Monday Proteus, and Comus on the second Tuesday, mardi-gras. Not a member of his family, not a captain to whom he was sworn, but jumped in their surprise at each successive recognition of the royal legs. Years passed and so did he, and the fortune that had enabled him to wave four scepters in a week.

Time came when his granddaughter was a working girl. And—honor to the Majesty of Rex—the working girl, instead of any millionairess, was chosen and did reign as Queen of Carnival. (To identify the gentlewoman, the memorable banquet was in his honor when the soubrette popped out of the Roederer.)

Could any other town do a miracle like that? Could anything but carnival?

—Perry Young, "Carnival and Mardi Gras In New Orleans" (1939).
gate (the city's big, convention-oriented auditorium) and by making them boozy, wild parties, broke tradition further last year by bringing its parade through the Superdome, for the entertainment of the fans at a special Blaine-Kern sponsored event. Bacchus will do the same this year; admission to the Dome is $6.50 for adults, and, besides Bacchus, you'll get to see Chuck Berry, the Shirelles, Irma Thomas, Professor Longhair, and more.

EVEN THOUGH the direction that Bacchus is taking is quite different from that of Rex, it still shows how powerful the Carnival system is. Bacchus members, many of them relatively newly-rich and long-excluded from the top krewes, reacted to their social ostracism not by achieving, gaining prominence, in different arenas but by using the Carnival system—or a variation on it.

The influence of Bacchus has extended even to politics—the first such venture in Carnival history occurring in September 1974, when Kern and Brennan wrote a letter accusing Peter Beer, who was running for Judge of the Court of Appeal, of being “the biggest enemy of Carnival” and urging their friends to vote against him for that reason.

The incident may have worked to Beer's benefit. At any rate, he won the election.

Bacchus, Endymion, and the other spectacular new krewes have maintained an uneasy truce with the older organizations (which certainly never would have gone in for injecting politics in the show). In a sense the newer krewes have upstaged the older ones. But Comus, Momus, and Proteus have a sense of style—albeit an archaic style—that no one else can touch.

The reaction of old-line krewes to Bacchus, etc., was best expressed long before the birth of Bacchus, in 1952 in Arthur Burton LaCour's book “New Orleans Masquerade”: "There have been repeated hearsay reports that quite a number of newer krewes have been created by mercenary aspirants for personal aggrandizement."

Actually, one of the nicest things about Carnival is that no one participates in it for personal aggrandizement.

That is not to say that many float-riders don't get a feeling of power and celebrity as they ride down St. Charles Avenue, throwing trinkets to the crowd and watching scores of people dive for them.

"It's truly an amazing feeling," says one float-rider. "You just don't know until you do it."

IN ONE ANALYSIS, the Carnival structure is a reflection, or actually a reinforcement, of the social and political structure in this city.

The bead-tossers get their feeling of power, the masses get their bread and circuses as a palliative, an amusement to keep them from being upset about the private side of Mardi Gras—which is actually an extension of the exclusive world of this town's powers-that-be.

Still, over the years, Carnival has become less of an "us-and-them" proposition. Most krewes, even though they are patterned after the older society organizations, could care less about the social structure. They're out for a good time—though in a highly structured, very serious way.

And the vulgarization of krewes like Bacchus has brought democracy to the whole scene. Excitement over the arrival of Henry Winkler as Bacchus II certainly extend to the sons of the Boston Club—the pages of Rex—as surely as to the urchins of Chalmette.

BUT AGAIN, this is not to say that many Orleanians don't feel excluded. They do. While Bacchus members mimic the old structures, many others who have been kept out simply escape—fly off to Aspen or Florida for a week.

For a surprisingly large segment of the local population, Leaving Town is a grand Mardi Gras tradition, as enduring as the mask of the King of Comus.