



Station 2: Music - Mardi Gras “Indians” in New Orleans

Watch Clip 2, “Big Chief Monk Boudreaux”

From Bigchiefmonk.com:

The history of the Mardi Gras Indian culture in New Orleans is complex, and accounts of its origins are sometimes inconsistent. An affinity shared between Native American and African American people, both of whom were enslaved and persecuted at various times in the city’s history, was clearly a driving force in those origins and the mixing of their cultures. Both ethnic groups also share an appreciation of tradition, and the unique New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian music, costumes, and rituals are a melding of influences from both cultures.

From “Mardi Gras Indians,” in *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*, pp. 235-6. George Lipsitz:

Although it takes place in response to the rituals and timetables of European carnival traditions, the Indian spectacle is not primarily European. It presents visual and narrative references to Native American Indians, but it bears little resemblance to genuine Indian celebrations and ceremonies. It draws its determinate modes of expression from African culture and philosophy, but it is not a purely African ritual...[it picks and chooses] from many traditions to fashion performances and narratives suitable for arbitrating an extraordinarily complex identity.

From Louisianafolklife.org:

The “Mardi Gras Indian” tribes of New Orleans are, in fact, the oldest cultural organizations surviving from the original African tribes which were brought into New Orleans during slavery days. The tribes are particularly noted for preserving African “dress art” and musical heritage in the New World. The sewing and beadwork incorporated in Mardi Gras Indian suits, which are destroyed and redesigned each year, are widely considered to be the finest example of traditional African-American folk art in North America. Now long hidden in the Black ghettos of New Orleans, the Mardi Gras Indian tribes pursue cultural traditions, rooted in what they think of as a mysterious past, which despite being some 10 to 15 generations removed from their origin in Africa, still give them pride and serve to maintain their spirits against the dehumanizing effects of modern society.

Like small colonial armies on the march, a core of musicians play all sorts of drums and percussion instruments, speak in unknown tongues, and sing and chant dressed in elaborate African-American Indian costumes. During the day, they methodically hunt down other Indian gangs-some friendly gangs, in order to show off their new suits, and some not so friendly gangs, in order to show off their strength and power-all bringing back both the warrior spirits of Africa and the kindred spirits of Native American Indian people they came to respect and love.

Watch Clip 3, “Ancestry”