



The Krewes and Traditions of Mardi Gras

A New Orleans transplant goes behind the scenes to explore the world of krewes and floats.

By Carrie Williamson

I am balanced on a gnarled live oak root, better to glimpse the oncoming floats parading past the mansions lining St. Charles Avenue. Light from a hand-carried *flambeaux* (torch) reflects against the silvery leaves draped overhead, illuminating the rolling works of art. Many of the floats are constructed as year-long projects with themes conceived by members of krewes—social clubs with decades, and in some instances, centuries of history.

The Purple Knights of St. Augustine High School's band, a musical mill that has produced many New Orleans legends, march by with military precision, brass instruments blaring "The Mardi Gras Song." A little kid is securely perched atop a ladder with a custom-built seat, just the right height for catching the shower of stuffed animals and beads being tossed from the passing parade floats. The child's father jockeys for footballs. Women, gathering with friends in the same spot as years

past, wave at their costumed husbands riding the floats, members of the krewes cascading the crowd with throws.

I am a relative newcomer to New Orleans, but my preconceived notions about Mardi Gras long ago disappeared. This is not bawdy reverie. This is a neighborhood block party meets "The Greatest Show on Earth." This is magic.

I have always shunned the crowds attracted to the infamous Mardi Gras of the French Quarter, instead opting to congregate with fellow music disciples at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. Since experiencing my first Mardi Gras—24 parades in the 16 days leading to Fat Tuesday—I've discovered there's more to this carnival than meets the eye.

From old-line, all-male krewes like Rex, parading since 1872, to the all-women krewe called Muses, celebrating their 10th anniversary in 2010, each of the 53 krewes who commission the floats and host the parades of Mardi Gras has a distinct personality. Parade themes, different every year, are closely guarded krewe secrets. Except for a handful of signature floats ridden by the kings, queens, captains and





Rex Super Krewe on the Bouef Gras Float

officers of the krewes, most roll at only one Mardi Gras. The combination makes the carnival a highly anticipated event.

Behind the Revelry

“Mardi Gras is the heart and soul of New Orleans,” says Barry Kern, son of legendary New Orleans float maker Blaine Kern.

We are sitting in his office at Mardi Gras World, the cavernous warehouse along the Mississippi River, which houses a fraction of the 500 floats that Blaine Kern Studios manages for 17 elite krewes.

I am still recovering from the thrill of a behind-the-scenes look at float making and an up-close-and-personal peek at floats from carnivals past, including the intricate flower floats of Harry Connick Jr.’s krewe—Orpheus.

“It is a highly competitive business,” Kern says, and he isn’t talking about the nine other area float makers. He means the competition among the krewes is fierce, but it’s also friendly.

“The challenge is to use the same paradigm and come up with a new aesthetic,” says Damon Bowie, Kern Studios’ visionary art director, who pops his head in to confirm a meeting about a 2011 parade. Kern Studios has been meeting these kinds of challenges since 1947.

“None of the work is conventional construction,” Kern says. “Our skilled artists, sculptors, painters and carpenters use techniques my father learned in the 1950s, studying under master European float makers like those from Viareggio.”

Where Tradition Meets Evolution

At the same time, Kern Studios has been adept at innovation. The advent of super krewes like Bacchus and Endymion in the 1960s demanded bigger, splashier

floats to accommodate their larger, open memberships. Hence, Kern Studios introduced massive multi-sectioned floats, spelling the end of parades in the French Quarter, as well as dizzying fiber optics displays, rivaled only by the celebrities who were invited to ride for the first time.

Despite advancements, modern Mardi Gras is steeped in tradition.

“Secrecy dates back to the oldest Old World traditions, like Venice celebrating carnival in the 1800s,” says Stephen Hales of the historic Rex krewe. “Masking, being disguised as anyone but yourself, is still part of the charm of carnival.”

Each krewe upholds its organization’s history. While the king of the highly exclusive krewe Chaos is never revealed to the public, the identity of Rex, the official King of Carnival, is revealed on Lundi Gras, the Monday before Ash Wednesday.

“Rex really tries to hold on to tradition,” Hales says. “To have a theme drawn from mythology, literature, arts and music captures the imagination and takes you on a journey.”

In fact, half of Rex’s floats are still built on mid-19th century cotton wagons. The exquisitely detailed decorations shimmer and shake as the wheels roll over bumps in the road, adding a magical element.

In contrast, the Muses krewe has embraced another tradition—satire.

“The whole idea of irreverence and silliness is what it is all about,” says Virginia Saussy, one of Muses’ founders and theme chair.

She is leafing through original color sketches of past floats when she hands me a brochure stamped “Top Secret.” I unfold it to see the 27 floats from the Muses



2009 parade, each a spoof of a James Bond movie, and many lampooning local politicians, like the oversized head of the infamous Senator David Vitter on the “Live and Let Deny” float.

The only clue I get to Muses 2010 theme is “seasonal.” I have absolutely no idea what to expect, but based on the brilliant parodies I’ve just seen, I am certain I will be laughing when the Muses floats roll by.

In 2010, Mardi Gras culminates on Fat Tuesday, February 16. Rex will once again roll the Bouef Gras float, honoring the old tradition where the fatted ox was led to slaughter prior to Lent. The queen of Muses will once again ride down the avenue in a red stiletto float. The crowd will once again hurl beads into the mouth of the Bacchagator, a staple float in the Bacchus krewe parade.

With the exception of these and a few other expected favorites, much of the rest of the parade floats will be a surprise. As Saussy says, “There are very few chances as an adult to experience that ‘I can’t wait for Christmas’ feeling.” ■

Photo from Kate Elkins and the Rex Organization