

Big Chief: Alfred Doucette and Mardi Gras with a Message

By Dean M. Shapiro

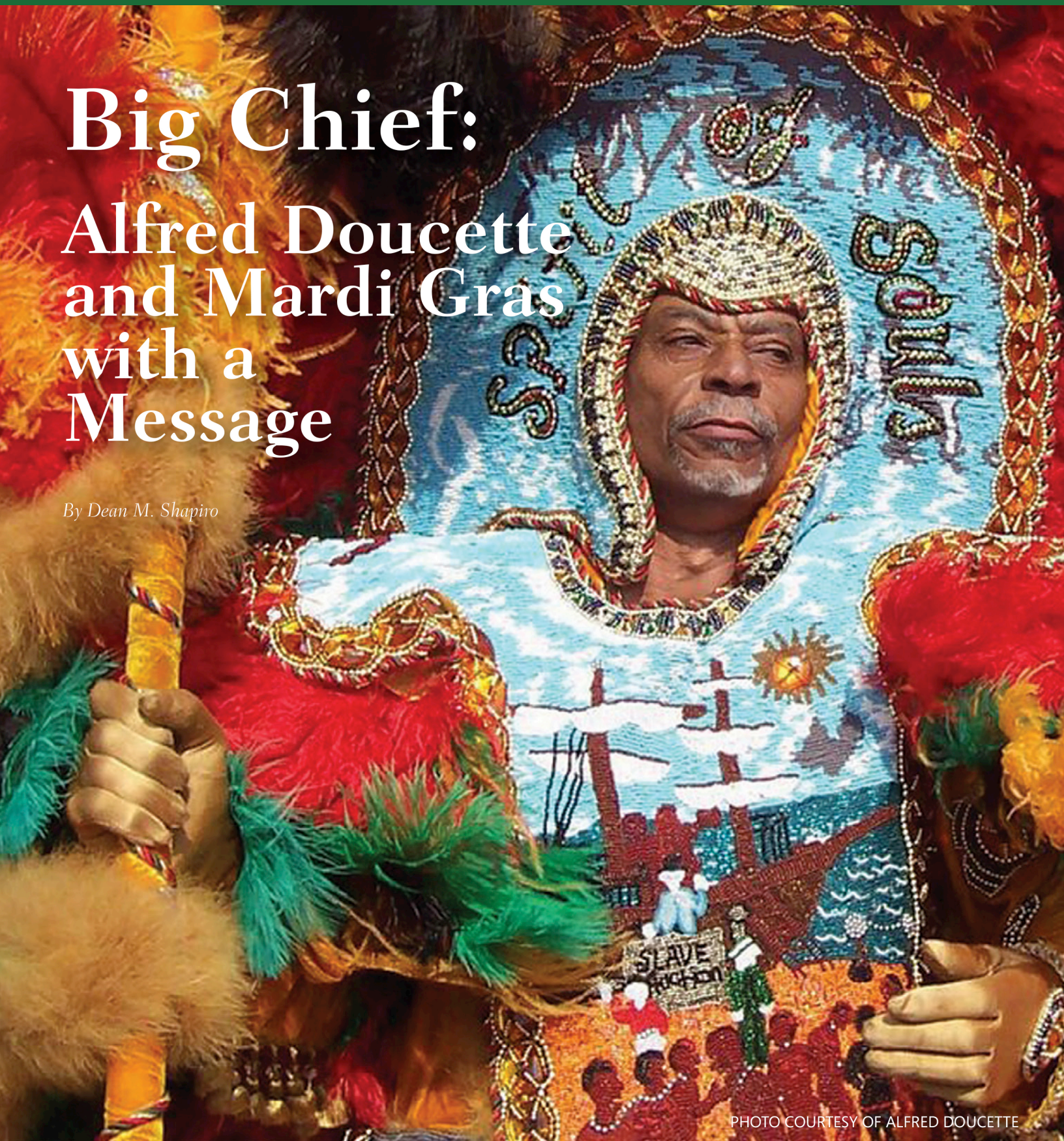


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Mardi Gras is the most fun time of the year in New Orleans and is hardly the time to be making heavy political statements. But Big Chief Alfred Doucette of the Flaming Arrows had a message he wanted to get across to the young people of the city; a message on his Indian suit during Mardi Gras 2012.

“I call them the Ten Commandments of the Street,” Chief Doucette revealed in an interview at the time. “These kids, they’re shooting up each other. They’re doing the devil’s work. They’re imprisoning themselves and we’ve got to turn that around. We got young people who can’t read or write. We’ve got to show them to a better place.”

And that ‘better place’ he was talking about is a return to the old values, the values he himself grew up with in the city’s Seventh Ward: those based on the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments. That’s why he came up with his own version of “Thy Shalts” and “Thy Shalt Nots” to emblazon on the Mardi Gras Indian costume he wore on Fat Tuesday, February 21, 2012.

Starting with his crown, which said “Prince of Peace” on it, the right wing of his suit read “Thy Shall” and went on to list the following: “Believe in Jesus. Love. Rejoice. Be good and kind. Pray. Work. Apply your talents. Morals and values. Solidarity.”

On the left wing it read “Thy Shall Not live without the spirit. Hate. Kill. Be selfish. Want. Be unproductive. Be lazy.”

And, to drive these points home, his apron depicted Jesus with his disciples at The Last Supper. His feather-festooned staff bore a message in the same vein.

“That’s what I want to get across to these kids,” the Chief explained. “They’re going to have to come up with something else. This year we’re bringing the message to the street. We’re trying to make a better world. We’ve got to stop thinking black and white. We’ve got to come together.”





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Growing up in the city's Seventh Ward, Chief Doucette said he had his family all around him and it was a very tightly knit, values-oriented unit. All of them, his parents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, had input into his life. "These days the kids don't have that anymore. All they have now are their Mamas and their Mama's Mamas and there's no man around to guide them. But they can learn something if they take an interest in it," he said.

Over the years he has been a master carpenter, a master racecar builder and driver, owner of the legendary Nite Cap Lounge, a thoroughbred horse trainer and racer, a Creole chef and a renowned musician, songwriter and entertainer. And, of course, a talented, visionary artist who designed and created some of the most beautifully exquisite Mardi Gras Indian suits to be found anywhere in New Orleans. He has been inducted into the Mardi Gras Indian Hall of Fame twice -- once as Big Chief of the Flaming Arrow Warriors and again as Chief Council of the Flaming Arrow Warriors.

In 1970, the Chief, along with his brothers Roland and Sterling, opened the Nite Cap 1 nightclub. During its prime it featured such famous local acts as The Meters, The Neville Brothers and Chocolate Milk, as well as renowned international artists like The Manhattan Transfer, The Chi-Lites, Bobby Womack, The O'Jays, Betty Wright, Johnny "Guitar" Watson and Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown.

Ten years later, Chief Doucette bought a 25-acre thoroughbred horse farm in Lumberton, Mississippi, where he pursued a successful career training and racing horses. He owned eleven thoroughbreds, training and racing two of them with winning results at the storied Fair Grounds Race Course.

In 1989 he became Big Chief of the Flaming Arrows tribe, a title he inherited

from his oldest brother Merc. Merc had inherited the title from longtime family friend, Big Chief Jabby who started the Flaming Arrows in the Seventh Ward. Here is how Chief Doucette explained it:

“I was riding horseback with the Buffalo Soldiers for one year back then. I asked my brother to make me a crown because I wanted the Indians and the Buffalo Soldiers to ride together. So he gave me a crown he said to me, ‘The Chief is on the horse.’ He made me the Chief the next year.”

Chief Doucette had already been working with his brother sewing the traditional Mardi Gras Indian suits since the 1950s. When he became Tribal Chief he began designing and making his own creations, a skill he acquired from his mother, a commercial seamstress who ran a factory in New Orleans.

In his early years as Big Chief, his tribe consisted of many of the members’ children. The tribal elders would buy beads for them to throw and they enjoyed it. However, Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005 and decimated the tribe’s membership. Still, however, Chief Doucette soldiered on, doing what he had always done, making a new suit every year and strutting around proudly in it through the streets of some of New Orleans’ oldest and most storied neighborhoods.

Every individual suit created by Chief Doucette tells a distinct story through its colorful artwork and design. His first suit, “Pegasus,” tells the story of the mythical flying horse. In 2000, he created the popular Marie Laveau suit, which depicts a graveyard scene of the “Voodoo Queen” who, Chief Doucette said, visited him in

his dreams on three consecutive nights and gave him inspiration for the suit. He also said she bestowed on him the words for his song, “Marie Comin’ Out” (sung to the tune of “Lil’ Liza Jane”) and the ability to sing outside his normal range.

In 2001, Big Chief Doucette was inspired to create a suit in commemoration of the September 11 terrorist attacks. The “White Buffalo Suit” depicts the fall of the Twin Towers using the Indian

legend of the White Buffalo as a spirit of peace. In 2004 he created the “Spirit of the Soul” suit telling the story of the Billie Holiday song, “Strange Fruit,” which decries the many lynchings of African Americans during the Jim Crow Era. This suit has been exhibited at the Historic New Orleans Collection and The Cabildo.

In later years, Chief Doucette’s career branched out in many creative directions. In addition to “Marie Comin’ Out,” which was released in the late ‘90s, there have been other Laveau-inspired songs like “Louisiana Pray,” “Three In The Morning,” and “Tired of Wine and Whiskey.” He has sung these songs with some of the city’s most renowned musicians in clubs and festivals from one side of New Orleans to the other, including JazzFest.

He also enjoyed a film and video career, starring in “Bury the Hatchet,” which was featured in the 2010 New Orleans Film Festival, and 2009’s “Keeper of the Flame,” written and directed by Brian Harrison Nelson, grandson of the legendary Big Chief Donald Harrison Senior.

Chief Doucette has been featured in numerous films, documentaries, television specials and music videos, and has been quoted in prestigious magazines



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALFRED DOUCETTE

and newspapers. He also gave frequent lectures about his cultural heritage to schools and universities.

Now 80 years old with many years of “suiting up” as a Mardi Gras Indian, Big Chief Alfred Doucette has officially retired from making suits and parading but he still retains the dignity of the role he embodied over the years. He still believes in and exemplifies the lessons he hopes to impart on today’s young people.

Along those lines, he is planning to start teaching young Mardi Gras Indians about the cultural traditions and passing along the skills of the trade, especially suit-sewing. Throughout his life this man of many talents has been a success story that others should be inspired to emulate.

“My life has really been great,” Chief Doucette said in a January 2021 interview. “I’ve done a lot of things and gone where I want to go. As long as I can walk and talk and function like I’m doing now, I plan to be around for awhile. I’m thanking God for every day I wake up. I say ‘Thank you for this day.’ It’s a blessing.”