

GOLDDIGGER BABY DOLL

MERLINE
KIMBLE
KEEPS
OLD PARADING
TRADITION
ALIVE

By Anita Oubre

PHOTOGRAPHY BY: KIM WELSH

In New Orleans, at almost any time of year, you might come across grown women frolicking about dressed as Baby Dolls. Adorned in short satin dresses, bloomers and bonnets these women are a fixture not only on Mardi Gras Day but year-round during second lines, funerals, festivals, conventions and other special events.

The origin of the tradition has a varied history but it is a practice in the African American community that has been passed down for generations. Merline Kimble proudly masks as a Golddigger Baby Doll.

“Baby dolling reminds me of the bra-burning days. At that time we had to kneel on the ground. If your skirt did not touch the ground, you were considered a loose woman,” said Merline.

Many of today’s practicing Baby Dolls would agree with Merline as they describe the practice as an act of defiance, liberation and self-celebration despite society’s norms.

The Golddiggers can be traced back to the late 1930s when Merline’s grandparents, Octave and Louise Philips, formed a social aid and pleasure club that the family and close friends could participate in together. The women dressed in short dresses and the men wore top hats. They used their husbands’ old black and brown tuxedos and dyed them bright hues of yellow, pink and green.

The Golddiggers came out every year for Mardi Gras as a family unit until the men were drafted into the war in the early 1940s. They ceased to parade after that as the women would not dare parade the streets without their husbands.

“As a child I would laugh at her stories. My grandmother said she was having the most fun of her entire life and I wanted to experience this,” said Merline.

Merline’s parents, Merline and Walter Kimble Jr., also enjoyed good times celebrating the culture of New Orleans. They worked hard all week to give their family a good life. Her mother was a seamstress and father worked as a foundryman. The couple liked to have a good time and they partied on the weekend just as hard as they worked during the week.

Rebellious at a young age, Merline and her brother would eagerly await their parents’ return from a night out. Merline recalls waiting to hear her father snore before they would sneak out to dance at one of the corner bars until the sun came up. “On Sunday I could count on two things, going to church and getting



my butt whipped after mass for sleeping in church,” laughed Merline.

The family can be traced back six generations in the 6th Ward. From the 1100 block to the 1500 block of Dumaine Street it was all family. Merline recalls waking up to music every day. There was either a second line passing in front of the

house or children mimicking one on the sidewalk. Music drifted out of the bars and the neighbors sat on their stoop and escaped in the rhythms and beats.

“It was a neighborhood of families raising their children. I would stop to listen to music and have supper with neighbors up and down the block before I reached

home. Everyone looked out for one another,” said Merline.

Merline and her siblings, Janice and Walter III, all attended Craig Elementary, McDonough 41 and Clark High School. As a young girl Merline had a restless spirit and there were plenty of opportunities for her to wander outside the confines



PHOTOGRAPHY BY: HENRY YORK



of the classroom.

“Charbonnet Funeral Home was right down the street from Craig. If I heard the band strike up that was the end of the school day for me. We would follow the jazz funerals and if Olympia Brass Band was playing, it was like a taste of heaven,” said Merline.

Merline went on to study nutrition and radiology at both Delgado Community College and Jefferson VoTech. She enjoyed a full career as an assistant dietician until her retirement.

Merline continues the legacy of celebrating her culture and family ties in the neighborhood she grew up in. In the late ‘70s she was able to surprise her grandmother by bringing back the Baby Doll tradition. She gathered friends and family to plan, sew new dresses and come out on Mardi Gras.

“Imagine my grandmother’s delight to see her family all dressed to the nines celebrating her legacy. I was all dressed in white and that was the last color dress my grandmother came out in,” said Merline. “The men, women and children of the family all came together that year and it was truly magnificent.”

Although Merline grew up in New



Orleans, every couple of years she was sent to California when her rebellious spirit became too much for her parents. Merline was just a teenager and that meant she was not able to fully participate in political and community activities in the way she longed to but she sold newspapers on the corner and helped with programs geared towards the youth.

Once her family caught wind of her involvement with one particular controversial group, they banished her back to New Orleans. “They probably saved my life sending me back home but my soul was on fire,” she recalled.

Back in New Orleans, Merline continued to seek out opportunities where she could make a difference. She wanted to attend the marches in Selma and Montgomery and so she began to frequent the local bars to gather change from the patrons to fund her trip.

“There was always someone in those bars who was doing something they didn’t have no business doing. A little hush money would help me further the cause,” laughed Merline.

The family didn’t know what to do with her besides ship her back and forth. She was an angry young woman and soon

earned the nickname “Militant Midget.” Merline continued to foster that spirit into her adulthood. Over many years she has been passionate about standing up for fair housing and affordable utilities. She leans toward causes that will help the underserved and most vulnerable in her community.

With the recent hurricane displacing so many people, Merline has been assisting those without transportation to gather supplies. Her small car is often filled with food, cases of water and cleaning products that she disburses to those who are need. “Sometimes I stay awake all night thinking about those who have been wronged, especially the children and the elderly, she said sadly.

Merline takes the role of culture bearer seriously. Her image has been captured in many paintings and murals and was even the face of the Jazz in the Park where her likeness adorned T-shirts, posters and the city bus.

“When I do what I do my spirit takes over and I look up into the sky and say, ‘Grandma, look at your little girl!’”

At 72 years young, this Baby Doll plans to continue frolicking in her rebellious spirit for many more years to come. 🌹

