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January/February 2021

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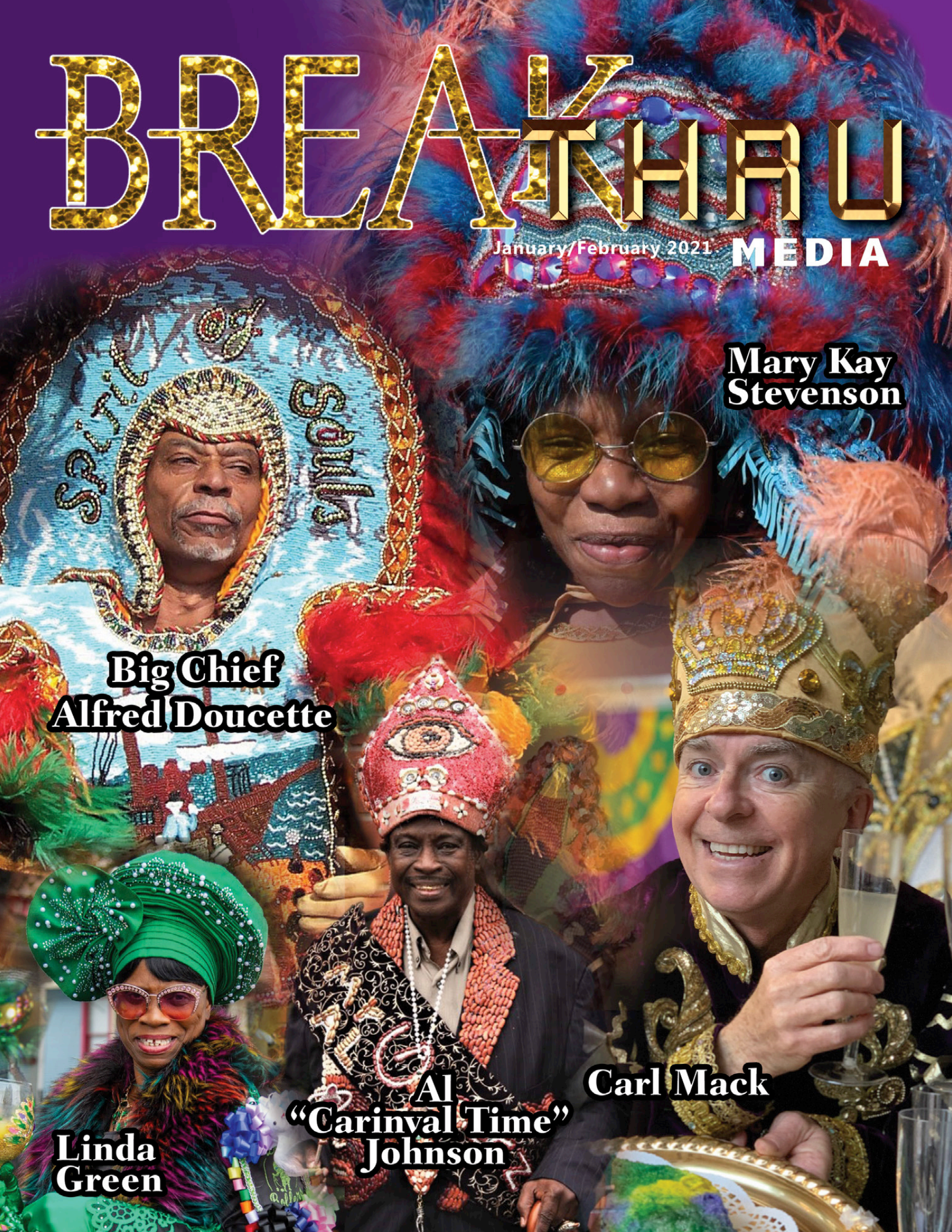
**Mary Kay
Stevenson**

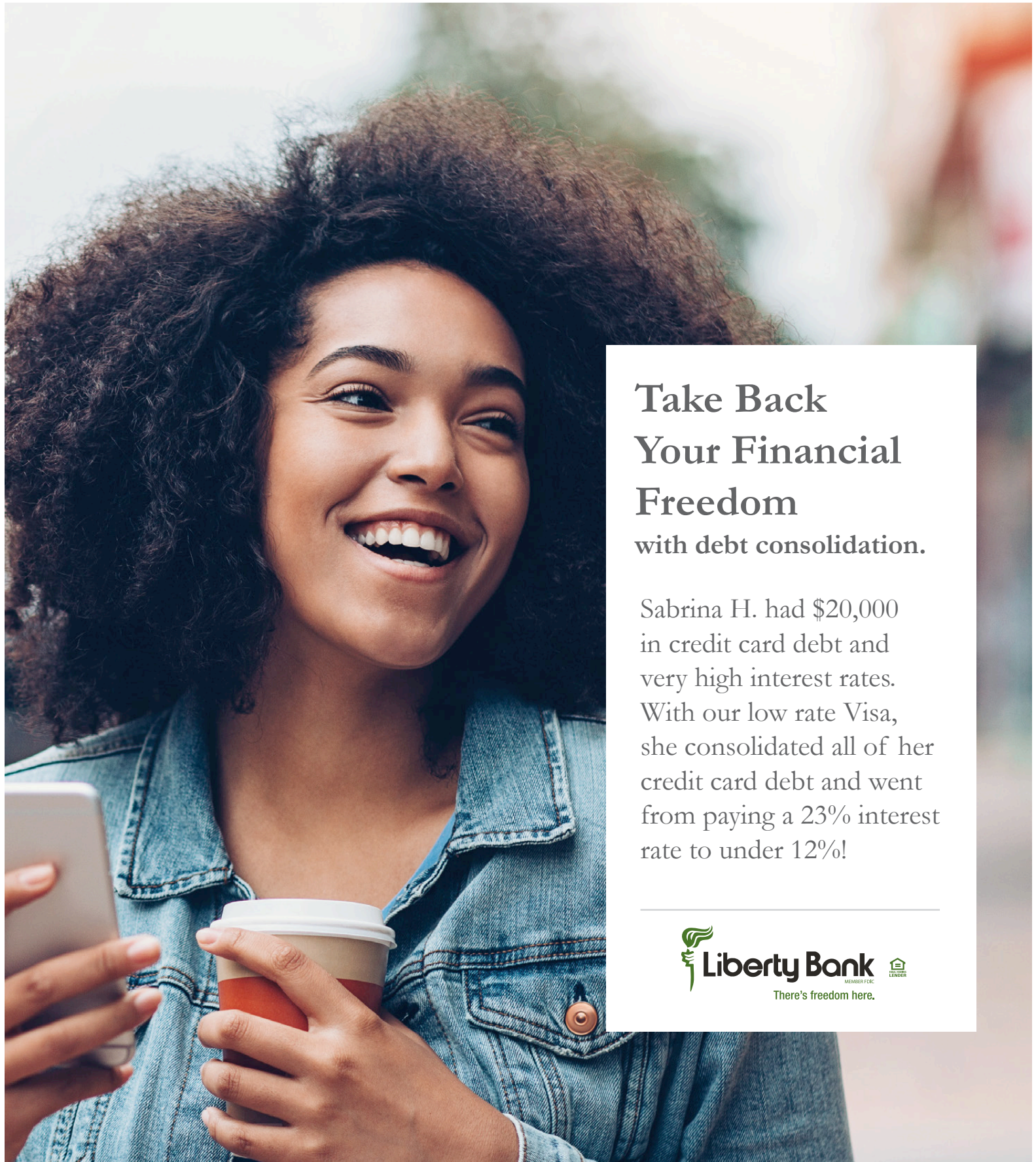
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**Linda
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**Al
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“The Ya-Ka-Mein Lady” of New Orleans

Linda Green cooks up a culinary delight.

By Anita Oubre



nopp20

PHOTO PROVIDED BY LINDA GREEN, PHOTO TAKEN BY : GUS BENNETT, THE PEOPLES PROJECT.

Linda Green defines her success by having always applied a variation on the Golden Rule: “If you do not love what you are doing, why do it at all?”

Globally known as “The Ya-Ka-Mein Lady,” Linda is an award-winning culinarian who was born and raised in New Orleans. The pickup truck from which she serves her home-cooked soul food and her famous, trademarked Ya-Ka-Mein along parade routes, is a popular destination for celebrities and common folk alike who rave about her cooking prowess.

Ya-Ka-Mein is a spicy soup that is enjoyed in neighborhoods all across New Orleans. The soup is a meal in a cup filled with broth, noodles, bits of meat, and

topped off with a boiled egg and green onion. Linda noted that Ya-Ka-Mein “has been a staple in the city for ages” and that it originated from people of Chinese descent.

“When African Americans began to intermarry with the Chinese people, the dish became what we know today,” Linda explained. “The African Americans brought the spices and herbs to the noodles along with special cuts of meat left over from Sunday’s dinner. From these two cultures the dish was elevated

to become a popular dish that is sought after in the community,” she added.

The delicious broth consists of a secret juice handed down through the generations. Linda’s great grandmother, Georgiana, was widely known for making it. The neighbors were said to have followed the aroma from down the street, Linda laughed as she recalled the family history. “They called it ‘porch popping.’ The neighbors would line up at the door with their own bowl to get a taste of this soup, then they would sit on the porch and talk for hours.”

Some people even swear by its ingredients, saying that it is a great cure for a hangover. During second-line season in New Orleans a popular chant one might hear is someone singing, “Where the Ya-Ka-Mein Lady? Where she at? Where she at? I need that Old Sober.”

Linda has been a regular on the second-line routes for many years selling her famous Ya-Ka-Mein. “I have people get off the plane and the first thing they do when they get into a taxi is call and ask

me to get some ‘Old Sober’ ready for them,” she said.

Ya-Ka-Mein can also be found every year at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, along with Linda’s equally famous fried pork chop sandwich.

Linda grew up in the Central City neighborhood and attended Carter G. Woodson and Booker T. Washington high schools. On Third and Danneel streets Linda and her brother graduated from what she lovingly refers to as the “University of Shirley Green.” Their mother Shirley attended business college and worked for the city for a few years but for the majority of her working life she was employed by the Orleans Parish School Board as a cook.

It was through her love of cooking that



Shirley met many people, including local dignitaries. A young Linda watched her mother’s every move and often helped in the kitchen. She learned to chop seasoning and how to properly set a table. It was through these loving lessons in the kitchen that the legacy was born which Linda would eventually pass on to her own children and grandchildren. “My mother told me to respect myself first and then I can respect everyone around me,” Linda fondly recalled.

Linda attended Delgado Community College where she studied secretarial administration. Over the years she held jobs in Central City with the housing department, as well as at Charity Hospital. Following in her mother’s footsteps, she eventually started doing what she loved. She too began cooking for the New Orleans public schools and held that position for 25 years until Hurricane Katrina forced her to evacuate.

Upon her return to New Orleans, her mentor and friend, Adam Shipley, took Linda under his wing and put her to work cooking for the world-renowned music club, Tipitinas. It was at Tipitina’s that Linda served her unforgettable soul



PHOTOS CREDIT : HENRY YORK

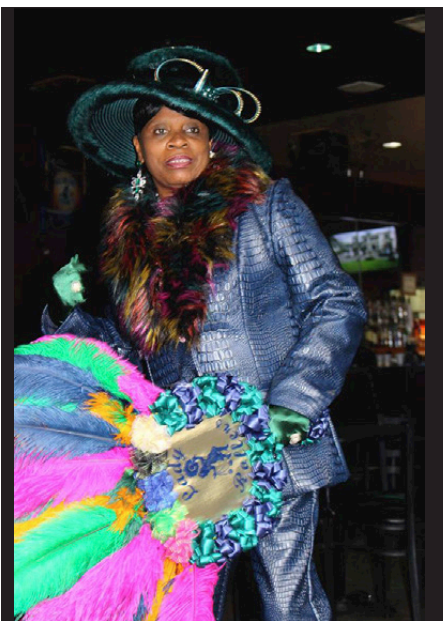
PHOTOS PROVIDED BY SWAMP ISLAND RECORDS

PHOTO COURTESY OF MS. LINDA



food to the bands that performed there, both local and national. Though she has received countless awards, her pride comes from the satisfaction and happiness her food gives to others. Celebrities such as Kate Hudson, Bon Jovi, Robert Plant, Willie Nelson and Fats Domino are just a few she has had the honor to cook for.

Articles about “The Ya-Ka-Mein Lady” have been featured in numerous publications and she has also been a guest on many television productions. But people from all over the world probably know her best as the winner from the Food Network’s “Chopped,” *Pride of New Orleans* episode. She has appeared on the Travel Channel’s show “No Reservations”



PHOTOS CREDIT : HENRY YORK

with the late Anthony Bourdain.

“Anthony traveled all over the world and he wanted to taste MY food. He said he had never tasted anything like it and that I should do something with it,” beamed Linda.

In her spare time Linda enjoys spearheading events with her club, “The Lady and Men Rollers.” Linda explained that the social aid and pleasure club was first started by her former husband, Anthony Holmes. It was originally an all-men’s club with the ladies participating annually in the court. Linda especially enjoys being a parade marshal and handling the behind-the-scenes magic that goes into creating a parade.

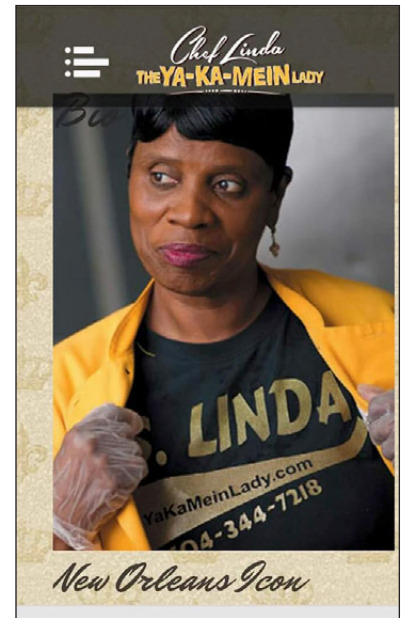
When her marriage dissolved, Linda inherited the club and added women onto the roster. “My club is everything to me and I love my girls,” she said. “We all have a mutual love and respect for one another. We come together in one accord and we put on a hell of a show.”

Every year, after her turn coming out of the door, Linda rides on the back of a convertible for the duration of the procession. And she is always amazed by the masses of people that follow the line. To see the crowds dancing and so full of joy makes all of the hard work worth it to her, she proudly noted.

The Lady and Men Rollers traditionally parade on the last Sunday of the year but, due to the citywide COVID-19 restrictions, this year’s festivities have been put on hold. The club would have celebrated its 25th anniversary.

Linda stays busy featuring her delicious food at most of the major festivals and food events for which New Orleans is widely known. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced her to slow down for a bit, something she says, “I don’t know how to do.”

She has been enjoying spending time with her nine grandchildren and one great-grandchild. You can meet the grandchildren nearly anytime you see Linda serving up her culinary delights. She is passing the legacy on to them and teaching them everything she knows about the business.



Her next project is bottling her unique seasoning for her award-winning take on the classic Bloody Mary cocktail, called the “Ya-Ka-Mary.” She is also working on getting local grocery stores to stock her Ya-Ka-Mein. Be sure to look for her in the near future as she partners with the Dragon’s Den (Esplanade Avenue at Frenchmen Street) to feature some of her classic, down-home cooking, hopefully during Phase 3 of the city’s reopening plans.

In those rare moments when she does take it easy, Linda enjoys watching old movies and is a self-proclaimed history buff. Linda dreams of traveling to Egypt where she can visit the Pyramids.

“I thought about becoming an anthropologist at one point, and maybe when the travel ban is lifted I can visit the dead kings. Now, that is something I would love to do.”

Maybe she can get the pharaohs to rise up for a yummy taste of her “Old Sober” Ya-Ka-Mein! 🍷

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Mary Kay Stevenson aka “Big Queen Kim” Honors Her Family Legacy

By Anita Oubre

Traditions are a valuable way for families to connect and create memories that last for decades. The Black masking tradition was

handed down to Mary Kay Stevenson from her mother and today she honors this legacy that has been part of her life since she was a small child.

Mary Kay was born and raised in the Uptown neighborhood of New Orleans, the youngest of eight children in a close-knit family that grew up in the Magnolia public housing project. Her father, Leroy Stevenson, was the oldest of 18 children brought up in the St. Bernard housing project. He made his living as a longshoreman. Her mother, Mercedes Gertrude Madison Stevenson was the third of 19 children and she was raised by her grandmother Mary. Her grandmother made sure she had the best of everything in life but she also ensured that Mercedes would learn a trade and she became an excellent seamstress.

Leroy and Mercedes raised their own large family and instilled high morals and values in the children, including the importance of hard work. One early lesson was “to always look your best and do your best,” Mary Kay recalled. “Your first impression should always be your best impression. My mother taught us all how to sew. She was a classy, jazzy lady.”

Mary Kay attended school at Our Lady of Good Counsel and later Walter L. Cohen High School. She studied education for two years at Southern University. “Most of my life lessons were taught to me by my mother,” she said. “They included diligence, hard work and the love of the culture that people from all over the world come to New Orleans to get a taste of,” she added.

The family legacy started in the 13th Ward which stretches from the Mississippi River to Broad Street bounded by Napoleon and Jefferson avenues. The neighborhood is home to a local institution, The Buzzards, one of the oldest Mardi Gras walking clubs, and their annual route brought them in front of the home of a young Mercedes.

“My grandmother, Mary, took note of the generosity and good cheer that The Buzzards provided to the neighborhood and she decided to organize her own group. She gathered up some of her girlfriends who donned long dresses and carried baskets of gifts and bottles of milk. They called themselves The Baby Dolls,” Mary Kay stated. The procession consisted of the group led by a

PHOTOS BY: JAMES CULLEN

neighbor pushing a buggy with an entourage that followed behind. The children tagged along, eagerly awaiting the cookies, sandwiches and other treats inside the coveted basket. Close behind the group were the men dancing and singing with moonshine in hand.

Mary Kay recalls her mother's fondness for this tradition that she kept up for many years. "Mama talked about the good old days and how she enjoyed dolling and going to sock hops with her good friends Amelia and George "Jolly" Landry," she said. "They loved to dance and had their own act that people would come from all over town to see."

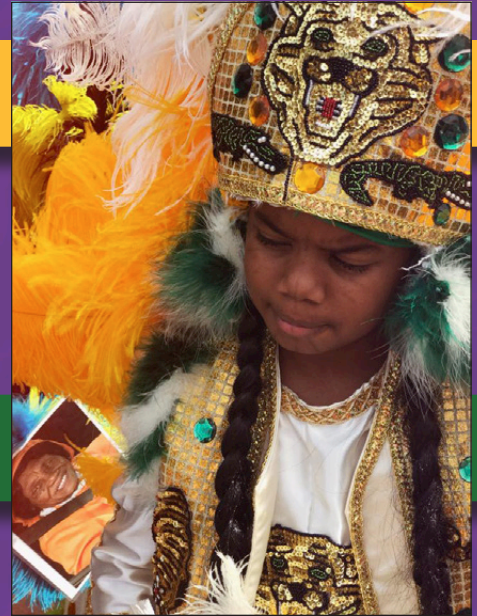
Not only did they enjoy dancing; Jolly was a member of an Indian tribe and he wanted to form his own tribe and he wanted Mercedes to be a part of it. "Mama was happy with her Dolls and what they had established but she was also fond of the community and always wanted to lend a hand. So she did what



Mary Kay and her mom, Mercedes

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARY KAY STEVENSON





PHOTOS BY: JAMES CULLEN

she could because she had a good spirit," Mary Kay said.

To raise funds for the efforts, the family would host card games and suppers. Mary Kay explained that her mother made the suits and Jolly made the crowns. "Mama brought all of us children into it. We did not stay behind," she said. And so one by one the entire family was brought into the culture and it became their family tradition. "My mother Mercedes was the Big Queen, Jolly became Big Chief Jolly and the Wild Tchoupitoulas Tribe was born," Mary Kay stated.

A young Mary Kay paid close attention to her family as they prepared for Carnival each year. She attended Indian practice but she admits to being frightened by the loud chanting and singing. At the tender age of eight, she was presented but she was not ready. She recalls how she would

cover her face when

they began to scream and chant.

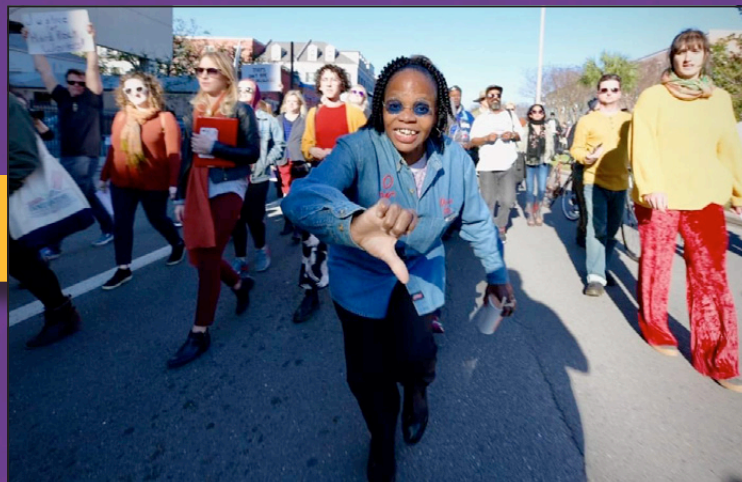
There were quite a few times when Mary Kay was supposed to mask over the years. At the age of ten her mother made her a suit but she once again declined and it was not forced on her. "My cousin was able to fit into the suit and she wore it proudly," Mary Kay said. Every year a new family member was chosen to be presented. As the years went on, Mary Kay stayed in the background and assisted with sewing and getting others prepared.

"It wasn't until I was a grown woman and my own child was put into a suit that I finally acknowledged my responsibility to preserve the family legacy," Mary Kay explained. Her brother's grandchild and her child would be presented together. There was an excitement in the air and the family was ecstatic. "My spirit was stirred. I was finally ready to fulfill the role that I

had prepared for my entire life and I was ready to tell my mother the good news: the following year I would mask," Mary Kay fondly recalled.

In 2008, there were twelve family members who came out of the house on that memorable day. They included Mary Kay, her brother-in-law and a group of kids who beat on pots and pans and walked beautifully through the Uptown neighborhood. Mary Kay noted that, "My mother was proud to see her tribe come full circle. The house was full of feathers and joy."

Mary Kay held the title of second queen until she earned her current place as Big Queen. And, adding on her nickname, she called herself "Big Queen Kim." According to Mary Kay there are measurements that must be passed before a title is earned. There is a deep respect in the culture and she knew she had to be spiritually enlightened first. One of her jobs as Big Queen is to lead her tribe in song. Her unique



voice is recognized from afar. Her songs are spontaneous and they depend on factors such as the occasion and audience. Mary Kay relies on her spirit and her heart. “The same song will never repeat itself. It’s all in the moment,” she explained.

Mary Kay acknowledges that this spiritual awakening is a gift from her mother. The year before she passed, her mother registered the name Original Wild Tchoupitoulas. Although there was controversy surrounding the name, Mary Kay stresses that the beauty of it all is the people engaging in the culture. “The more the merrier. It’s like a gumbo. The more you put in the better it comes out,” she said.

Mary Kay embraces the role that she shied away from for most of her young life. She asserts that although the culture is a billion-dollar venture, she doesn’t want a billion dollars: she wants a billion people to know about her culture.

“It is my job to tell you if you are not doing it right. I don’t like negativity or balls of confusion,” she declares. “It’s all about advising and encouraging. If there’s no love in it, it doesn’t make sense.”

Now, that is truly a legacy to pass on.



PHOTOS BY: JAMES CULLEN

Big Chief: Alfred Doucette and Mardi Gras with a Message

By Dean M. Shapiro

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALFRED DOUCETTE



(reprinted from January/February 2012 issue with updated revisions)

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."





PHOTOGRAPHY BY BIONCA FLOT SYKES



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PHOTO COURTESY OF ALFRED DOUCETTE

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 Manhattans, 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 and

PHOTOS COURTESY OF
ALFRED DOUCETTE



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." 🌸



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2021 post COVID-19 during pandemic adjustments.

In the wake of bringing awareness to the ongoing needs of hurricane survivors in Central America and Jamaica with the recent OAH (Operacion Asentamientos Humanos) relief, "Christmas Masquerade" at BB King's Blues Club, Damon Batiste of NOLA's "Royal Family of Music" is driven. He is driven to manifest the purpose of the cultural arts beyond just "having a good time." While determined to take note of the effects of the crisis on the music and tourism industries, Batiste is intensifying his focus on the life-changing cultural programs based in New Orleans. Batiste, founder of NOSACONN (New Orleans South Africa Connection), is in a full-court press to revitalize and uplift lives through successful programs of NOSACONN and its network of partners.

Leading the way to the healing of the nation at the ground level, where the arts meet the community and touch people in a granular way, Batiste is gathering supporters to make a substantive and sustainable difference with what's in their hands - mainly, the arts. "Music is healing. It is spiritual" said Tommy Peters, President & CEO of BB King's Blues Club, in a conversation after the successful virtual and live December 18, 2020 disaster relief fundraiser at his New Orleans BB King's Blues Club. Peters is known for his awe-inspiring economic revitalization of Beale Street as head of the Progressive Capital Investment Corporation at a time when Memphis, Tennessee political leaders were about to give up on all efforts to combat the decades of blight and decay in the area. Peters and his team rolled up their sleeves and millions of dollars later, Beale Street is a worldwide calling card of



United States tourism for visitors to enjoy and refresh themselves amid Southern hospitality.

"I have all the confidence in the world that Damon Batiste will be a strong force in resisting the economic impact of the Coronavirus in New Orleans," said Peters. Discussing the impact of the worldwide pandemic bringing the entertainment industry to its knees, Peters talked about the economic impact on business. "Congress has got to get out of gridlock and do something to help small businesses with PPP, not just the major corporations who are more equipped to ride the storm."

Peters spoke of the impact of the pandemic beyond economic terms. His explanation of the impact and healing aspect of the arts and entertainment industry hit home. "Music brings people together and we've been missing those good vibes. The absence has added to the pain of the pandemic."

"What we do is not frivolous," said David Batiste Sr., the "Father" in the band, "Fathers and Sons of The New Millennium," one of several historical musical derivatives of his Louisiana Hall of Fame group, "David and the Gladiators." A widely recognized bandleader, keyboards and B3 organ player, singer, composer and producer in his own right, David Batiste Sr. displays his passion

for purpose in all he does. "Our music is more than making people feel good, which is a very important element; it is also an economic engine that needs to be cultivated and cared for as one would plant and harvest a productive farm," he said.

In addition to Damon Batiste, the "Fathers and Sons" band also includes David Sr.'s well-known sons, Russell, Jamal and Ryan.

Damon Batiste's purpose-driven life is yielding fruit. An example is that of emerging drummer, 18-year-old Danno Petersen (<https://youtu.be/iLKpHg45Ug0>), who will be emigrating from South Africa to study at New York City's Manhattan School of Music Conservatory. "Damon Batiste and NOSACONN have been instrumental in guiding our family's next steps in the cultivation of Danno," said Danno's father, keyboardist and percussionist, Danny Peterson Sr. "NOSACONN is part of our success and we look forward to continued partnership."

With David Batiste's leading of a band of seven students groomed by NOSACONN's After School Corporation to Michelle Obama's last White House event for the White House Initiative on Turnaround Arts - in partnership with the United Way of Louisiana and other programs - NOSACONN and the Batistes have laid the groundwork for a new beginning in 2021. It's a New Year that calls for the healing that the new President Joe Biden has declared the United States of America desperately needs.

The music continues with NOLA's "Royal Family of Music" as the Batistes will take part in NOLA's virtual Mardi Gras, from February 14th through the 16th. Visit NOLA.com for more info and programming information.

For more information about Damon Batiste and NOSACONN visit www.nosaconn.com. For information about the band itself, go to www.batistefathersandsons.com. Be sure to sign up for the newsletter to stay abreast of what's going on. Keep your track shoes handy to keep up!



PHOTO COURTESY OF CARL MACK

BACK IN BUSINESS!

Carl Mack's Mardi Gras Costumes and Culture Museum Reopens for Tours

By Dean M. Shapiro

This past spring, when the COVID-19 pandemic began shutting down businesses and events throughout New Orleans, Carl Mack was on the verge of permanently shuttering his Mardi Gras Museum of Costumes and Culture in the French Quarter.

The museum with its dazzling displays and thousands of costumes, along with other Carnival memorabilia, remained closed to visitors for months but, through persistence and paperwork, Carl managed to rescue the facility. Thanks to a loan from the Small Business Administration plus his own personal resources and, what he termed “a very generous landlord who was willing to work with me,” he was able

to reopen to a limited extent.

And so, despite the cancellation of Mardi Gras 2021 and not being as fully up to speed as it was before the pandemic, the museum is once again offering tours, both in-person and virtually, with reservations made in advance. Carl is conducting the tours himself.

The museum, located at 1010 Conti Street, is hosting tours on Fridays,

Sundays and Mondays at 2:00 pm and Saturdays at 12 noon and 2 p.m. And, with the Carnival Season officially underway, tours are also being offered on Sundays at 4:00 pm serving king cake and champagne and passing out beads.

Carl is also offering virtual tours for school classes for up to 50 students, as well as for individuals and groups via a Zoom program.

Tickets to all tours, both in-person and virtual, can be ordered online at www.themardigrasmuseum.com or by calling (504) 858-8228. All major credit cards are accepted or payments can be made through Zelle and other similar electronic pay programs.

In-person tours are limited to 25 persons per tour and masks are required.

And then, to top it off on Mardi



Gras Day, Tuesday, February 16, Carl announced, “We’re doing king cake and champagne at 2:00 and 4:00. These are limited to just 24 people.”

During a recent interview, Carl recounted with immense satisfaction the effort it took to get the museum back up and running again to some degree and he expressed confidence in becoming fully operable again when the pandemic has passed. “I’m so happy I was able to keep this facility going,” he said. “It took a lot of work but it was worth it.”

Working largely alone, Carl has changed out the long-standing displays in the

museum’s spacious main exhibit hall. He has also changed the displays in the side rooms that function as galleries to the right and left of the museum’s main corridor. The displays that are now present pay tribute to the New Orleans-based social aid and pleasure clubs, the Mardi Gras Indians, the second-line marching groups and the history of the Carnival celebration itself, Carl explained.

One of the side galleries honors some of New Orleans’ most recognizable celebrities in their glittering outfits, including Chris Owens, Al “Carnival Time” Johnson, Irma Thomas, Big Freedia and Trombone Shorty. “It’s breathtaking to walk into that room and see everything all sparkling and glittering. It’s really beautiful,” Carl said.

Prior to opening the museum on Twelfth Night (January 6) 2017, Carl had accumulated what is believed to be the largest costume collection in New Orleans. No longer able to store them inside his former home in the Faubourg Marigny, he opened a succession of shops in the French Quarter, each one larger than the one before it until he signed the lease for the present-day facility on Conti Street. Since then he has hosted many parties and other special events there, including the coronations of the kings and queens of the Krewe of Stars, of which he is co-captain, along with Marshall Harris.

Arriving in New Orleans from his home in Rochester, New York nearly 40 years ago, Carl was a familiar sight in Jackson Square during the 1984 World’s Fair, as

a street performer playing his wheeled xylophone for tips. Colorfully attired in his trademark red and white striped suit and straw hat, he also performed basic magic tricks, twisted balloons into animal shapes, juggled, face-painted and performed other forms of entertainment.

During his museum tours Carl enjoys recounting and telling jokes about his early experiences while playing his xylophone in Jackson Square. “My most requested song was one for which there was no sheet music,” he tells visitors. “It’s called ‘Somewhere Else.’ I would play outside someone’s place of business and the owner would come out and say, ‘Hey mister, can you play somewhere else?’”

But all during that time Carl was doing more than just playing an instrument and posing for pictures with tourists. He was astutely observing the local culture, thinking of ways he could carve out his niche in it. And little by little within a roughly ten-year span he evolved from a lone street performer into one of the city’s premier entertainment entrepreneurs.

“I’ve been blessed with the gift of creativity and the ability to get an idea and just do it,” is how Carl explains what drives him forward. “If I think something is a good idea I just plug away at it and so far most of it has worked out.”

Creativity, and the desire to have fun while providing fun and being able to make a living at it, were the key elements that propelled Carl toward acquiring the skills that led him to where he is



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CARL MACK





PHOTOS COURTESY OF CARL MACK

today. During his most prosperous years his eponymous company, Carl Mack Presents, hosted or produced hundreds of parties and special events, especially during the Carnival Season, in addition to outfitting countless numbers of revelers from his vast, diverse costume collection.

So how does this super-busy entertainment impresario manage to maintain his sunny disposition amid the crushing demands of a fast-paced business with a multitude of moving parts? His simple answer is, “I love what I do. Everything about it. I’m blessed with a lot of energy.”

During Carnival in past years, Carl and his staff were busy around the clock, making and fitting out costumes for the city’s parading krewe and organizing Mardi Gras-related events. He also had his hands full planning and making arrangements for the Annual Krewe of Stars Ball

at the Jefferson Performing Arts Center in Metairie. As co-captain of the krewe, he was largely responsible for overseeing the ball's details, from costumes to catering to entertainment and "whatever else needed to be done," as he put it.

"My goal is to have people leave the museum with much more of an understanding that Mardi Gras isn't just a million people out on Bourbon Street," Carl explained. "There is a Carnival season that permeates all layers of the community. Different neighborhoods and cultures have their own way of celebrating Carnival. There's not just one way to do it and one of the most fun things about exhibiting is telling the story and showing the deep textures of this variety."



Carl Mack with 2018 Krewe of Stars Queen Irma Thomas and King Al "Carnival Time" Johnson and Krewe Lieutenant Marshall Harris



Carl Mack with actor Drew Varrick



The Mardi Gras Museum of Costumes and Culture is located at 1010 Conti Street in the French Quarter. For guided tours and school groups and for more information and admission prices call (504) 858-8228, visit www.themardigrasmuseum.com, email info@themardigrasmuseum.com or go to their Facebook page.

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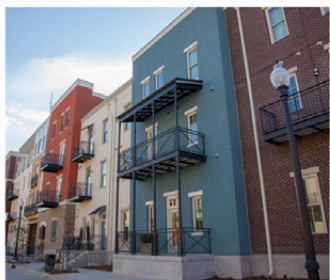
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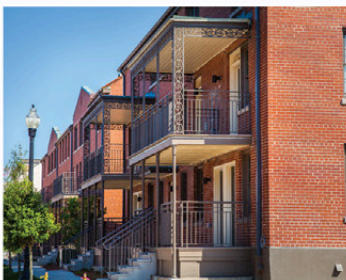


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A Lifetime of Carnival

An interview with Al “Carnival Time” Johnson

Breakthru Media Staff

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BIONA FLOT SYKES

There are many words that can be used to describe the life of Alvin Lee Johnson Senior but there are two in particular that stand out above the rest. His most famous song, which has become enshrined in the Mardi Gras musical pantheon, has forever earned him the moniker of Al “Carnival Time” Johnson.

Born in New Orleans on June 20, 1939, he moved with his family to Houston during his earliest childhood years. Roughly ten years after his birth they moved back to New Orleans. Another ten years after that he entered the studio of Cosimo Matassa with an all-star band to record his most iconic composition which is widely played and performed live every Carnival Season.

Al remembers back to when he was ten years old and his father bought musical instruments for him and his siblings. “My daddy gave me a trumpet, hoping one day I would play the role of Satchmo,” he recalled, but that never happened. His career escalated in other ways, making him the musical icon he is today. Drawn to the family piano, he taught himself basic chords and that would become his instrument of choice.

Al’s whirlwind professional career started when he was 17 years old. He said that, at the time, he thought that he was “getting an early start on being rich.” In later years, his work ethic and love for music allowed him to feel like he hadn’t worked a day in his life. His major influences Smiley Lewis, Fats Domino and Chuck Willis influenced his own music during his early years in the business.

His first recording, “Lena” received local airplay but bigger things were in store for him. He saw a way to make the transition into Mardi Gras music when he astutely observed that there were very few songs recorded and being played that represented the fun and festivities of the Carnival Season.

“All they had was “Mardi Gras Mambo (by the Hawkettes) and (Professor Longhair’s) “Goin’ to the Mardi Gras,” he

said. “They didn’t have anything about Carnival. So I had to figure out a way to get Carnival in there, where it would fit in with the rest of the things. I came up with ‘Carnival Time’ and stuck it right there in the middle and it looks like a lot of people liked it.”

In the studio with him on the recording of “Carnival Time” was a who’s who of New Orleans backup musicians including Lee Allen, James Rivers and

Robert Parker on saxes, Mac Rebennack (later Dr. John) on piano, Placide Adams on bass, Edgar Blanchard on guitar and Walter Lastie on drums. Joe Ruffino, the head of Ric Records was the producer. The record was released in 1959.

The song, now a Mardi Gras standard, punched Al’s ticket



PHOTO COURTESY OF CARL MACK



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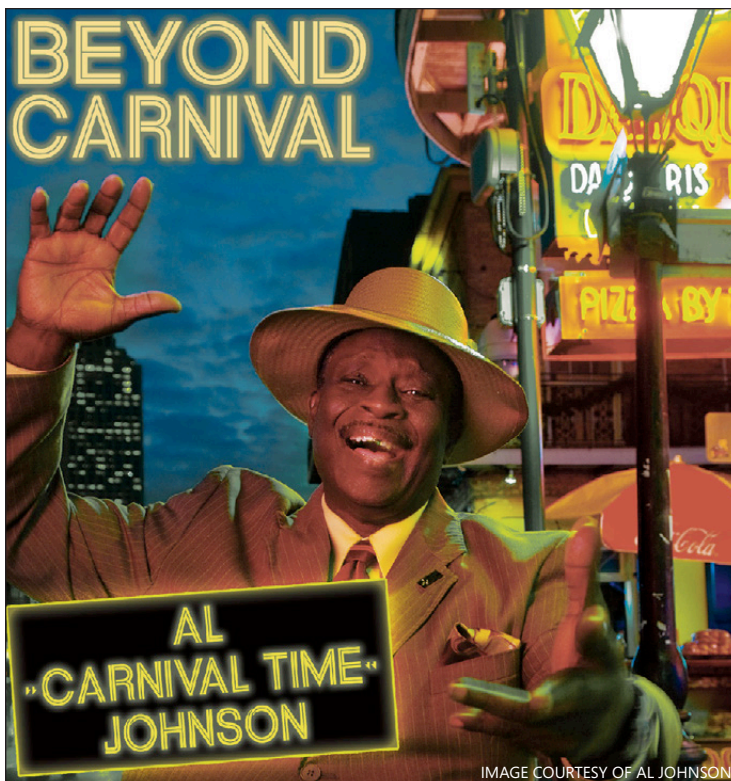


IMAGE COURTESY OF AL JOHNSON

to success with multiple appearances at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival and sharing the stage with some of New Orleans’ most legendary performers. He has appeared onstage with such luminaries as Aaron Neville, Ernie K-Doe, Jessie Hill, Oliver Morgan, Bobby Lonero, Tommy Ridgley, Eddie Bo and a host of others.

But, with

success and acclaim also came disappointment and despair. Like many musicians of the 1950s and 1960s, Al was not given the rights to his music, despite having written and composed the songs. He made very little royalty money from his endeavors. Forced to work other jobs, especially as a New Orleans taxicab driver, Al toiled at the daily grind for nearly 40 years until, finally, in the late 1990s he began fighting for the rights to his songs, including “Carnival Time.” In 1999 he won his lawsuit and has owned and controlled the fruits of his labor ever since then.

“Carnival Time,” which most of Al’s fans (“Carnival Timers” as he calls them) know and love has belatedly brought him the twin satisfaction of increased revenue and recognition over the past 20-plus years. He finally got to ride in his first Carnival parade in 2001 when the all-women’s Krewe of Muses made him

their Grand Marshal. In 2009 he reigned as the Grand Marshal of the now-defunct Krewe of Grela in Gretna and a few years before that he rode as King of the Krewe du Vieux. In 2017 he reigned as King of the non-parading Krewe of Stars, alongside Irma Thomas as Queen. He has also been hired to sing his famous song and others at special events throughout the city, especially at Carnival balls.

Al has been honored by the Louisiana Music Hall of Fame with his induction in 2007 and, five years after that, he was crowned Honorary King for Life by New Orleans' Good Children's Social Aid and Pleasure Club. He was also featured prominently in the Louisiana Lottery commercials in the early 2000s.

Displaced from his longtime Lower Ninth Ward home by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Al moved around for several years before settling into a comfortable home in the Musicians Village, surrounded by other musicians and creative types. He is rightfully proud of his accomplishments, stating confidently, "I am 'Carnival Time.'"

Sadly, with parades, balls and most other related events canceled for the 2021 Carnival Season, Al has been sidelined from taking part in the festive events he loves so much. Although a limited number



PHOTOGRAPH BY BIONA FLOT SYKES

of invitations have come his way, he has had to turn them down for fear of possibly being infected with the COVID-19 virus. At 81 years old he's not taking any chances and self-quarantining at home.

"But there's always next year," he confidently and cheerfully proclaims. "We're gonna make it and it's gonna be a fun Carnival Time all over again." 🌸



PHOTOGRAPH BY DEMIAN ROBERTS



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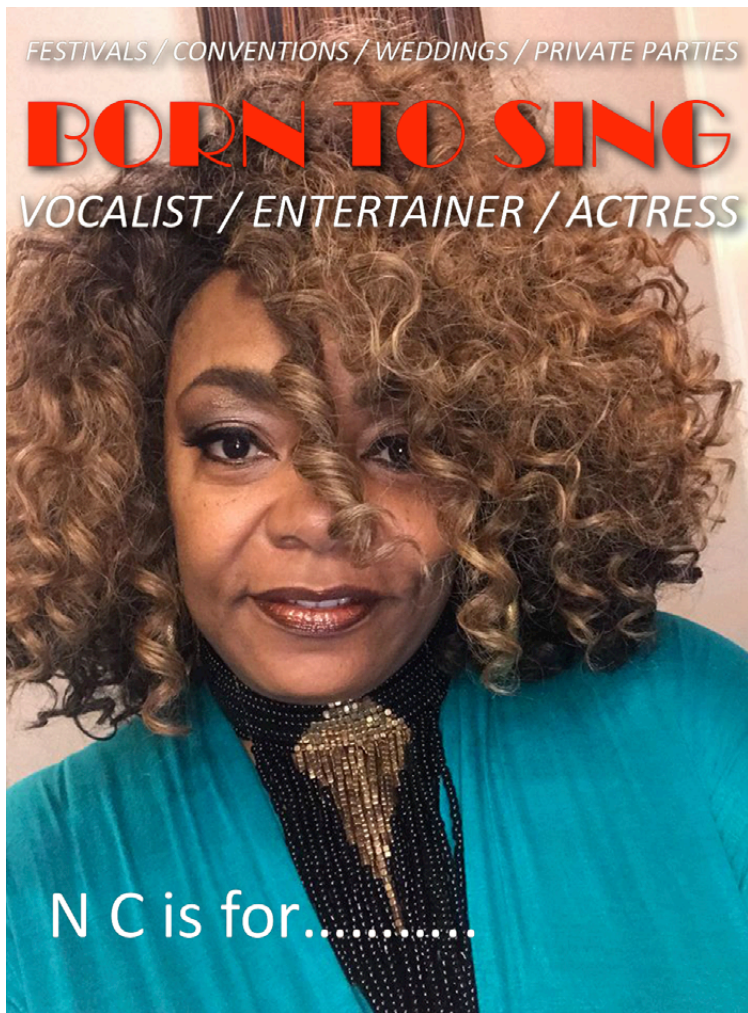


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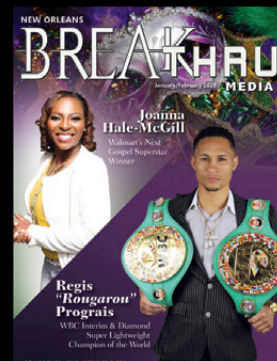
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