

# **new orleans griot**

the tom dent reader

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by Tom Dent

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# NOSTALGIA: St. Joseph's Day Celebrations, or the Origins of Super Sunday

*Tom had a profound interest in the people who made New Orleans work, and not just in the culture in the abstract. The conversations he is having are with two of the most important culture makers, Tootie Montana and Danny Barker. Both of these men ushered in the modern expression of their respective cultures: Tootie for the Mardi Gras Indians, and Danny for rekindling young people's interest in New Orleans street music.*

*Published in the New Orleans Tribune in 1986.*

You are driving through town in rush-hour traffic as dusk falls. Suddenly you run up against a cluster of Mardi Gras Indians parading across the street silently, as if they are an apparition that refused to dissolve on Carnival night.

"Surely, this is a dream," you tell yourself, well knowing the Big Easy's ample capacity for the unreal. It is then that you realize this must be St. Joseph's Day, March 19<sup>th</sup>—the traditional day for a minor repeat masking by the Indians.

No matter how rushed you are, you may as well stop for a few minutes and enjoy one of the miracles of New Orleans culture—the luscious colors and startling designs of the Indian costumes.

Later, you may wonder about the origins of this improbable tradition. Why on St. Joseph's Day, an essentially Italian festive occasion that falls smack in the middle of Lent—a time of supposed abstinence and restraint— why do the Indians suddenly reappear?

This question led me into a brief search of the history of St. Joseph's Day, its relation to Carnival, and its even more unlikely connection to the Black New Orleans community.

In the section on St. Joseph's Day in *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, the fascinating repository of New Orleans history, myth, legends and lies compiled by the Federal Writers Project during the early 1940s, I discovered that St. Joseph's Day is indeed an Italian religious holiday of Sicilian origin, set on March 19th by the Medieval Papacy.

Observances to "St. Joseph, the carpenter" actually began hundreds of years before St. Joseph was assigned a commemorative day in the Franciscan calendar. It was in 1870, however, that Pope Pius IX declared St. Joseph the patron saint of the Roman Catholic Church.

In the Sicilian tradition, altars to St. Joseph were offered to protect the giver against evil, disease, pestilence and, particularly, to protect travelers. Altars were constructed with the image of the saint in the center, flanked by an incredible variety of breads and pastries. At heart, the holiday was considered a respite from the heavy restrictions of Lent, a day of even bacchanalian relapse into the pleasures and celebrations of Carnival.

Carnival, which has always been connected with the coming of spring and the rebirth of vegetation, predates Christianity. It began in Egypt as a commemoration of the renewal of life brought about by the yearly flooding of the Nile and spread into Greek and pagan Roman societies. Once Christianity became accepted in Rome, the Papacy merely incorporated the pagan rites they

could not stamp out into their scheme of rituals, celebrations and holidays. St. Joseph's Day was one of these.

In New Orleans, St. Joseph's Day took root in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, brought over by generations of Sicilian and Italian immigrants. Many of these immigrants settled among the numerous, widely dispersed Black communities of the city, establishing small groceries and bars—establishments that became integral components of the daily lives and memories of the Blacks who inhabited those neighborhoods. "Generations of Italians came, settling in Black neighborhoods with their corner groceries," said Danny Barker, one of the city's most esteemed jazz banjoists and historians. "The newer immigrants were supported in their businesses by family members who had preceded them."

It is Barker's impression that the Italian immigrants didn't understand or completely accept the racial prejudices common to the American South, so they got along fairly well with their Black neighbors and customers, though it was not the custom of Blacks to visit Italian homes—which were usually in the rear of, or above, the groceries. According to Barker, St. Joseph's Day was probably the only day of the year Blacks were welcome. On March 19<sup>th</sup>, many Italian families constructed altars and held open houses. That's how St. Joseph's Day probably got introduced to the Black community.

Though all of New Orleans commonly acknowledged special devotions and celebrations on March 19<sup>th</sup>, among non-Blacks, the holiday was rather exclusively limited to those of Italian ancestry (New Orleanians of Irish descent celebrate St. Patrick's Day, March 17<sup>th</sup>). However, by 1900 Blacks were celebrating St. Joseph's Day with unusual enthusiasm. It was the occasion for parties, balls, and masking (though rarely for altars). In short, it was an outburst of Mardi Gras frivolity for one brief reprise.

According to Barker and Allison “Tootie” Montana, Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas Black Indians for the past 37 years, 40 to 50 years ago parading groups from the traditional Carnival clubs like the Baby Dolls, the Saints & Sinners and the Dirty Dozen were familiar sights on the night of March 19th.

Since it was still recognized as a working day, “St. Joseph’s Day celebrations in the Black community were almost always at night,” said Montana, “though some uptown Indians came out in the afternoon to get a few more hours in their costumes.”

Both Barker and Montana pointedly recall the railroad lanterns the Indians carried so that they could be identified at night. A lantern in the distance meant the Indians were coming. Barker said the police required the Indians to carry lanterns, but Montana doesn’t remember being harassed by police on St. Joseph’s night.

Carnival Day, with its warlike atmosphere among the Indian tribes, was a different story. “On Carnival night years ago, the emergency ward at Charity Hospital used to be full of wounded Indians,” says Danny Barker.

“On Carnival,” Chief Montana agrees, “you weren’t supposed to give way to anyone because you represented the pride of your tribe and neighborhood. On St. Joseph’s night, it was mostly our habit to parade in quiet walks within neighborhood. All you could see were lanterns, the shininess of the costumes and hear the jingles of the metal pieces on suits.” The Indians visited traditional neighborhood stops, ending their ritual journey at a neighborhood ball or bar. If there was a humbug, the second liners started it with their chants and boasts proclaiming the greatness and fearlessness of their respective chiefs and tribes.

“That was St. Joseph’s Day in the old days,” sighs Chief Montana. “It was really something to see and enjoy.”

Today, very few of those who mask on Carnival mask again on

St. Joseph's night. Only a few of the Indians still come out, and those are mostly the uptown groups. Festivities on March 19th among Blacks have receded into the past (save for a few altars and dances), as have the once ubiquitous Italian corner groceries and the "credit slip" held by "Mr. Johnny."

As times and cultural patterns change, however, they sometimes mutate into a more glorious manifestation. For many years, Chiefs like Tootie Montana and younger Blacks who grew up engrossed in Indian culture deplored the violence that was all too characteristic of Indian encounters on Carnival Day.

Jerome Smith is one of these younger Blacks. He grew up in Montana's St. Bernard-St. Claude-Claiborne neighborhood. In his early twenties, Smith was a key figure in the Louisiana direct action civil rights movement, representing the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).

During his civil rights period, Jerome became convinced that the African culture-rooted Indians of New Orleans represented a serious, prideful and unique aspect of Afro-American culture. Nowhere else in America do similar groups appear, though similar costuming and rituals do exist in the Caribbean.

When his Movement days were over in the mid-sixties, Smith, along with fellow CORE leader Rudy Lombard, founded the Tambourine and Fan organization to highlight Indian culture and tradition, and to tie that hundred-year-old tradition to athletic and positive Black cultural training for youth in their Seventh Ward neighborhood.

Using Hunter's Point (the field at St. Bernard and Claiborne Avenues) as his base, Smith has, in two decades, built a strong program that serves New Orleans youth as no other before or since.

It was Jerome's dream to use Tambourine and Fan as a vehicle for building better relationships among Indian tribes throughout the city—to eliminate "tribalism" and long-standing hostilities.

In 1961 he began trying to set up meetings that would bring all the chiefs together, but it was impossible to ever get more than two or three to attend. Smith's aim was to have all the tribes march together on St. Joseph's night.

Gradually, with the constant support of Montana and Tom Sparks of the Yellow Jackets, and with ten years of persistence, objections against a unified parade wore down.

"We had to contend with the extreme neighborhood mentality of New Orleans," Smith recalls. "But because they knew I had worked in the civil rights movement, and because I knew guys from all over town from my days on the riverfront in the banana workers' local, we were finally able to get enough chiefs to see that what we were advocating was in the interests of Black pride and the education of our youth."

A unified parade on St. Joseph's, Smith argued, would spectacularly demonstrate the genius of Indian costuming as a unique New Orleans phenomenon and signify a new time of brotherhood and cooperation. The basic idea was creative exchange, not competition, though there would certainly be an appreciation for costume beauty and creativity.

In 1971, seven or eight of the chiefs agreed to convene with their tribes at Hunter's Point on St. Joseph's night and parade together, complete with chanting and second lines to the Municipal Auditorium for an affair commemorating the event.

"That first march was a huge success," remembers Jerome. "People along Claiborne Avenue couldn't believe what they were seeing—all those Indians in one parade together," recalls Montana. "The next year we were amazed. We didn't have to beg the chiefs to come to a meeting—they called us about wanting to be part of the parade."

Thus the origin of the most beautiful parade held in New Orleans today. Now all the Indian tribes active in the city have joined the St. Joseph's parade, along with traditional second line dubs, Mardi

Gras clubs, various drummers, kazoo bands, individual maskers, and at least three marching bands, including Dejan's Olympia.

By the mid-seventies, however, Smith recognized that such a massive parade could not be fruitfully held on St. Joseph's night. So a decision was made to hold it on the Sunday following March 19th, which is now known as "Super Sunday."

The 1984 and 1985 Super Sundays were long, multi-faceted, spectacular events involving the Creole Wild West, Seminoles, Cherokee Braves, Wild Magnolias, Flaming Arrows, White Eagles, Golden Stars, Mohawk Hunters, Yellow Jackets and Yellow Pocahontas. Second line clubs who marched included the Moneywasters, Sixth Ward Swingers, Bucketmen, Mellow Fellows, Kazoo Band and the Jammers.

In a massive, four-hour procession from Bayou St. John and Orleans Avenue, from Orleans to Claiborne Avenue and on to Hunter's Point, each group had a chance to strut their stuff in a gloriously colorful display before thousands of admirers.

This year, weather permitting, Super Sunday will be March 23rd. It is the parade to end all parades—St. Joseph's Day raised to a level of magnificence never envisioned in Sicily or old New Orleans. Through Super Sunday, the genius of Black New Orleans culture has spun off from the old Catholic holiday to produce its own altar of ever-nourishing spiritual and celebratory bread.

