

## Indian Rulers: Mardi Gras Indians and New Orleans Funk

On November 1, 1970, The Wild Magnolias and their chief Bo Dollis made the first commercial recording of Mardi Gras Indian music with a group of New Orleans funk musicians. The 45rpm disc of "Handa Wanda, Pt. I & II" transformed the traditional sound of black Indian chants into an electrified dance anthem. The song continues to be heard on local jukeboxes and radio stations in New Orleans, usually during the two month period leading up to Mardi Gras. New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival co-founder Quint Davis produced and financed the release, hand picking a band to accompany the Indians in the studio. The Wild Magnolias went on to record several LPs in the same vein, and they continue to record and perform around the world.

Their success also inspired several other New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian tribes to update their sound, paving the way for critically acclaimed recordings by The Wild Tchoupitoulas and The Guardians of the Flame. Though many consider the modernization of street chants a blasphemous disregard of tradition, the music has actually been in a constant state of change since its genesis.<sup>1</sup>

The music of the Mardi Gras Indians has often been neglected by writers who have focused on the spirituality of the men, the sociological aspects of the gatherings, and the laborious art form of designing and sewing the elaborate costumes. There are, however, a handful of notable sources that touch on the music. In the early 1970s, David Draper conducted some fascinating research for his doctoral dissertation at Tulane University.<sup>2</sup> Photographer Michael P. Smith, who began documenting Indian parades and rehearsals in 1970 for the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University, includes a very brief chapter on the music in *Mardi Gras Indians*.<sup>3</sup> New Orleans music writer Jason Berry comments extensively on the music of The Wild Magnolias and The Wild Tchoupitoulas in his survey.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quint Davis, interview with author, November 2001 (Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

<sup>2</sup> David Elliott Draper, "The Mardi Gras Indians: the Ethnomusicology of Black Associations in New Orleans," Master thesis, Tulane University, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Michael P. Smith, with forward by Alan Govenar, *Mardi Gras Indians* (Gretna.: Pelican Publishing Company, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Jason Berry, Tad Jones, and Jonathan Foose, *Up From the Cradle of Jazz: New Orleans Music Since World War II* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986).



Mardi Gras Indian by Harry Souchon (1959)

More recently, George Lipsitz, a professor of American studies at the University of Minnesota, has viewed the music and culture as a collective memory of African and African-American shared stories.<sup>5</sup>

Several other articles and books include information on Mardi Gras Indian music, but a comprehensive study has yet to be published. No one from within the Mardi Gras Indian community has attempted any formal research on their own often insular activities, and outside researchers face a difficult challenge in documenting them. Though the Indian parades are safer now than they have ever been, on occasion they reach a fever pitch, inciting explosive behavior. Injury and death due to

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<sup>5</sup> George Lipsitz, "Mardi Gras Indians: Carnival and Counter-Narrative in Black New Orleans," *Cultural Critique*, vol. 10 (1988); reprinted in George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

accident or acts of violence occur often enough to remain a deterrent.

Possibly the most difficult obstacle in researching the Indians is receiving their cooperation. Many Indians feel they should be compensated by those who profit from images and descriptions of them. There are dues to be paid to the Indian associations for burial insurance and other assistance, and the costumes often cost thousands of dollars to sew, with no public or private monetary support. In the foreword to Smith's *Mardi Gras Indians*, folklorist Alan Govenar commented on the conundrum. While the tradition should be documented and promoted by researchers, who naturally should be paid for their work, it also seems logical that Indians deserve compensation for what amounts to public displays of folk art. At this time, there is no compromise in sight and few members are able to survive on their Indian activities alone.

Formal associations of Mardi Gras Indians, organized in "tribes," have been traced back to the post-Reconstruction period of the 1880s in New Orleans.<sup>6</sup> A full history of this cultural tradition is beyond the scope of this article, but it is worth noting that Native Americans and slaves had been mingling over 100 years earlier in a public marketplace.<sup>7</sup> Later known as Congo Square, the spot was considered sacred ground by several Indian tribes, such as the Houma and Chitimacha, who

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<sup>6</sup> Michael P. Smith, "Behind the Lines: the Black Mardi Gras Indians and the New Orleans Second Line," *Black Music Research Journal*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Spring 1994), 43-73, 55 note 6.

<sup>7</sup> Jerah Johnson, "New Orleans's Congo Square: An Urban Setting for Early African-American Culture Formation," *Louisiana History*, vol. XXXII, no. 2 (Spring 1991), pp. 117-157.

performed ritual corn dances on the site. Indians were congregating on the space to sell their wares when groups of slaves were permitted to do the same around 1750. A collegial relationship existed between the two oppressed cultures, and many descendants from this period in New Orleans claim mixed parentage of black and Indian. "Because most African slaves brought to Louisiana were males, great numbers married Indian women," wrote historian Jerah Johnson.<sup>8</sup> The slaves came principally from the Bambara culture of Senegal, with a history of masking in ornamental costumes not too different from traditional Native American garb. On Sundays in the early 1800s, African ring dances were recreated in the open plaza, using percussion instruments similar to those Mardi Gras Indians play today.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of the 19th century, the "Wild West" shows of Buffalo Bill Cody and others, which often played to mixed audiences in New Orleans, most certainly influenced the development of black Indian tribes.<sup>10</sup> In the harsh climate of post-Reconstruction, the image of the Indian recalled the initial genocide carried out by white Americans and stood as a symbol of courage to working-class blacks. A tradition emerged that continues every Mardi Gras day, when fifteen to thirty men parade in Indian costume, using music and dance to attract a "second line" of



Mardi Gras Indian by Harry Souchon (1958)

followers that become active participants in the music, beating on bottles and tambourines through the city's back streets.

The first recording related to Mardi Gras Indians came in 1927 from a traditional New Orleans jazz group, Louis Dumaine's Jazzola Eight. The title of Dumaine's instrumental "To-Wa-Bac-A-Wa" is taken from one of the oldest Indian songs, "Two-Way-Pocky-Way," but there is no audible connection to the music of the Indians.

In his historic Library of Congress sessions with Alan Lomax in 1938, Jelly Roll Morton referred to the tribal gatherings on Mardi Gras day and actually did sing a bit of the traditional chant, transcribed as "T'ouwais, bas Q'ouwais." New Orleans jazz guitarist and singer Danny Barker recorded four Indian songs, including "Indian Red" and "Corinne Died on the Battlefield," for his King Zulu label around 1949. "Indian Red" is given a brass band

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Cable, George Washington. "The Dance in Place Congo & Creole Slave Songs," originally published in *Century Magazine*, 1886. Reprinted by Faruk von Turk (New Orleans, 1974).

<sup>10</sup> Berry, 1986; Govenor, in Smith, *Mardi Gras*; and Lipsitz.

treatment, but the other three songs favor the emerging style of rhythm & blues, setting the tone for the next 20 years as various R&B singers recorded material with Mardi Gras Indian themes. In 1953, Professor Longhair spiced up his song "Tipitina" with the lyric "Ooda Malla Walla Halla," and R&B singer James "Sugarboy" Crawford had a local hit with the old chant "Jock-A-Mo." Eleven years later, The Dixie Cups re-cut the tune as "Iko, Iko," and Longhair recorded "Big Chief," an original song written by guitarist Earl King that utilized Mardi Gras Indian colloquialisms.

These songs reveal two patterns that evolved in the use of Mardi Gras Indian vernacular in popular forms: Indian chants transferred literally to R&B (as recorded by Crawford and The Dixie Cups) or phrases and themes borrowed from the Mardi Gras Indian vernacular to create new compositions (as written by Earl King, Longhair and others). But with the exception of field recordings made of members from various tribes by folklorist Samuel Charters in 1956, all Indian-flavored music released before 1970 was performed by "non-Indians."

In 1944, Theodore Emile "Bo" Dollis was born in the 1900 block of Jackson Avenue in the Central City section of New Orleans. One of the most fertile neighborhoods in the history of black music, jazzmen like Buddy Bolden, Kid Ory, and the Dodds brothers had made their home there in prior generations. It was also a hotbed for "uptown" Mardi Gras Indian tribes, who often clashed with "downtown" tribes on the "battlefield." The location has been variously described as "at Perdido St.,"

<sup>11</sup> "around Earhart", <sup>12</sup> "near Magnolia and Melpomene", <sup>13</sup> and at "Claiborne and Poydras Streets."<sup>14</sup> Plotting these intersections on an early 20<sup>th</sup> century street map of New Orleans reveals their proximity to the New Basin Canal. On Mardi Gras morning in the 1920s and 1930s, the spot also served as the point of debarkation for the city's premier black Mardi Gras krewe, the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club. In the early 1950s, the canal was drained and destroyed, and the surrounding area has changed drastically over the years with the construction of an Interstate in the 1960s and the Louisiana Superdome in the 1970s.

The New Basin Canal acted as a line of demarcation between the uptown and downtown tribes, where many men lost their lives fighting in turf wars known as "humbugs" on Mardi Gras day. The most feared chief in the neighborhood during Dollis' youth was Brother Timber of the Creole Wild West (also referred to as Brother Tillman in several sources). "When I heard an Indian gang coming, I thought it was Brother Timer and I used to shoot inside," says Dollis. "He was one of the most dangerous." Bo eventually began following his neighbors Joe and George King, who paraded in costume, or "masked," with the Creole Wild West.

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<sup>11</sup> Theodore Emile "Bo" Dollis. Interview with author, November, 2001 (Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

<sup>12</sup> Davis.

<sup>13</sup> Bill Winn, "Here Come The Indians," *New Orleans Magazine*, February 1974, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> Jeff Hannusch, *I Hear you Knockin': the Sound of New Orleans Rhythm and Blues* (Ville Platte: Swallow Publications, 1985), p. 262.



Bo Dollis

"All my fear just went away about Indians. I just wanted to be like them," he says.<sup>15</sup>

Bo's father, James Dollis, Sr., was an upstanding cabinetmaker and forbade his son to mask with the Indians because of their violent nature. But on Mardi Gras morning 1957, Bo left home and headed straight for his friend's house where he had been sewing a costume in secret for months. Later in the day, James spotted Bo with The Wild Magnolias, one of the more recently formed tribes, but never spoke of the incident. His son continued masking and was voted chief in 1964.

James may well have realized that the worst of the battles were over. As early as the 1930s, the focus of the tribal face-offs had shifted from the toughest man to the prettiest costume. For the 1945 collection *Gumbo Ya Ya*

Robert McKinney noted of the Golden Blades, "ten years ago the various tribes actually fought when they met... today the tribes are all friendly."<sup>16</sup> He even transcribed a song that signaled the change, with the repeated phrase "shootin' don't make it, no no no." The next round of chiefs, like Bo and his downtown peer Allison "Tootie" Montana, promoted unity among the various factions. The emergence of this new spirit may also have been a reaction to increased law enforcement, as police began to crack down on the battles.<sup>17</sup> But the competitive nature of the Indians did not simply dry up like the canal, it was redirected to other activities. "Oh yeah, we [still] fight," says Dollis, but

<sup>16</sup> Lyle Saxon and Robert Tallant, with Robert McKinney, "Kings, Baby Dolls, Zulus Saxon and Queens," *Gumbo Ya Ya: Folk Tales of Louisiana* (Boston: 1945), (authorship is given on page vii of the introduction).

<sup>17</sup> Lipsitz.

<sup>15</sup> Dollis.

“with a needle and thread.” Modern day Indians also use street dancing as a symbolic form of combat. This change in attitudes may represent the most important transformation the Indians made in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it is by no means the only one.

On his initiation in 1957, Bo was faced with the task of learning the fifteen or twenty songs in the Wild Magnolias repertoire. Starting out with the repetitive response choruses, he was soon taking the lead, improvising long, spiraling lines in songs that lasted up to an hour.

*Well the funniest thing that I ever seen  
It was an Indian hollering at the sewing  
machine  
Oh the only thing make the white folks  
mad  
People we got some that they wish they  
had.*<sup>18</sup>

In the communal spirit of the music, the call-and-response singing of the chief and his tribe has always been accompanied by a wide array of percussion instruments. Since the earliest documented gatherings, tambourines have been the driving rhythmic force, with cowbells, bottles, sticks and other improvised instruments adding the accents.<sup>19</sup> In the 1960s, conga drums made their first appearance and the bass drum soon followed, igniting a backlash from traditional chiefs.<sup>20</sup> While the instruments were

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<sup>18</sup> Excerpt from “Shallow Water,” sung by Bo Dollis, transcribed by Draper, 1973.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel J. Crowley, “The Traditional Masks of Carnival,” etc., *Caribbean Quarterly* 4, nos. 3-4 (1956).

<sup>20</sup> Davis.

always percussive, the only constant appears to be the presence of the tambourine. Other instruments, like the jawbones and gourds of yesterday or the once-controversial congas and bass drums, have come and gone depending on availability, the preferences of the time, and economic limitations.

Many of the songs performed today pre-date documentation of Indian music, possibly going back as far as the 1800s. Every Indian has come to know “Two-Way-Pocky-Way” and “Indian Red.” Other songs, such as “Shallow Water” and “Fire Water,” can be dated to the 1960s as extensions of the tradition.<sup>21</sup> Draper commented on the constantly shifting repertoire of several tribes, eventually concluding that “the musical repertoire does not represent a static set of songs. New pieces are occasionally added, using older examples as their models on a formal level. A differing set of words, for example, creates a totally new song for the Indian. New additions appear to have a replacive, rather than additive function in terms of total repertoire.”

Though the actual number may vary over time, and different tribes prefer different songs, it is clear that material comes and goes. “Most all the songs is similar,” says Dollis. “You could take ‘Ooh Na Ney,’ ‘Two-Way-Pocky-Way’ or ‘Meet the Boys on the Battlefront,’ ‘Big Chief Got a Golden Crown’ – all of ‘em, you just take and put a new label on it... the beat is almost the same. If you ever come to Indian practice, it’s that same type of beat.”

An example can be made with the song “Cora Died on the Battlefield.” First recorded in the late 1940s (as “Corrine Died...”), the song stretches

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<sup>21</sup> Draper; Dollis.

back even further. Paul Longpre of the Golden Blades tribe said the song referred to a woman, Cora Anne, who masked as a queen with the Battlefield Hunters and was killed in a crossfire with the Wild Squatoolas.<sup>22</sup> Passed down through the generations, "Cora Died on the Battlefield" was updated and modified by Dollis during the funeral procession for John "Scarface" Williams, an Indian who was stabbed and killed in Dollis' neighborhood on March 3, 1972.<sup>23</sup> "[Williams] had the first, that I knew of, Mardi Gras Indian jazz funeral when Indians came out and dressed and had Mardi Gras Indian music," says original Wild Magnolias producer and manager Quint Davis. "Bo started singing about John Williams and he said, 'Brother John is gone.' He created a new song right there."<sup>24</sup>

Dollis, who would record "Corey Died on the Battlefield" on his debut LP a few years later, never recorded "Brother John" but the song was further modified and released as "Brother John is Gone" by The Wild Tchoupitoulas in 1976. Vocalist Cyril Neville received the composer credit, exemplifying the difficulty involved in tracking down the sources of Mardi Gras Indian music. Nearly every recorded Indian song from Danny Barker to The Dixie Cups to The Meters is credited to the performer with little regard to its actual origins. Until there were financial considerations, authorship simply wasn't an issue. As Lipsitz states, "unlike the Euro-American musical tradition which places

a premium on individual authorship of finite texts, the African tradition, manifest in Mardi Gras Indian music, values dialogue and conversation between artists and audiences in order to adapt old texts to new situations."<sup>25</sup>

In a conversation with author Jason Berry, Bo stressed the importance of music as a tool in continuing the "mythic tradition" of the Indians. Commentary on current events is placed side by side with the shared memories of ancestors who beat handmade drums at Congo Square, or died on the battlefield on a Mardi Gras morning long ago. The interpretive experience of the chiefs and their songs has never focused on preserving the literature, but extending it. "There's a lot of old traditional music that came down, but everybody - the only thing they do is put their experience in it. They put what they feel into it," says Dollis. "I just made mine commercial and just put a lot of electronic instruments - guitar, piano, whatever - and that's how you have it."

Dollis is referring to the groundbreaking turn of events that occurred in 1970, when one of the last traditional elements to yield to progress - the musical accompaniment - finally gave way. The impetus of the change came in the form of a white college student from uptown New Orleans. Quint Davis, the son of a prominent architect and philanthropist, was a student at Tulane University who worked at the Hogan Jazz Archive when he attended his first Mardi Gras Indian practice in the late 1960s. The Sunday rehearsals leading up to Mardi Gras were restricted to tribal members, and membership was historically limited to African-American men. Davis was

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<sup>22</sup> Berry, 1986.

<sup>23</sup> "Woman Is Shot to Death..." *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, March 5, 1972, p. 2 (includes death of John Williams).

<sup>24</sup> Davis.

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<sup>25</sup> Lipsitz.



Bo Dollis with the Wild Magnolias

introduced to the secretive culture by Jules Cahn, an elderly Jewish real estate magnate who had a passion for the street life of New Orleans and filmed many parades and events with his own movie camera. Cahn and Davis were among a handful of whites that gained admittance into the groups as the humbugs dwindled and the Indians became respected citizens in the community. The men were also part of a long line of white New Orleanians attempting to document and promote local black music and culture, as Richard Allen and William Russell had previously done with traditional jazz for the Hogan Jazz Archive.

When Davis wasn't bringing his reel-to-reel tape recorder to Wild Magnolias rehearsals or searching for the mythical pianist Professor Longhair, he was laying the groundwork for the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, which he co-founded in 1970. (It was Richard Allen who put Davis and co-founder Alison Miner in contact with

George Wein, the promoter of the prestigious Newport Jazz Festival, to launch what is now a New Orleans institution.) A preliminary concert was given at Tulane University in the spring of 1970, featuring Bo Dollis' Wild Magnolias and a band led by Wilson Turbinton, known as Willie Tee. Tee was a top New Orleans funk musician with a background in modern jazz, bringing in musicians like Rahsaan Roland Kirk and Gerry Mulligan for performances at his Jazz Workshop throughout the 1960s. "Willie had a trio, he was playing an upright piano," says Davis. "The Indians then came on and were wailing and Willie got up and started playing with them and was just able to improvise his sort of brand of New Orleans R&B, jazz flavored funk... that was the creation of some modern form of music that matched instruments and Mardi Gras Indian music. It just happened improvisationally and it was phenomenal."

Since his first encounter with Mardi Gras Indians, Davis had dreamed

of finding a way to capture the music and present it to the public. "Every Indian practice is in a bar with a jukebox. The jukebox always played until it's time to jam. Then you unplug the juke box and you have Indian music and then you plug it back in while they were breaking and it plays, then you unplug it, then they jam again, then you plug it back in. My idea was to bridge that gap." The serendipitous meeting of Dollis' street chants and Turbinton's modern, melodic funk was the catalyst Davis had been waiting for. Using the same formula local R&B artists had tried for years, the Indians were finally making an attempt to enter the commercial marketplace. Previously, they had no avenues to earn a living with their craft or even recoup a portion of the money spent on costumes.

Davis assembled a band and rented out a rehearsal space for a few practice sessions. Willie Tee stayed on piano and organ while Joseph "Zigaboo" Modeliste, the renowned drummer from The Meters, followed the beat set out by the hand percussion. Zigaboo came from uptown New Orleans and had an innate connection to the rhythms of the street. Bassist George French was raised in the jazz tradition by his father, Papa Albert French of the Original Tuxedo Jazz Band, and played jazz and R&B with his brother, drummer Bob French.

Among the handful of Indians playing and singing was Bo Dollis' childhood friend, Monk Boudreaux. Boudreaux was a chief of another uptown tribe, The Golden Eagles, and still sings with The Wild Magnolias today. Dollis and Davis settled on a song, "Handa Wanda," and the disparate group of men headed to a modest Baton Rouge recording studio.

When Modeliste, Tee, French, and the Indians all assembled together in the studio, Dollis began with a typical stop-time introduction, flailing his tambourine and shouting:

*Indians! (Yeah!)*

*Indians from Wild Magnolia won't bow  
Said uptown rulers and downtown too  
Well the Wild Magnolias got Indian blue  
Said Handa Wanda you han on day*

With a smack of Zigaboo's snare drum, the band entered with a relentless one-chord vamp driven by the percussion battery of Dollis, Boudreaux, and a handful of tribesmen. At the end of the song, the band dropped out as the Indians continued to chant and beat their instruments, recreating the authentic sounds heard in the street. Davis was content with the first attempt, but the take was over seven minutes, far too long to fit on one side of a 45 record. He called for another take, but Zigaboo – a local legend, used to star treatment - had already packed up his drums and headed out the door. At a mixing session a month later, the song was split into two parts, one on each side. A piano was added to the mix and the record came out on Davis' own Crescent City Records in time for Mardi Gras, 1971.

No one involved with The Wild Magnolias could claim that the release of "Handa Wanda" set the world on fire. But the record soon earned a reputation for filling the dance floor at clubs and parties in the tight-knit New Orleans musical community.<sup>26</sup> White musicians and scenesters picked up on the tune, many becoming aware of the Indians for the first time. The black community also

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<sup>26</sup> Bruce Raeburn, conversation with author, 2001.

responded, as David Draper commented in 1973. "For the last couple of years, this record has been prominent on the black radio programs in New Orleans, and is a popular song on the jukeboxes in black bars... the prospects of commercialism of the Indian songs seems imminent." Indeed, the seed had been planted for the public's acceptance of Mardi Gras Indian chants and The Wild Magnolias were at the forefront.

If the first commercial recording by Mardi Gras Indians was indicative of the constant evolution of their tradition, the mere existence of the song "Handa Wanda" is yet another example. Conceived by Dollis himself, the melody and meter are essentially borrowed from the chant "Shallow Water," with new words added. Though Finn Wilhelmsen wrote that "Handa wanda *o mambo*" meant "I ain't lookin' for no trouble but I ain't gonna run",<sup>27</sup> Dollis said the words ("Handa Wanda *oh mama*") simply sounded good together.<sup>28</sup> The language the Indians use in their chants – a hybrid mix of Creole French, English, and nonsense phrases – is worthy of a complete and careful study on its own. Wilhelmsen's reading of the lyrics indicates a scholarly desire to extract a specific meaning from his subject, when words and phrases are chosen, rather, for their impact, effect, or alliterative qualities. As Lipsitz states, "to search for a static and literal meaning for each Mardi Gras Indian phrase is to misread gravely their playful and deliberately ambiguous language."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Finn Wilhelmsen, "Verbal, Body, and Territoriality Communication Concepts Among the Mardi Gras Indians," cited in Berry, 1986, p. 32.

<sup>28</sup> Dollis.

<sup>29</sup> Lipsitz.

An interesting comparison can be made between the "Handa Wanda" single, a 1990 recording of "Shallow Water" by the Magnolias, and another version of "Shallow Water" recorded by Monk Boudreaux and his Golden Eagles in 1988. Each song sounds rooted in tradition, but remains unique in emphasis, instrumentation, and lyrical content. All songs are in 4/4 meter, but each accents different beats in different ways. The first recording of "Handa Wanda" is an extension of traditional Mardi Gras Indian street rhythms with added emphasis on beats 2 and 4 by Zigaboo's bass drum. The rhythm section is straightforward and simple and follows the rhythms of the tambourines and chants. "Shallow Water, Oh Mama," recorded by Dollis and the Magnolias 20 years later, features the Rebirth Brass Band and their funky adaptation of the New Orleans "parade beat." The accented beat is played on the snare drum, falling on the upbeat of "4." Overall, the piece has the lilting Caribbean feel that brass bands often incorporate. Though the meter of Dollis' phrasing is similar to "Handa Wanda," he's often behind the beat, in keeping with the "lazy" cadence of bass drum, snare drum, and tuba.

The Golden Eagles recording was made in the H&R bar, a Central City rehearsal spot for many tribes, and was the first commercial recording produced specifically to duplicate the traditional street chants. After a long introduction typical of Indian rehearsals and parades, "Shallow Water" begins at an accelerated tempo, faster than the Magnolias' versions but still appropriate for marching. The beat is held down by the bass drum, with the emphasis spread across all four downbeats, slightly

favoring the "1" and "3." Tambourines, cowbells, and bottles fill in the gaps, with a Latin-flavored clave rhythm occasionally emerging. By the end of the song, the bass drum has begun to emphasize the upbeat of "4," in the style of the New Orleans parade beat.

The three versions of this song show the versatility of Mardi Gras Indian music. While the Golden Eagles' version is purposefully the most authentic in instrumentation, as bass drum has been added and the words have clearly changed, it differs greatly from transcriptions made by Draper in the early 1970s. Of course "Shallow Water" already represents an extension of tradition, as it was written in the 1960s, over 40 years after the first reference to an Indian song on record. Field recordings made by Draper and Davis prior to the commercial success of "Handa Wanda" would undoubtedly reveal further variances but, again, it is clear that precise preservation of the tradition is not a top priority for the Indians.

By 1973 a burgeoning interest in Mardi Gras Indians was underway in pockets around the country and beyond. The Wild Magnolias and their music had sparked much of the curiosity, and Davis was able to secure a record contract with the French label Barclay, distributed in the U.S. by Polydor. At Studio in the Country in rural Bogalusa, Louisiana - the state's first world-class studio - French producer Philippe Rault met with a band assembled by Willie Tee, who was appointed as musical director for the LP. There was a lot of money at stake for this virtually untested form of music, and the pressure to make the music more commercial was high. Tee says Davis and Rault were "thinking in terms of making them a commercial act and not

to just keeping it in the vein of people seeing it as a Mardi Gras thing. I think that's what they wanted us to do."<sup>30</sup>

In order to perfect every detail of the musical accompaniment, the backing tracks were recorded first, without the input of Dollis or his men. "Willie put it together, the music," says Dollis. "I would go in and sing after Willie put the music down." The 45 of "Handa Wanda" had essentially placed a rhythm section behind the traditional chant, but the LP sessions featured complex arrangements and chord changes played on synthesizers, saxophones, and wah-wah guitars. "Handa Wanda" was recorded in this new format and the difference is immediately noticeable. After an introduction that is nearly identical to the first recording, sessionman Alfred "Uganda" Roberts taps out a new beat on the congas. When Tee's regular drummer Larry Panna enters, the bass drum falls squarely on the "1," not on "2" and "4." The sixteenth-notes played by the tambourine on the 45 have shifted to "straight-time" eighth notes on the hi-hat. Along with the effected guitars, the beat suggests James Brown-style funk, and the tambourines and Indian hand percussion are completely absent.

Other songs performed on the record include inherited material like "Two-Way-Pocky-Way" and "Golden Crown," as well as an original composition by Willie Tee, "Smoke My Peace Pipe." Chosen as the first single, the song uses chord changes far outside the realm of traditional Indian chants, laid over a drum pattern that is closer to disco than funk or R&B. The lyrics, with

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<sup>30</sup> Wilson Turbinton interview with Jason Berry, March, 1982 (Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

the combined cliches of the Native American peace pipe and marijuana smoking, have nothing to do with authentic Mardi Gras Indian themes.

The resulting LP, *The Wild Magnolias*, is simultaneously exciting and disturbing, depending on the threshold of the listener. In order to get the Indians' music across to a broader public, the local instrumental and rhythmic elements associated with them were removed. Yet the team was marching through uncharted territory – creating a completely new sound that displaced the traditional chants from their natural environment, resulting in a hybrid mix of styles. From a commercial standpoint, the recording makes perfect sense. There is a long history in the music business of “dressing up” or “watering down” artists to make their music more palatable to the broader public. While traditionalists may cry foul, Dollis doesn't seem to mind. “[Tee] was always the leader of the band because I didn't know nothing about no music. I couldn't tell a B flat or an E minor,” he says. Asked if he saw himself as a professional musician, Dollis replied “nah, I never thought I could be recording, I always thought me as like a street singer. Oh, I could do that ‘Two-Way-Pocky-Way,’ but Quint Davis heard me sing one night at Indian practice. He said, ‘you have a distinguished voice’ ... next thing I know he got Willie Tee to put a band together and we went to the studio.”

The release of *The Wild Magnolias* also coincided with a movement in the record industry away from the single format and Top 40 radio, and towards LPs and Album Oriented Radio, or AOR. New, free-form FM stations were taking more chances, and Polydor hoped the Indian music would

catch on. Though it was never a big seller, the LP essentially fulfilled the group's commercial goals and got them some notoriety. The Wild Magnolias, with Willie Tee's band billed as The New Orleans Project, toured Europe and the U.S.,<sup>31</sup> opening for Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight, and jazz organist Jimmy Smith at Carnegie Hall. Positive reviews appeared in New Orleans periodicals as well as the *New York Times*, which, in 48 words, summed up the group. “Backed by an electrified rock and blues quintet called The New Orleans Project, the Wild Magnolias mixed chants and dances that are alleged to have their roots in the African dances held in Congo Square before the Civil War with contemporary rhythms and sounds of the five instrumentalists.”<sup>32</sup> The change in audience came with a change in attitudes for Dollis and the Magnolias. Accustomed to the second line followers playing and dancing along to the rhythms in the street, the musicians expected active involvement from the crowds, which were often seated or too shocked to participate. “I thought, ‘this is the wrong type of crowd here for our music,’” said Dollis of the Carnegie Hall concert. He warmed up after noticing “about two or three rows back from the stage, I seen them tapping their feet. I figured the people I couldn't see, they might be tapping their feet too.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Clare Jupiter, “Boogie-ing with the Wild Magnolias,” *New Orleans States-Item*, October 5, 1974.

<sup>32</sup> John S. Wilson, “Dickenson Wields a Witty Trombone,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1974 (includes a review of a Wild Magnolias performance).

<sup>33</sup> Dollis.



The Meters (1973)

In 1975, The Wild Magnolias and The New Orleans Project recorded a second album, *They Call Us Wild*, which wasn't released in the U.S. until 1994 due to contractual problems. The group reduced their activities to local performances until 1990, when the album *I'm Back at Carnival Time* arrived. Billed as Bo Dollis and The Wild Magnolias, with a different backing band, the group has recorded and toured extensively ever since.

Equally important as the relatively consistent output of The Wild Magnolias is the trend they instigated with the help of Quint Davis, Willie Tee, and others. In 1976, Island Records released a benchmark album by another Indian tribe, The Wild Tchoupitoulas. Retired merchant marine George Landry had masked with Dollis and The Wild Magnolias for several years, eventually deciding to lead his own tribe as Chief Jolly. Jolly was the uncle of the musical brothers Art, Charles, Aaron, and Cyril

Neville, and had always encouraged the boys to form a group together.<sup>34</sup> *The Wild Tchoupitoulas*, recorded at New Orleans' SeaSaint studios with producer Allen Toussaint, marked the first occasion that all four brothers recorded together, with Jolly handling most of the lead vocals.

Organist and pianist Art Neville's group, The Meters, served as the house band for the session, with Zigaboo on drums, George Porter on bass, and guitarist Leo Nocentelli. Similar in organization to Willie Tee's band, The Meters were much more rooted in New Orleans R&B, soul, and funk styles and were able to redirect some of the innovative aspects of The Wild Magnolias towards a more organic sound. Accompanied by members of the Wild Tchoupitoulas tribe, the session captured the best elements of both the street parades and the initial "Handa Wanda" recording. The kinship of the family mirrored the communal relationship of the tribes, while the stacked harmonies sung by the brothers extended the typical unison response calls.

*The Wild Tchoupitoulas* record received universal acclaim inside and outside the city and remains a Mardi Gras classic. Many of the arrangements and altered melodies have filtered down into the street, where the traditional songs are now sung in the style heard on the LP. Though chief Jolly died in 1980 and The Wild Tchoupitoulas never recorded again, the Neville Brothers formed a permanent band, keeping much of the Indian material in their repertoire to this day. The legacy is evident in two

<sup>34</sup> Art, Charles, Aaron and Cyril Neville with David Ritz, *The Brothers* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000).

video documentaries featuring The Wild Tchoupitoulas and the Nevilles, *Always For Pleasure*<sup>35</sup> and *Up From the Cradle of Jazz*.<sup>36</sup>

In 1992, the innovative qualities of the Wild Magnolias and Wild Tchoupitoulas recordings were taken in a different direction by jazz saxophonist Donald Harrison, Jr. and his father, the chief of The Guardians of the Flame. Their collaboration on *Indian Blues* alternated between jazz-inflected Indian songs and more traditional chants, sometimes within the same song. On the traditional side, Harrison, Sr., who had been masking since 1949,<sup>37</sup> handled lead vocals on "Shallow Water" and "Two-Way-Pocky-Way." Pianist Dr. John, who had been featuring Indian songs in his repertoire since the early 1970s, sang and played on jazz arrangements of "Ja-Ki-Mo-Fi-Na-Hay" and Professor Longhair's "Big Chief." Harrison, Jr. stretched out on instrumental versions of the standards "Indian Red" and "Iko, Iko" with jazzmen Cyrus Chestnut – piano, Phil Bowler – bass, and Carl Allen – drums. But on "Hu-Ta-Nay" the father and son, jazz band, and Dr. John came together to form a glorious melting pot of New Orleans influences.

The term melting pot has always been used to describe New Orleans music. From the ring dances of slaves to society dance bands, through jazz and R&B, stylistic cross-fertilization has always been present. Just as jazz scholars have argued about what

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<sup>35</sup> Les Blank, *Always for Pleasure*, video recording, El Cerrito, CA: 1978.

<sup>36</sup> Berry, 1980.

<sup>37</sup> "Donald Harrison Sr., Mardi Gras Indian," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, December 3, 1998, p. B4.

ingredients are needed for an antique recording to qualify as "traditional" New Orleans jazz, issues of authenticity abound in discussions of modern Mardi Gras Indian recordings. Though the presence of melodic instruments and drum sets *did* alter the presumably purer sound of Mardi Gras Indian music, it is not so much an abandonment of the tradition as an inevitable updating of it. The addition of saxophones in brass band parades or the Afro-Latin influence in early jazz rhythms can be seen as a parallel to the introduction of the piano, guitar, and drums, and the shift to popular dance beats in Mardi Gras Indian music.

As long as it has been documented, Mardi Gras Indian music and culture has evolved as consistently as any other American vernacular tradition. Even the handmade suits are refashioned every year - the same color or design is never worn two years in a row. Ephemerality is thus endemic to the tradition. In the 1920s and 1930s, the movement away from humbugs and towards pride in the costumes led to a gradual acceptance of Indians by the community. The consistent evolution of musical repertoire has always been evident, as noted by McKinney<sup>38</sup> and Draper.<sup>39</sup> The adaptation of lyrics to reflect current events is inherently tied to the changing repertoire, as is the improvisation or composition of new material, including "Handa Wanda." Musically, the addition of the conga and bass drums in the 1960s illustrates the changing backdrop of percussion instruments that began with the movement from handmade gourds and jawbones to

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<sup>38</sup> Saxon and Tallant.

<sup>39</sup> Draper.

tambourines and cowbells. Finally, the controversial inclusion of melodic and electric instruments in Mardi Gras Indian recordings not only changed the texture of the music, but also increased the visibility of the tribes, drawing interest from outside the working-class black community. Within the community, the popularity of the music has helped elevate the image of Mardi Gras Indian culture. There has been a proliferation of new tribes<sup>40</sup> and increased membership in existing tribes, while the once-feared parades have become celebrated events.

The public ritual of Mardi Gras Indian ceremonies is over 100 years old, and to some extent the chanting and dancing represents an ancient African memory that has made many twists and turns but remains unbroken. The music associated with the Indians has, it seems, changed over the years, from the traditional jazz of the 1920's, through the rhythm and blues of the 1950's, up to the New Orleans funk of the 1970's and after. But, if one wishes to hear Mardi Gras Indian music in its initial format, the tribes still gather with tambourines, bottles, and sticks every Mardi Gras morning.

**Matt Sakakeeny**

#### Select Listening Examples:

The initial version of "Handa Wanda," released as Crescent City #25, is currently only available on the CD *Mardi Gras in New Orleans* from Mardi Gras Records #MG1001, 1987.

*The Wild Magnolias*, 1974 debut LP (Polydor LP PD-6026) is available through Polydor as Barclay, France #314-519 418-2, 1993.

*They Call us Wild* (Barclay, France, 1975) the second Wild Magnolias is available through

Polydor as Barclay, France #314-519 419-2, 1994.

*I'm Back at Carnival Time*, The Wild Magnolias, Rounder, #CD-2094, 1990.

78 rpm recordings by Danny Barker on the Zulu label (1949) are housed at the Tulane University Hogan Jazz Archive and have been reissued on *Jazz a la Creole*, GHB Records #BCD-50, 2000.

*Music of New Orleans, Vol. 1: Music of the Streets: Music of Mardi Gras*, includes field recordings by of Mardi Gras Indians by Samuel Charters, Folkways #FA-2461, 1956.

Professor Longhair's recordings have been collected as *Fess-Anthology* on Rhino Records #71502, 1993.

*The Wild Tchoupitoulas*, (Island #9630, 1976) has been reissued on Island's Mango division #1625399082, 1991.

The Golden Eagles Featuring Monk Boudreaux recorded *Lightning and Thunder* for Rounder #CD 2073, 1988.

Donald Harrison's *Indian Blues* was released by Candid, #CCD 79514, 1992.

#### Resources not cited in this article:

The Mardi Gras Indian Council of New Orleans: Larry Bannock, director.

The New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation Archives.

Shepard Samuels: WTUL-FM dee-jay.

Tad Jones collection of New Orleans R&B, soul, and funk music at the Hogan Jazz Archive.

<http://www.wildmagnolias.net>

Photo credits: Bo Dollis images courtesy of Bo Dollis; vintage Mardi Gras Indians shots from Harry Souchon Collection; photo of The Meters from Tad Jones Collection.

<sup>40</sup> Lipsitz.