



"The Snow Fox Suit", Photo credit: Button, Graham, 1998

CANVAS &

COLORS:

History of The Big Chief

ABSTRACT

This paper will examine the life's work of one of the most colorful, prettiest, and resilient Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans. From childhood to manhood, in his own words, this is the story of Andrew Jude Martin De Pores Justin, one man's journey as seen through the eye of a needle.

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Canvas and Colors: A History of The Big Chief

Ask a random person what they know about New Orleans and many will answer with “Hurricanes” or “Mardi Gras”! The festivity, the food, the music, the traditions are what makes the annual celebration a favorite of residents and tourists alike. Long after the beads and beignets have been enjoyed, visitors to New Orleans say the Crescent City stays with them. Whether standing in Congo Square where enslaved Africans were openly sold or dining at Antoine’s which opened in the 1840’s, this city is rich in culture and traditions rooted to the African diaspora. The historical significance of New Orleans, Louisiana makes it a center point of the African American experience. On days leading up to Fat Tuesday, the Tuesday before lent, French Creoles, African Americans and yes, the White people of New Orleans from Wards all over the city gather for the annual Krewe of Zulu procession which extends from Claiborne through streets of Downtown New Orleans. This pageant is more than a festival. This essay will explore how, for Black Mardi Gras Indians, the annual cavalcade is a rite of passage. Tribes of Mardi Gras Indians vying for the title of “The Prettiest” sing, dance and make their way down the route, as spectators cheer them on. There is so much more than bright colors and decorated canvases at play here. Using primary sources and timelines, this paper will trace the colorful journey of one New Orleans native from the 6th Ward, from Mardi Gras to manhood. This is the oral history Andrew Jude Martin de Porres Justin, a testament of what it means to be The Big Chief.

During our interview, Mr. Justin, would aim his iPhone at the table where he was working. There were hundreds of pre-thread needles standing like sentries, waiting, as his loyal platoon. Today, instead of plumes and ribbons, his canvases are covered in intricate beadwork depicting scenes from the King James Bible. From Adam and Eve to Michael’s casting Satan from Heaven, each hand selected glass bead, crystal, and gemstone is sewn into the canvas by Mr. Justin. “Look, the true beauty of being a Mardi Gras Indian is when the culture is passed down to a younger. The true beauty of being a man from the Treme, is giving that same culture to another city. The true beauty of that is going to California, and

then, full blossom.” Andrew Jude Martin De Pores Justin’s parents were of French and Caribbean descent. Named for his Grandfather, Andrew Strasser (sp.), Andrew was raised by his Grandmother Geneva Llopis, owner of Carr and Llopis Funeral Home on Dumaine Street. Andrew is one of 8 children. His Grandmother Geneva, whom he lovingly calls “N’nann,” often spoke of how his family came to be in New Orleans.

“My Mama’s Momma was born into slavery,” he shared.

“She was freed by the Emancipation Proclamation at the age of 6. My Grandmother told me in 1619 twenty slaves came to Jamestown, and that I was born the same date the first slaves arrived, August 20th. Once our ancestors passed through

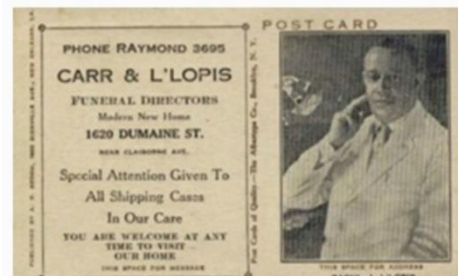


Figure 1 - Carr & Llopis Postcards

‘The Door of No Return’ they would never again see home”. Mr. Justin went on, “when the slaves danced in Congo Square on a Sunday, the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chicksaw, and Seminoles would all be there. The Natives were the ones that would help slaves escape into the swamps. That was agape love. They looked out for one another. The White men would not follow them in there.”

In the Tremé, Blacks, French Creoles, Italians and Native Americans lived together in his community. “When the White man came around, we all looked out for one another”. The family lived in the 6th Ward of New Orleans during the Jim Crow era. After hours, their family business was home to the headquarters of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club. Mardi Gras Indians would congregate on the street in front of the family funeral home at Dumaine and Claiborne. Sometimes things would get heated when rival Chiefs, Flag Boys, Spy Boys and the Baby Dolls got to jawing at one another. According to Justin, knives and razors would get pulled often. “Baby Dolls were some of the prettiest women in the Tremé,” he explained, “They would go down to the docks when the merchant ships come in and take all their money. Touch ‘em though, and let their pimp see it? Woo-WHOO! But that’s how these women

fed their families.” Justin remembers a picture of him dressed in red and gold, as a Second Liner, at the age of 3. The fictive kinship between “cousans” from the Treme, French Creoles, Gypsies, Italians, and blood relatives augmented Justin’s childhood as part the Second Line tradition. “We all got along. It was my uncles I did this with. My family. This is the culture.” Black Mardi Gras Indians mask in honor of the Native Americans who sheltered and shielded the enslaved before, during and after slavery. *Never forget where you come from, so you know where you are going* was N’Nann Geneva’s mantra, and is now Mr. Justin’s. N’naan’s oral tradition continues with him.

“When we rode the bus, there was a piece of wood they called a screen, and there was a little slot it fit in. If we were riding the bus, and a White man wanted that seat, he would take that piece of wood and move it to our seat, and we’d have to move.” That was the ugly reality of the Jim Crow South. When recalling parading down Claiborne with the likes of Dooky Chase, The Square Deals Social and Pleasure Club and the Black Mardi Gras Indians, you could see in his face the joy associated with those memories. “The Zulu’s would load up in their old cars with cranks in the front, and on flatbeds. Marching right behind would be Second Liners, Flambeaux carriers, Brass Bands, and Mardi Gras Indians.” Black Mardi Gras Indians offered lesson plans that no brick-and-mortar institution could offer a young boy from the Tremé. “Dance nigger, dance,” could be heard along the parade route. Even as hooded Klansman towered over them on horseback, heckling them during Lundi Gras, the Monday before Ash Wednesday, Mardi Gras celebrations were joyous. Justin quipped, “The joke was on them ‘cause I sure did pick up all their money! By the end of the parade, we had like \$500 dollars!”

Mr. Justin’s mother and father would leave New Orleans, as many millions had done during The Great Migration out of the South.¹ At age 5, Andrew was left in the care of his Grandmother. While he missed his parents, Geneva Llopis would lay out a cultural, familial, and spiritual foundation that Justin would hold dearest for decades. Raised in the Roman Catholic Church, the family worshipped at St Louis Cathedral, one of the oldest Roman Catholic Churches in the United States.² Mr. Justin went by “Andy”

as a child. His nickname was "Little Onion", a name his Granddaddy coined because young Andy loved onions. Laughing heartily, "I ate them like apples!" His older brother Maurice's nickname was "Knock Out Slim". "Come at him wrong," he said," and he would knock ya ass out!" Justin went on, "I grew up around pimps, drug dealers, murderers, and pedophiles." The people of New Orleans did what they had to do to live in a city that was not always kind to Black people, Native Americans, or anyone non-White. Owning a funeral home, and participating in numerous Jazz Funerals, Justin's Grandmother spoke to him frankly about death. "You weep and mourn when a baby's born, and rejoice at life," she would say. Second Liners dance behind immediate family to celebrate that a loved one is finally free. It was in death that freedom lived, freedom from oppression, the threats to Black lives, and White Supremacy.

In 1956, Geneva Llopis who had Type II Diabetes would become increasingly ill. Her sister, Andy's Aunt, would send for her so that she could care for N'nann. Andy moved with her. "Take care of Little Onion," his Grandpa said, and the two moved to Chicago's South Side. They lived on the 24th floor of the Cabrini Green Public Housing Complex and had to walk up to their unit because the elevators were not safe to use. Mr. Justin was taught to sew by his mother and grandmother. "They'd see holes in my pants and say, BOY! Come here," and immediately point him in the direction of a needle and thread. Young Andy would wear out the knees of his pants playing marbles with his friends, which he loved. He would also learn to sew suits and decorate umbrellas for Mardi Gras at a young age. Mr. Justin loved to play percussion and to this day is an accomplished Congo player. In his youth, he taped together Community Coffee and French Market cans, then would go play over on the North Side. Ms Missy Wallace, a family friend, after seeing Andy's "drums" bought him a set of \$15 Bongos, which back then was a lot.

Andy attended Holy Cross School, where he was mentored by Father George Clemmons, a Black priest. His N’Naan also took him to the *Chicago Tribune* to get what would be his first job, delivering newspapers at age 12. “I had cousins that were Black Panthers, Black Stone Rangers, and Vice Lords,” Justin shared. In James F. Short’s Journal Article, “Youth, Gangs, and Society: A Micro- and Macrosociological Process”, there are many political ideologies and rhetoric associated with the large number of Black Americans migrating to Chicago. “Black and white youths fought countless battles in neighborhoods undergoing racial transition. The white youths often were members of gangs and acutely conscious of “defending” their neighborhoods from the invasion of blacks.”³ Blockbusting and White Flight were growing in number, making room for the new Black middle class settling in the suburbs. Fr. Clemmons taught Black children the truth about the unrest going on at the time. The Catholic Church in Chicago had just a few hundred Black Parishioners in the 1900s. By 1975, Chicago would be home to the second largest Black Catholic population in the country.⁵ Racial tension was brewing in relation to the new Black middle class moving into White areas, like Humboldt where Our Lady of Holy Angels was. “Holy Angels was bombed,” Justin shared. Rumors swirled about attacks being due to the influx of Blacks moving in and invading historically White Catholic Churches. According to Justin, “I got teased for the way I talked.” Fr. Clemmons would say, “Sit down, and beat them with a pencil”. “I wanted to be in the



Figure 2 - Flyer, Artist Chester Commodore, 1972. Source: Chicago Public Library

French choir, because I spoke French.” Justin went on, “Fr. Mann, the White Priest, wouldn’t let me. Then, I wanted to be an Alter boy. Fr. Mann didn’t think I could read good enough.” Fr. Clemmons would say, “show them who you are. Show them who you are, Andy.”

Every Summer in Chicago there would be a parade in Washington Square Park called the Bud Billiken Parade. The entire city would come out, dignitaries and Black celebrities ride down the parade, and the sidewalks deeply packed for the parade. Now,

parading, young Andy knew. He and his brothers would take to the streets, singing the songs of the Black Indians, and play percussion in the park where the parade ended. People from New Orleans of course recognized what they were doing, but for Chicago natives, this would be new. They danced for hours, engaged in the call & response songs from their days on Dumaine and Claiborne. This was Andy's time to shine. "I brought the culture to Chicago, me!" He was the star of the show and loved sharing the Mardi Gras Indian culture with people. "He who teaches, learns twice," he said. In the streets, he could be himself. Andrew would avoid many trappings young Black men faced in Chicago, except for one.

"It was the changing of the mind," Mr. Justin called it. Andrew was 17 when he and 3 friends decided to join the military. "Stop acting a damn fool," N'naan snapped at Justin. "You need me to sign the papers, and I'm not." After signing his own enlistment papers, Andy headed back to the Recruitment Office. "It was me, Benny Jones and 2 other guys, and I was the only one who passed the test. That was messed up!" When he returned home and told N'naan he was going to be a soldier, she was vehemently opposed. "She said, 'the Lord take care of babies and fools, and you are at the top of the list!'" A devout Catholic, Justin put all his faith in the Lord as he headed to Vietnam. "I was a virgin when I went in, and I was a virgin when I got out." Mr. Justin would see combat, and after being shot while on patrol in a rice paddy, be flown to Neubrucke Army Hospital in Germany. Research shows that soldiers in the Vietnam war were disproportionately African American. As stated in the journal article "Race, Casualties, and the Opinion in the Vietnam War", this was due in part to educational deferments, African Americans were clearly overrepresented in the military,⁴ Young Black men were looking for a way out, a hand up. "I used a needle in ways I'm not proud of. When I got out in 1962, all my friends were either in jail, on drugs, or had babies." Andrew came home to Cabrini Green one night, high. His grandmother took one look at him and knew. She asked if he remembered what she had told him before? "Always remember where you come from, so you know where you are going," she said. Then, N'Naan walked over, picked up the phone and called Chicago PD. She told young Andrew and officers

that she did not want to see him again until he was clean. He was taken to the VA Hospital and admitted for Heroin addiction treatment.

“I quit cold turkey. I didn’t want methadone. I didn’t want anything.” Mr. Justin’s doctor was Dr. Nietzsche. “Andrew,” he said, “you will only be hurt in life as long as you want to be.” After rehab, Mr. Justin took a job with Sherwin Williams. According to Mr. Justin, in the early 1970s, due largely in part to the Black Nationalist movement forged by Stokely Carmichael, the paint company was required by the Union to hire 3 Black employees. Mr. Justin was one of those 3. He was hired, and worked for the Lithograph, Photograph International Union.. In 1976, Mr. Justin was married with 2 children, Andrew Jr. and Angela. Justin’s brother – In -Law was attending Westpoint and got kicked out for selling exams. When he returned from Westpoint, decided to relocate to Los Angeles and purchase real estate. “I left Chicago, and never looked back,” he said. Mr. Justin would maintain and manage his family’s properties. Mr. Justin bought in a house on 43rd and Haas, near Vernon in South Central Los Angeles. He and his first wife would divorce soon she became a Jehovah’s Witness. That was not the only reason, but it was a huge point of contention. While it pained him, Justin vowed to “use a needle in a positive way,” and found solace in two things, sewing Indian suits and his Afrocentric Catholic church in the heart of South Central, Los Angeles, St. Brigid. “My beads never talked back,” he said. “St. Brigid was my refuge. It comes a time. I would run from my house on 43rd to St. Brigid on 54th and Western, and then run home after mass.” The African Traditions incorporated into the masses at St. Brigid, including West African Drums during mass felt familiar. Mr. Justin sang, “I love the lord, he heard my cry. Pitied every groan. As I live, when trouble come, I hasten to his thrown.” He also sang the Lord’s prayer as the Indians would sing it in the Treme, pulling from his past, seemed to ease his mind in the present. “I missed my mother and father. All I was feeling, I would put on canvas, and leave it there.”

When both his marriage and business partnerships were severed beyond repair, he surrendered his firearms to the Josephite Priests at his church, afraid of how he might use them. A friend told Mr.

Justin that he had heard the VA Hospital was hiring, so he took the bus to Westwood every single day to inquire about job opportunities. After 3 days of this, when Justin returned to the VA on the fourth day, Thursday, the woman at the front was waiting for him with the new hire paperwork in hand for him to sign. "I have never, in my life, seen a young man come in every day, looking for a job," she said. "When she asked when I could start, I said right now." "No, no!" she said, laughing, "We'll see you on Monday." Mr. Justin worked his way up through the ranks. From laying ceramic tile at the VA, he went back to school to earn his Biomedical Electrical Technology AS Degree, to begin working in the Special Procedure Department as part of the Surgical Unit at the VA Hospital. Mr. Justin was well respected and sought after by doctors who knew he did quality work. A new SPD hire, Miss Kramer, from Biloxi, MS would prove another life test Mr. Justin would be pressed to pass.

From the time she was hired, Miss Kramer would micromanage Mr. Justin, send him for random drug tests indiscriminately. When he finished work too quickly, drug test. If he was not sitting around idle like his counterparts, drug-test. Friendly? Drug test. Upset? Drug test. "This woman was testing my blood and urine all, the time. I finally had to say something." Mr. Justin went to the Director of SPD, Brian Happy, and told Dr. Hamm for whom he also worked. The next time Kramer ordered lab tests Dr. Hamm would accompany Mr. Justin to her office. "You stop sending this man to the lab! He is not on drugs. He is does not drink alcohol." That was the last time a test would be ordered. Mr. Justin would work for the VA for 20 years, retire at 55, and outlast Miss Kramer by a wide margin. This overt racism was just as Mr. Justin experienced a child. The idea no Black man could be talented or trusted, even if he held a Degree, a per view still common among Southern Whites, had made it all the way to West LA.

Black Mardi Gras Indians are working class people of color. Mr. Justin was working full-time and sewing for hours on end. It was not unusual if one suit required \$5000 worth of stones and close to the same in colorful plumes. The Big Chief of the Wild Tremé was responsible for not only for crafting the suits, but the tribe, and preserving tradition. "He who teaches, learns twice," he said. It was after LA-LA

Parade that one of his fellow Second Liners suggested they form a Tribe, and The Wild Tremé Madri Gras Indians came to fruition. “I made suits for St Joseph’s 1995, 1998, 2000, and 2005. The Fire suit made in 2004 would not make it Dumaine Street due to Hurricane Katrina that year. The Wild Tremé Mardi Gras Indians and Shake ‘Em Down Second Liners would win trophies for the The MLK and The LA-LA parades in Los Angeles. In 2000, “The White Suit”, crafted for the Krewe of Zulu Y2K parade weighed a total of 132 lbs when it was finished. Imagine carrying a 132 lb person on your back as you danced through New Orleans, for miles. By standers and rival Chief, at seeing the White Suit told Justin, “Man, you not gonna make it.” After countless man hours of sewing, sorting, ribbons, plumes, stones and sweat, The Big Chief was going to make it. Mr. Justin and the Tribe received numerous accolades for his work The Wild Tremé would appear on stage at the House of Blues for the Academy Awards ceremony honoring Women in Film in 1995. He would also be given the key to the city by Councilman Oliver Thomas and Troy Carter in New Orleans in 2000. Justin says none of these are his proudest moments.

“I have 4 Indian suits back there. I can put one on at any time.” He takes a moment. “This here, this is about pride, determination and resilience.” Mr. Justin wanted to be very clear that masking as a Black Indian is more than dressing up like an Indian, and what the suit really represents “You don’t just put it on,” speaking of the Indian Suit. “You should only be wearing your suit on



Figure 3-Wild Treme Indian Suits, Photo credit: Dr. Jacqueline Le Falle, 2004

St. Joseph’s, Lundi Gras, and that’s it. Not putting it out on the porch, not wearing it for pictures. “Ain’t no way a house is gonna be a float! That is not the culture.” Not unlike the trash talk in front of the funeral home, one rival Chief, called the Big Chief Drew out when Mr. Justin tried to drive this point home about the importance of preserving the tradition. “Justin, if you stay in your lane, you don’t have to worry about the traffic,” one Indian wrote. Big Chief Drew replied, “And, if you stay out of my lane,

you won't have to worry about me runnin' your ass over." While much less dangerous now, it is still common for Indian Chiefs to clash. "I started to be true to myself in Los Angeles" he said. "You have to be your own best friend".

While a parishioner at St. Brigid's, one Lector stood out. The two would become friends, and after a long and patient courtship, he would marry a second time, to his wife of 31 years, Jacqueline. "I'd have to say marrying my wife was my proudest moment." There was a quiet pause as Mr. Justin gathered his thought. "I'm just me. I just want to be loved by my heavenly father, and I want to truly in my heart, in Jesus' name, forgive my father and my mother because I was never raised with them. I was raised by my Grandmother. I don't even know if my parents ever loved me, but I got a lot of love from my wife, and that's all I need right now in life. The love from her and my Almighty Father, I can conquer anything in life I want. Sometimes I'm a little too trusting. I am a good man. I'm loyal to my wife and my family. I'm a God-fearing man. I am in the UCLA Archives & Xavier University Archives in New Orleans, from which I came, for being the Wild Treme Mardi Gras Indian Big Chief. Yeah. This is what I've done." Andrew Justin lives in the West Park Terrace community of Los Angeles. He continues to bead the King James Bible and never stops creating. "I'm a Chief. I'm always going to be a Chief, but right now in Jesus' name, I'm telling the story of The Biggest Chief, on canvas."

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