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The History of Black Mardi Gras: A Celebration of Black History Month & African American Culture in New Orleans

New Orleans Mardi Gras is traditionally thought of as a holiday full of food, fun, and festivities. February, usually the month we celebrate Mardi Gras, is also the time we celebrate Black History month. Much of the tradition and history of Mardi Gras is rooted in New Orleans' rich African American culture. During times of slavery and segregation, the city's Black communities built a carnival culture that lives on in New Orleans today.

One of the most recognizable traditions in the history of Mardi Gras is the Mardi Gras Indians. The Mardi Gras Indians are a staple of New Orleans Mardi Gras. The Mardi Gras Indians began when African slaves brought to the Gulf region were not permitted to participate in Mardi Gras festivities. Dating back to the 1700s, the Mardi Gras Indians preserve African "dress art" and musical heritage. The sewing and beadwork incorporated into Mardi Gras Indian suits are widely considered to be the oldest surviving cultural preservation of traditional African American folk art in North America. The African drumming traditions used by the Mardi Gras Indians were combined with the brass marching band traditions in New Orleans and ultimately led to the birth of jazz.

Zulu, the first Black Mardi Gras organization, was founded in 1909 by the Black communities of New Orleans, who were precluded from joining the carnival parades in the city due to segregation. The organization's original members paraded as a marching club. Since its

founding, the krewe has raised money for African Americans suffering from financial hardships. In 1949, when Louis Armstrong served as king Zulu, the krewe achieved national recognition when Armstrong was featured on cover of *Time Magazine*. In 1969, Zulu made civil rights history when the city of New Orleans granted the organization permission to parade on Canal Street, the historic route of Rex, as an African American carnival organization became part of the city's official Mardi Gras festivities and paraded in a public space historically preserved for white parades. In 1973, Zulu became the first parading krewe to integrate, nineteen years before the 1992 krewe desegregation ordinance was passed in New Orleans to integrate all Mardi Gras krewes, which had remained largely or exclusively white with the exception of a few Black krewes.

One of the most coveted Mardi Gras throws is the "Zulu coconut." Zulu coconuts, originally thrown unpainted, took on their distinctive painted and decorated form in the 1940s. Interestingly, the signature coconut throws were briefly put on hold in the 1980s, due to lawsuits brought by those parade-goers injured by thrown coconuts. But in 1988, the "Coconut Bill" relieved Zulu from liability from coconut-related injuries, and the Zulu coconuts have remained a Zulu tradition and prevalent Mardi Gras custom ever since.

The Krewe of Zulu and the Mardi Gras Indians serve as just two examples of the many ways that Black culture and history have deeply impacted Mardi Gras celebrations. In addition, much of Carnival takes place off the streets at debut Balls, where young ladies are introduced to society. Two of the oldest debut organizations are the Original Illinois Club and the Young Men's Illinois Club, which present a coterie of black debutantes each season.

New Orleans' Black communities have continued to preserve the history of Black Mardi Gras by passing these traditions down to younger and future generations and continuing to promote and further their influence on New Orleans Mardi Gras. For example, in 2013, The Mystic Krewe

of Femme Fatale was founded by African American women for African American women, although the organization welcomes all women.

Black Mardi Gras celebrations pay tribute to the history, strength, and spirit of black New Orleanians. If you're looking to learn more about the history of Black Mardi Gras, Backstreet Cultural Museum on the corner of St. Phillip and North Robertson in Treme is a great place to start! The museum displays these traditions and highlights the history of Black Mardi Gras culture.