

## Mardi Gras Moments: The Backstreet Cultural Museum

By *Janelle Nanos*

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*Last month, IT Editor **Janelle Nanos** traveled to New Orleans to explore the culture and traditions of Mardi Gras. For four days, she spoke with the people behind the masks -- the ones who help make the celebration happen -- to get their stories and insider tips. She'll be blogging about her experiences through February 24th, when the party culminates. Check back for more [Mardi Gras Moments](#) throughout the coming weeks.*



The [Backstreet Cultural Museum](#) deceives upon first glance - its rather plain-looking appearance from the street belies a rainbow of colors that peacock inside. Step through the doors of this eclectic museum and you'll find some of the most fascinating glimpses into the African-American Mardi Gras traditions, from the dazzling feathered costumes of the [Mardi Gras Indians](#), to a detailed photographic history of Jazz Funerals, Second Lines, and the area's Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs. The entire museum has been the life's work of [Sylvester Francis](#), who has devoted most of his adult life to taking photos of the Mardi Gras celebrations.

A bit of a backstory: There is no single event during Mardi Gras, and no single place to take part in the revelry. In the [Tremé section of town](#), you'll find the historically black, "[Under the Bridge](#)" Mardi Gras celebration, and this is where you'll also come across one of the biggest spectacles around - the Mardi Gras Indians.

The history of the Indians is said to have developed from the time when African-American slaves ran away from their owners and were helped by the American Indians who lived in the region. To pay tribute to their support, families would create tribes of their own, and assign members to different roles. If you attend the parade today, you'll see the Chief, who's often the head of the family, and the Wildman, who's there to protect the chief (they typically wear horns). Then there's the trail or "second" who walks behind the chief to protect his back. There are Spyman, Queens and even children that participate as Little Chiefs and Wildmen. If you watch the crowd, you'll probably see a stroller or two decked out in feathers.



The costumes themselves are another story. Each one is painstakingly handcrafted by the men (and it's mostly men) who make them. Many whom I spoke with said that the process can take the entire year, and that being an Indian means relegating your living room permanently to the creation of your costume. They're constructed out of canvas or cardboard, with elaborate beading, jewels, and feathers that are sewn into elegant patterns. Most are crafted in several parts, with a headdress and shoulder pads, a front apron piece for the chest, armbands and leg coverings, and even footwear is elaborately crafted to match the costume. There was a time when the Chiefs of each tribe - and there are about 25 now - used to fight each other, but now the only competition is to see who is "the prettiest." And it's generally accepted that the prettiest of all was the late [Allison "Tootie" Montana](#), the celebrated "Chief of Chiefs" who was featured in *National Geographic Magazine* back in January, 1992. Many of his costumes weighed 125 pounds, and it's rumored that he'd spend \$15-\$20,000 a year to make sure that he won.

In addition to the Indian costumes, Francis has also compiled an array of outfits worn by the [Zulu Krewe](#), the Baby Dolls (which is a women's Stepping Group), and the Skeletons, which are a collection of men who rise early on the morning of Fat Tuesday to ward off evil spirits and bless the day so that there's no sickness or death or rain (they'll usually do their best to scare you too). The other half of the museum is devoted to Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs which have traditionally served the community, and the Second Line parades and Jazz Funerals for which New Orleans is famous.

The museum itself started when Francis began taking pictures of the Second Lines and Mardi Gras festivities 25 years ago. At the time, most people agreed to let him take their picture if he'd give them a copy in return. After a while, he says, "the whole community got to know me," and he's continued to curate their history ever since, collecting artifacts, video clips, and memorabilia from the urban neighborhood. His lifelong passion found a home in 1999, when he converted a former funeral parlor into the Backstreet Cultural Museum, which has been recognized by the State of Louisiana for its contribution to folklife history.

On Fat Tuesday the museum is an open house, with some of the skeletons from the [North Side Skull and Bones](#) gang arriving at 8 a.m. Jolie Préau, who works with Francis to curate the museum, also says it's a great way to guarantee that you'll see the gorgeous Indians' costumes live and in person, instead of wandering through the neighborhood hoping to catch a glimpse. So if you can, be sure to stop by to watch them strut their stuff.

[The Backstreet Cultural Museum](#) 1116 St. Claude Ave., New Orleans, LA 70116

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