79rs Gang

Mardi Gras Indians. Tootie Montana. Bo Dollis.

Words Andy Thomas **Photographs** Dustin Cohen

"Big Chief Theodore Emile 'Bo' Dollis sat at the bar nursing a drink. In an adjacent room tambourines and drums thumped as a crowded circle of people sang," wrote Ned Sublette in *The World That Made New Orleans*. "Two men danced, gesticulating at each other from opposite sides of the room. One brought his arm down from high above his head way down low, in diagonal motion. The Wild Magnolias were running down the signals they would use, and the songs they would sing on Mardi Gras Day." Similar scenes would have been going on across New Orleans in the lead up to that February's carnival, when the Mardi Gras Indian gangs do battle in their extravagant hand-sewn costumes.

As seen in Christopher Levoy Bower's recent documentary *We Won't Bow Down*, these battles, taking place far away from the traditional Mardi Gras parade, can often get seriously heated. But the violence of the early days of the Mardi Gras Indians (when killings were commonplace) has largely been assigned to history, and today the battles are a statement of black unity. As with hip-hop in the 1970s, when gangs dropped their weapons to compete on the mic or on the floor, the battles of the Mardi Gras gangs revolve around creativity. As a member of the Blackfoot Hunters Gang says in W*e Won't Bow Down*, the focus is on "competing with each other with needle and thread instead of killing each other".

Following Hurricane Katrina, the unity of the community is more important than ever. After years of battles, Big Chief Jermaine Bossier of the Seventh Ward Creole Hunters and Big Chief Romeo Bougere of the Ninth Ward Hunters signed a peace treaty. "Jermaine was from the Seventh Ward and I was from the Ninth Ward and we used to have a lot of conflict, so we came together to say we are going to put all our differences to one side," says Romeo Bougere over the phone from New Orleans. The result of the union is the 79rs Gang, whose debut album *Fire On the Bayou* is the most important Mardi Gras Indian LP since the Wild Magnolias self titled release from 1974. "I consider myself to be one of the best singers in the city and so does Romeo. So we decided to make good music instead of fighting," explains Jermaine Bossier from his home in the Seventh Ward.

Fire On the Bayou is an altogether more roots-based affair than the Wild Magnolias' New Orleans funk LP. "Most of ours songs come from the slave times," says Bougere. "Listen to the lyrics of 'Shallow Water', that's all about the slaves having to follow the shallow water to escape." Released on Sinking City Records, the album is one of the first times the pure spiritual music of the Mardi Gras Indians has reached outside of its community. "You have to give Bo Dollis [the late Big Chief of the Wild Magnolias] credit for bringing the Mardi Gras funk music to the world, but the traditional stuff was always kept underground. So what we are trying to do is bring the traditional stuff to the forefront so people can really get a feel of what we feel doing Indian practice every Sunday," says Bossier. "I'm not trying to look down on anybody who has gone before," says Bougere, "but I feel like our music is more important because we are giving out a message, so everybody knows the struggle we went through to become this."

The history of the Mardi Gras Indians goes back to the most brutal days of slavery. "Back in the day the slaves escaped from their masters and hooked up with the Native Indians," says Bougere. As Michael P Smith wrote in his 1994 book *Mardi Gras Indians*: "Harsh circumstances brought about many alliances of necessity that gradually developed into functional friendships and coalitions." In the years that followed, the Native Indians helped slaves live off the land in Maroon camps on the outside of the city. "They got together in the camps and started to show each other how to do things and so started to learn from each other," says Bougere.

This began a long period of mutual support and cultural cross-pollination. "They found they had a lot in common," says Bougere. "I mean both the Natives and the Africans beaded. And they came together and shared what they knew and that has been passed down to us." Much of what happened in the early days, by its very nature, is shrouded in mystery. But it is believed that the freed slaves of New Orleans began to 'mask' as Indians, as a tribute to the Native Indians who had helped them. "What we have always done is impersonate the Native Americans, but we have come a long way from what it used to be," says Bougere. "In the beginning of course they didn't have the products or finances that we have. Everything was limited back then, they weren't able to get the glass rhinestones and all those things we use today. So they would use eggshells, cardboard boxes and turkey feathers. They used to save things and find things to create something beautiful."

The costumes of these 'gangs' or 'tribes', with their huge feather-plumed headdresses, sewed patches and intricate beading, became ever more elaborate over the years. "Some people still use turkey feathers and some of those old things but it's changed a lot," says Bougere. "Technology has changed everything and also nowadays we have a much wider variety of material and >

Big Chief Romeo Bougere of the Ninth Ward Hunters and Big Chief Jermaine Bossier of the Seventh Ward Creole Hunters are Mardi Gras Indians, carnival revellers from New Orleans. After years of rivalry between the two tribes, they reconciled to form the 79rs Gang

Romeo Bougere started masking (dressing up for carnival) in 1989. His outfit, assembled from beads, stones and canvas, took 10 months to make

things we can choose from to make our costumes look more elaborate and pretty." When thinking about the beauty in these costumes it's important to remember that, as Ned Sublette says: "prettiness, like sewing, is a manly attribute in Indian culture."

It was as a child that Bougere was first exposed to this culture. "I've been an Indian since 1989," he says. "I was four years old, and I started sewing when I was eight. It's definitely a family thing. My father was Big Chief Rudy of the Ninth Ward Hunters. He was grooming my brother to be the Big Chief but he didn't want to take that on. So the next person to step up in line was me. And I wasn't going to let something I love go to waste, that was never going to happen. I don't live like that." Bougere took on the role of Big Chief in 2003 after his father passed away. "I was only 18 years old so had very limited experience. But I did what I had to do and got into some very difficult situations, but from every situation I learned something," he says. The Mardi Gras Indian tribes are made up of a number of positions who support the Big Chief. This includes Spy Boy, whose role it is to look out for the arrival of the other gangs, and Flag Boy, who signals the arrival of the gang to the Big Chief with the gang flag (an elaborate staff decorated with feathers). They are both positions Bougere has held. "I ran Spy Boy one time," he says. "I was a little boy so I really couldn't handle it. Then in 2002 I became the Flag Boy. And so I started sewing my own suit in 2001 because carrying the gang flag is a dominant position. So I made a real nice suit for that."

Jermaine Bossier was also inducted into the Indian culture early in life. "My great uncle Percy Lewis was Big Chief of the Black Eagle Gang from uptown in the Third Ward and I started sewing when I was 12 years old," he explains. It was through the late Tootie Montana that Jermaine learned much of what he knows now. "I started masking [dressing up] with the Yellow Pocahontas and Big Chief Tootie Montana in 1996," he says. "I ran Spy Boy with them and then, in 1999, I ran Flag Boy for a gang called Trouble Nation. When the Chief of Trouble Nation died, we carried on for a while but then I decided to branch off and started my own gang, Seventh Ward Creole Hunters, in 2009." I ask Bossier about the challenges of becoming a Big Chief. "One of the biggest challenges is getting your neighbourhood behind you," he says. "They have to see you work. You have to have a reputation, that's how you get the neighbourhood behind you – through your suit and the work you put out on the street."

There was one figure thought largely responsible for moving the Mardi Gras Indians away from physical violence to aesthetic competition. "The late great Tootie Montana changed everything, so when we meet today we compete through the beauty of the costumes rather than war and fighting," says Bougere. "There used to be a lot of fighting going on. Don't get me wrong, we still get into disagreements and have altercations, but it's nowhere near as bad as it was. As a child I saw some really wild things."

'INSTEAD OF FIGHTING ALL THE TIME, NOW IT'S WHO CAN SEW THE PRETTIEST SUIT'

Bossier feels similarly about the importance of the late chief of the Yellow Pocahontas Gang. "Tootie Montana, man, he was the chief of chiefs and he totally changed the Mardi Gras Indian gangs," he says. "At one time it was all about who was the baddest chief and who was the baddest person and Tootie changed it to who was the prettiest. We still have a few confrontations here and there because this is a warrior culture. But instead of fighting all the time, the main thing now is who can sew the biggest and most pretty suit, who can have the most beads on the suit and all that to become the biggest and prettiest chief in the city."

Thousand of dollars and even more hours are now put into making the suits, created from scratch each year. "Making an Indian suit comes from your heart," said the late Larry Bannock, chief of the Golden Star Hunters. "You have to be on fire." I ask Bougere how he decides on the themes to be used in the suit each year. "It's changed a lot. Back in the day I used to just pick beautiful pictures, but nowadays I build my suit as to how I feel," he says. "I create my suit around the things I am going through, about what I have dealt with and what I'm feeling. I want my suit to tell a story. I want you to be able to feel what I'm going through from the images that I give." Although old folk tales are still told through the suits, it's a culture that reflects the times the Indians are living in. "During [Hurricane] Katrina they had helicopters flying over dropping water to people, so in my last suit I drew me some helicopters and sewed those in," says Bossier.

Creating the suits for each year begins the day after the Mardi Gras celebrations. "It's dedication, that's basically what it is," says Bougere. "I hold down a job from Monday through to Sunday and work all day long and I have two kids, so I can get really tired. But you know that you have to put in five hours with the needle and thread. If not, then you know you are not going to make Mardi Gras. And believe me that's the worst feeling ever, knowing that you should be there. And you can't blame anybody but yourself because you've put some things before being an Indian, when you should have been sewing instead of playing around. But I've been doing it for so long it's natural for me. I get home at seven in the evening, I sew for another five hours and then I crash. That's my everyday lifestyle." It's a similar story for Bossier. "I do four to five hours a day," he says. "Then as it gets close to carnival I will do six or seven hours. So it's a lot of sewing, but it's something you have to make time for. It don't matter what you have going on man, you are going to get that suit on. But when you finish and you put that suit on you are like king for the day. The rest of the tribe is pretty, but you are the Big Chief man. You have people you've never seen before coming up to you and kissing you on the cheek and stuff. It's a beautiful thing man, it really is, to put on that suit and to be pretty."

So how does Bougere feel when he finally gets to put the suit on after a year of work? "There's no other feeling like it in the world, no other feeling," >

he says. "There is nothing greater than when you put your suit on and stand in front of someone. When you have that costume on, there are so many people that are looking at you and who've looked forward to you being there at Mardi Gras. It's like you own the streets for that day. When I rep my hood and see the way the Ninth Ward believes in me and they know I'm coming – that's such a beautiful feeling." In *We Won't Bow Down* we hear many of the Indians talk about the spiritual significance of wearing the suits. "There are times I put on my costume and I'm singing and you could actually walk up to me and stand there for like five minutes and I wouldn't even remember you being there," says Bougere.

The Mardi Gras Indian battles take place far away from the traditional parades. "As in colonial times, they still deny outside authority and refuse to subject themselves to the financial burdens and humiliation of being monitered and controlled by the city," wrote Michael P Smith. "We take the back streets," says Bossier. "We don't go down St Charles [Avenue] and all that. I haven't been to a carnival parade for years, because I'm always getting ready with my Indian suit. So yeah, we always take the back streets. Like I said, it's a real territorial thing, but also a neighbourhood thing. So you go to the old people that can't leave the house for carnival and you show off for those people. You bring carnival to them. Not only that, but at times things can get confrontational and you don't want the police bothering you. So that's where we do our battling – on the back streets of New Orleans."

Mardi Gras Indian music was born from the interactions between Africans and Native Americans in the drum circles of Congo Square in the 18th and 19th centuries. "They started to learn from each other and combined the different styles of the African and Indian drumming," says Bougere. The African beat at the heart of Mardi Gras Indian music has been traced back to the Congo. "In what we do there is a beat called the bamboula beat, and that has been with the Mardi Gras Indians since they let the slaves have their drum circles in Congo Square," says Bossier. "That one beat has stayed in the city for over 200 years, and that's the same beat we use today. They freed the slaves on Sunday to play their music and that's the day we have our Indian practice and you can always hear that sound – the same African beat."

The polyrhythmic patterns that developed through the gatherings in Congo Square were accompanied by chants using a patois that you can hear today in the music of the 79rs Gang. "The language that we use is a mixture of African and Louisiana creole and a little bit of Native American," says Bossier. One of the chants, Jock-A-Mo (a battle cry), made its way into popular culture through the Dixie Cups' 1965 hit 'Iko Iko', a version of James 'Sugar Boy' Crawford's 'Jock-A-Mo'. And the music of the Mardi Gras Indians runs deep through African American music of the 20th century. "The beat and lyrics of Mardi Gras Indians have inspired and informed the music of a host of New Orleans players, including Jelly Roll Morton, Dr John, Fats Domino," wrote Michael P Smith.

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Yet as Ned Sublette wrote: "Few people outside New Orleans had ever heard of the Mardi Gras Indians before the 1970s." With their self-titled LP for Polydor in 1974, the Wild Magnolias were the first Mardi Gras Indians to reach beyond the working-class black neighbourhoods of New Orleans, with traditional songs such as 'Handa Wanda' set against a funk beat. A similar LP by the Wild Tchoupitoulas followed in 1976. With interpretations of Mardi Gras Indian songs such as 'Hey Pocky A-Way' and 'Indian Red', the LP featured the Meters (who also recorded an LP called *Fire On the Bayou* in 1975) as backing band and the Neville Brothers on vocals.

More recently, David Simon's post Katrina love letter to New Orleans, the HBO television series *Treme*, brought us a little closer to the spiritual and social traditions of the Indians. In one of the most poignant scenes, we see Albert Lambreaux (played by Clarke Peters) donning his chief's suit in the middle of the night. "Oh chief, that's pretty, that's real pretty. I was wondering if I was ever going to see something like that again," replies one of his neighbours in the deserted street outside the chief's bar. But despite the horrors of Katrina, it's a tradition that refuses to die. "You have to give [Mayor] Ray Nagin credit for that, because after Katrina he opened the city back up for carnival when the rest of the country was saying don't do it," says Bossier. "He let us come home and continue to do what we love doing. And once he opened the city back up, it was up to us to make sure the culture didn't die. And so we did whatever we had to do to make the culture go on." It's a culture that continues to connect with the new generation, upholding the traditions of their ancestors.

Christopher Levoy Bower captured the contemporary culture beautifully in *We Won't Bow Down*. His idea was to create "a real street-level, verbal history version of a documentary on the Mardi Gras Indians, one that would incorporate everyday Indians". And with the 79rs Gang travelling to London this January to perform at Gilles Peterson's Worldwide Awards, the ancient and modern traditions of the Mardi Gras Indians are reaching a new audience. "After years of conflict and getting into it all the time, me and Romeo came together and have just done our thing," says Bossier. "And now y'all want us to come to London, which is just beautiful man." ■

79rs Gang play at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, 22 April to 1 May
nojazzfest.com

Romeo Bougere will be at New Orleans Mardi Gras 9 February
79rsgang.com

Jermaine Bossier started masking in 1996. His outfit, assembled from ostrich and turkey feathers, beads, rhinestones and canvas, is inspired by traditional African dress. It also references the red ants that were running through his house