

Masked Endymion Riders



Let's Make Carnival Parades Better

By Errol Laborde

BY NOW PRACTICALLY every Carnival organization in the state with enough gumption to stage a parade also has a website, even if it is put together by a neighbor's 14-year-old. Looking at what is online I have concluded that there are some organizations that should have neither a parade nor a website.

I won't reveal its name but on one website there was a picture from a float that was absolutely sloppy. The riders on board where a bunch of guys mostly bedecked in various sweatshirts, or in whatever was left hanging in the dorm closet. They wore no masks. They had no costumes. They looked sloppy.

Many other parades in various communities have no greater standards, and Carnival suffers because of it. There is a fine line between rigidity and celebration but sometimes it takes structure to make the celebration worthwhile. Imagine a football game if the players dressed how they like; there would be no look, no symmetry, but just a bunch of guys being haphazard. Suppose the marching band had not practiced, so instead of uplifting fight songs, there were discordant notes. Spectacles, when done right, need to have some style.

In New Orleans there are laws in the books that riders

must be masked and must be costumed and the same floats cannot be overly repeated on the same streets. The really good parades design their own floats, have themes and stage original parades each year. Their riders throw beads, but the experience is not about the throws but of staging an ancient urban celebration – one worth seeing.

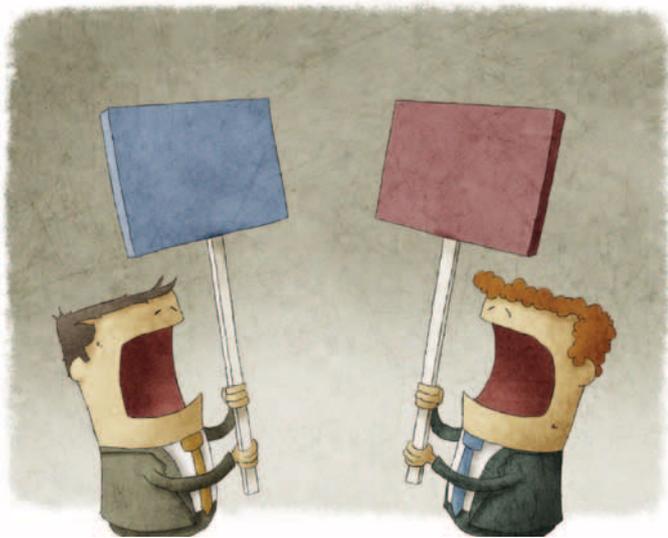
Granted, doing right is more expensive, but that is OK. On matters of Carnival I am a Darwinist. If a krewe cannot afford to put on a good show, it should not be allowed on the public stage. It is better for a community to pool its resources and have

one really good parade than to block the highways for a group of embarrassments. And if done correctly the parade could reflect local cultures and create work for designers and costume makers. Each community could develop its own quirks and style.

My concern about bad Carnival parades is that they disillusion those who have heard about Mardi Gras in Louisiana and who think that what they see is representative of the whole. Also, without the magic there is nothing to inspire a new generation to want to be involved other than for the shallow experience of tossing beads while drinking a beer on a moving vehicle. Carnival should deliver more than that.

Several years ago Jefferson Parish, which borders New Orleans, became concerned about its parades devolving. There were too few bands; the floats were worn out; masking was not enforced. One council member took the initiative and, working with Carnival promoters, introduced breakthrough legislation that, over several years, set standards for better parades, including setting a minimum for the number of bands. Jefferson Parish did the right thing, and when the law fully kicks in, its people will have a celebration that they deserve.

Carnival, I realize, is dismissed as a trivial matter and not worth the extra attention, but, if done right, it can do much to enrich a region. Being about quality is a message that every community should want to send to its people. ■



Why Elections Aren't Fun Anymore

DEMOCRACY WAS NEVER INTENDED

to be an entertainment event per se. At best, free elections were supposed to allow for a rational discussion of issues so that voters could evaluate candidates and make the right choices. Nevertheless, if the process also provided a good show, so much the better.

So we have memories of earlier days with candidates speaking at rural rallies and fairs from the back of a truck. There was Jimmie Davis, backed by his band, pickin' on his guitar and singing his hit "You Are My Sunshine" to the star-worshipping crowd. There was "Uncle Earl" Long picking on his favorite nemesis, New Orleans Mayor deLesseps Morrison whose name he downgraded to "Ole Deltasoups." Long once told a rock-hard fundamentalist audience that he did not believe Morrison was a crook and then added that Morrison was too good a Catholic to steal. Before that crowd, it would have been better to say he was a crook.

If someone didn't like the politics at least they might get a free slice of watermelon out of the experience. Oh, for the days of Huey Long speaking alongside the Evangeline Oak and delivering Louisiana's all-time greatest political speech: He referred to the tears that Evangeline shed waiting for her lost lover, but then Huey pleaded to the crowd to give him the chance to dry their tears from their despair.

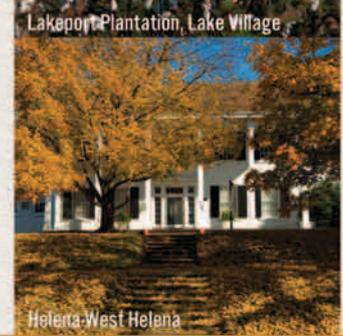
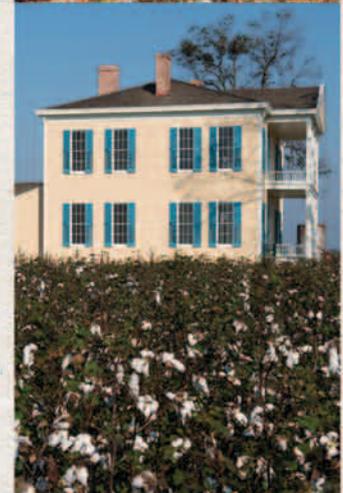
Nowadays politics is too refined to be fun. Candidates, the serious ones, work from a playbook that tells them to exploit buzz phrases, avoid serious discussions on issues and minimize debates.

Television is the new public rally: short and punchy and calculated to respond to what is needed at any given moment. Go on the attack if your opponent is getting too strong; show yourself frolicking with the family and the dogs when you need to look wholesome."

Audiences react differently to televised debates simply because they are less interesting, and that is because the candidates are more manipulating. Any serious candidate knows that what you say is not as important as what you don't say. They strive to avoid the "gaffe" – like the candidate who once forgot what his position was on an issue and instead of faking it, said so. It is the gaffe that will make the sound bite on TV and what everyone will be talking about the next day. Should a candidate come up with a brilliant plan for, lets say, coastal erosion, no one will remember it – too many words. Too many details – no gaffe.

This is not to say that listening to Uncle Earl howl was a better exercise in democracy, but at least you knew what you were getting. It was like buying boudin from the pot, rather than pre-packaged.

Some things are better served fresh. ■



FROM THE EDITOR



They were also meat-eaters, especially pork, and masters of the boucheries from which a multitude of pork products were made. If they splashed hot sauce on their food, it was not because cayenne pepper grew wild in their yards but because they bought a bottle at the store just like the rest of us.

Prudhomme, a native of Opelousas, took the spirit of his region, but developed the flavors particularly through working at such a pronounced chef's mill as Commander's Palace in New Orleans.

From there he made his own creation. Cajun Country gave him the image; New Orleans gave him a setting at which he could attract global attention.

His French Quarter restaurant, K-Paul's, became an epicenter for a hot (literally) version of a native cuisine. The lines to get in were so long that locals, who did not like the restaurant's practice (until expansion) of group seating, stayed away, yet they appreciated Prudhomme and the impact he was having on South Louisiana.

Prudhomme globalized the image of Cajun food being hot and spicy. Another New Orleans entrepreneur, Al Copeland, had also added fire. He applied it to fried chicken and called it Cajun-style. Copeland even added dirty rice, a classic Cajun side dish.

Truth is, Popeye's chicken could more accurately be linked to Prudhomme's Nouveau Cajun, than to what the early Cajuns often preferred: chicken stewed to create a thick gravy to go over rice.

All food, like all music, is ultimately a fusion. Prudhomme had the genius to fuse the right ingredients and create a method of preparation that would become classic. For both food and music there is often magic from turning up the heat. ■

Echos From Opelousas

By Errol Laborde

OPELOUSAS HAS GIVEN the world Paul Prudhomme and zydeco. Both are Cajun-influenced, with lots of spice.

Prudhomme was clearly one of the past century's most important chefs. When done right his Blackened Redfish was an exquisite dish – so much so that the Gulf of Mexico was once in danger of being depleted of the species and a moratorium on fishing them had to be established. To create a dish that is so popular that it empties the Gulf is quite a tribute to the chef – and perhaps to the fish.

A point that has been overlooked in the coverage is that Prudhomme, who died in October, didn't just make Cajun cooking famous, he redefined it into something Cajun in spirit but of a new age. I call it "Nouveau Cajun."

Cajuns of old did not blacken their fish and, for most, redfish, which comes from the Gulf, was not a common meal. More common was the seafood of the bayous and rivers. They would eat catfish, gaspergou, shrimp and, increasingly, crawfish.

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