



## Mardi Gras

by Tina Gianoulis

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The Society of St. Anne parading in New Orleans' French Quarter during Mardi Gras.  
Photograph by Ted-Larry Pebworth.  
Courtesy Ted-Larry Pebworth.

Mardi Gras, or Carnival, as it is often called, is a festival known for wild abandon, sexual promiscuity, feasting, drinking, dancing, parading, and elaborate masquerade. One might think it is a holiday created especially for the queer community.

Mardi Gras, or "Fat Tuesday," is the last Tuesday before the penitential fasting season of Lent in the Christian calendar, and therefore the last opportunity for devotees to feast and frolic before the Lenten solemnity and temperance begins.

In English, the day is called Shrove Tuesday, because revelers will be "shriven," or forgiven their sins. However, the roots of spring revelry go back far before the founding of the Christian church.

The Egyptian festivals of Osiris as early as 1000 B.C.E. and the Athenian festivals of Dionysus in the sixth century B.C.E. were riotous examples of spring merrymaking; and they were probably derived from even earlier festivals that were inspired by sheer joy at surviving the winter. These spring festivals were so beloved that the ascending Catholic church found it necessary to adapt them to its own mythology, creating that most pagan of Christian celebrations--Mardi Gras.

In Roman Catholic countries around the world, Carnival continues to be observed with abandon. Some of the most famous sites of Mardi Gras celebrations are the weeks-long festivities in Rio de Janeiro, Cologne, and New Orleans.

The notion of disguising one's identity in order to carouse more fully has made elaborate costume and masquerade a traditional part of Mardi Gras. Since gay men and lesbians are often required to hide their identities in everyday life, they are often drawn to masquerade as a chance, for once, to dress flamboyantly in drag as their "real" selves. Add to that the prospect of days of parties, dance, and music, and it is no wonder that gays everywhere have made Mardi Gras their own.

Although gays and lesbians have always participated in the New Orleans Mardi Gras, they have been an official part of the celebration since 1958, when the Krewe of Yuga became the first openly gay krewe (Mardi Gras club) to plan balls and a parade for the holiday.

Yuga disbanded in 1962 when one of their balls was raided and members were abused and humiliated by the police. However, that year another gay krewe, Petronius, was formed, followed in 1966 by the Krewe of Amon Ra, and in 1969 by the Krewe of Armeinius.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s other gay krewes formed, including the Lords of Leather and Ishtar, the only all-woman krewe. The AIDS epidemic took its toll on many of the participants in the krewes during the 1980s and 1990s, and many of the krewes have not survived into the new century.

The politics of gay liberation has served to make the New Orleans gay Mardi Gras relatively open and

public, as it attracts tens of thousands of gay and lesbian revelers to the city, including drag queens and biker dykes. But the "real" Mardi Gras is less the tourist celebrations than the social events in which the locals participate, particularly the elaborate balls, which are part drag show and part bal masqué.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, however, organized gay participation dropped off somewhat, perhaps caused by political backlash or perhaps because increased visibility has made gays and lesbians more comfortable in everyday life, so that they have less need for the costume and pageantry of Mardi Gras.

The southern hemisphere hosts a still more gay-identified pre-Lenten celebration, but it is unique in having no religious roots.

The massive Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras began in 1978 as a protest for gay rights and has since evolved into one of the largest gay cultural events in Australia. Only since 1981 has it been observed during the traditional Mardi Gras season. The celebration, which originated as a specifically gay event rather than as part of a religious celebration, is determinedly secular. And rather than participating in a "masquerade," its participants are defiantly and proudly open.

SGLMG now includes a gay and lesbian film festival and the Sleaze Ball, among many other parties and parades. The event draws tens of thousands of natives and tourists and infuses tens of millions of dollars into the city's economy.

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**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.