



New Orleans Mardi Gras Krewes

by Albert J. Carey

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

In New Orleans, Mardi Gras is an important holiday and the culmination of a lavish social season. The months-long Carnival season commences on Twelfth Night, January 6, and continues until its Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday, climax, which falls sometime between middle February and early March. Not only do hundreds of thousands of tourists, many of whom are gay or lesbian, flock to the city for the parades and rowdy public celebrations, but numerous private balls and parties are held by residents of the city.

Since the late 1950s, a significant feature of New Orleans's Mardi Gras observances has been the gay krewes and their carnival balls. After a shaky beginning, the gay krewes have become a familiar part of the holiday and their balls a center of glbtq social life in the city.

The Krewe

A krewe is simply a highly organized social group, usually bound by ties of family or neighborhood or ethnicity or other shared interest, that stages a parade or party or ball during the carnival season. The gay krewes, or clubs, are generally organized along the same lines as the mainstream social organizations. Although one gay krewe has attempted to present a parade, most gay krewes stage balls.

In most krewes, a board of governors is elected annually to run the day to day activities of the club, collect dues, raise money, and maintain order. The krewe also elects a Captain to organize the ball. He is a board member but is autonomous and makes all of the creative decisions as long as the club's bylaws are maintained.

The Captain chooses the Queen and King based on krewe longevity and participation. Although they are "mock royalty," the positions are regarded as high honors.

Costumes for the ball are elaborate and are paid for by each member. While drag is usually an important feature of the ball, what is most important is the costume itself.

The ball is often a glittering bal masqué, featuring drag performances, tableaux vivants, and highly choreographed presentations of royalty. Usually unified by a theme, the ball is the culmination of months of work by members of the krewe.

The audience is made up of friends and family, usually dressed in formal attire, as well as other spectators who are there simply to experience the spectacle. As in the seventeenth-century masques at the Stuart Court in England, the krewe members are at once themselves and the representation of someone else. The ball usually opens with the presentation of the current royalty and ends with the coronation of the new monarchs.

But if the ball is the culmination of the krewe's Mardi Gras celebration, it is by no means the only social



Blanche Debris as Queen of the Krewe of Armeinius in 2004.
Photograph by Ted-Larry Pebworth.
Courtesy Ted-Larry Pebworth.

activity that binds the members together. Since it is very expensive to stage the annual ball, most krewes help defray the cost by holding fundraisers. These events, which may range from theater parties to casino trips, are held all year long and are a source of interaction among the gay community and their straight friends.

The Background

The last years of the 1950s were especially hard for gay men in New Orleans. Even within the liberal precincts of the French Quarter, life could be dangerous. Even the few gay bars, such as Dixie's Bar of Music and Café Lafitte In Exile, could be perilous as well. The vice squad regularly sent young, handsome undercover policemen to the bars as bait and, once outside the bar, the man who took the bait would usually be beaten, arrested, and charged with attempted crimes against nature.

The following day, the city's principal newspaper, the *Times-Picayune*, would publish his name and address in the police reports under the heading, "Crimes against Nature." This column was must reading in New Orleans, and families were destroyed and careers lost as a result of arrest reports.

Same-sex dancing and cross-dressing were also jailable offenses at this time, and queer bashing was a favorite college sport.

In one notorious incident, three Tulane University students went to the Quarter to "roll a queer." They set upon a young Hispanic man, whom they killed. At the autopsy, the coroner discovered that the man's skull was an "eggshell cranium," that is, thinner than normal. This discovery inspired the killers' defense. They freely admitted to the bashing, but claimed that it was the man's cranium that killed him. They were acquitted.

The Krewe of Yuga

It was in this oppressive atmosphere that, in 1958, a group of gay men decided to stage a mock carnival ball. This ball was intended to parody the strict rituals of the high society counterparts. There would be a queen, maids of the court, even debutantes (affectionately dubbed "debutramps"). This group called itself the Krewe of Yuga, whose initials were K.Y.

At first the krewe's gatherings were held in private homes, but they soon grew to such a size that a bigger space was needed. In 1962, the members of the krewe decided to have the ball in the adjacent parish of Jefferson at the cafeteria of a private school where one of the members taught. It was a loosely organized event, and the guests were encouraged to costume.

As the guests arrived, the neighbors became alarmed and called the sheriff. The ball was well underway when the sheriff's men arrived to raid the gathering. Knowing what awaited them, many men ran for the rear exits or jumped out of windows. The area behind the school was undeveloped, and many sought refuge in the darkened woods. One story has the queen hiding in these bushes as the troopers came through with their flashlights. Sparkling in the high beams of light, his rhinestone tiara gave him away.

News of the raid and the numerous arrests drifted back to the Quarter. Dixie Fasnacht, owner of Dixie's, wasted no time in opening her safe and dispatching an attorney to Jefferson Parish to make bail for as many of the arrested krewe members as possible.

The Krewe of Petronius

In 1961 the Krewe of Petronius legally registered as a Mardi Gras krewe. It received a charter from the state to stage a Mardi Gras ball. The krewe also hired a police detail for protection, thus making it safe from a raid or other harassment. Petronius's first ball was in 1962, the same year as the Yuga raid, and it

set the standards for all of the balls that have followed.

The structure that they set up, including the preeminence of the Captain and the presentation of the royalty, especially the Queen and the King, was based on the organization of many mainstream krewes and is still used by most of the clubs. The guests were not permitted to attend in drag. Instead, they were required to be formally attired. Because Petronius had secured a charter, dancing was now allowed after the tableaux.

At this time, only African Americans would rent space to gays, so the early balls were held at black labor union halls.

Other Krewes Proliferate

In the 1960s, gay krewes proliferated. They became less interested in mocking the mainstream krewes and more interested in establishing their own traditions. In short, they were becoming an important part of Mardi Gras celebrations within the gay community and, ultimately, within the city itself.

The Krewe of Amon Ra formed in 1964 and Ganymede in 1966. Armeinius was established soon after. Their first ball was in 1969, the year of Stonewall, and its theme was prophetic, "1969, The Year of the Queen."

Apollo was established in 1970. Its flamboyant captain booked the ballroom of a large French Quarter hotel, thus breaking the barriers that kept most of the gay balls in black labor union halls.

Olympus, founded by a New Yorker, also debuted in 1970. The founder wanted a bigger venue and approached the politicians who ran the neighboring parish of St. Bernard about renting their newly constructed civic auditorium. He assured them that the ball would be of Broadway quality and that they and their wives would be invited to the first ball. Many clubs followed their lead to St. Bernard, and most were still there more than 30 years later.

The clubs flourished in the 1970s. Among the new krewes presenting carnival balls in this decade were the lesbian club Ishtar, the Celestial Knights, David, and Polythemus.

In 1982, the Lords of Leather changed the prevailing concept of a ball by presenting a "beary, leathery" King and a male consort instead of a Queen. Apollo sold franchises of their clubs and soon there were Apollo clones all over the Gulf South.

Decline and Revival

In the 1980s, AIDS spread through the gay krewes, and many members were lost. For a while, the krewes were considered irrelevant in those cruel times. Membership declined, and some clubs disappeared.

In the 1990s, however, there was a new wave of interest as members of lost krewes joined those still intact and younger men sought membership. Some clubs opened their membership to women.

Mwindo formed in 1998 as the first predominantly African-American krewe, although African Americans were already in the other krewes.

As of 2003, the gay krewes are Petronius, Amon Ra, Armeinius, Lords of Leather, Mwindo, POS, and the newest, the Mystic Krewe of Satyricon, founded in 2001.

Gay Mardi Gras Krewes Post-Katrina

On August 29, 2005 Hurricane Katrina ravaged the New Orleans area. When several levees collapsed, what

had been a disaster became a catastrophe. Most of the city and its surrounding areas were flooded. Hundreds of thousands of homes were destroyed and many lives were lost.

Like most residents of the city, members of the gay krewes were forced into exile for weeks. They returned to discover that many of them had incurred great losses. Some of the buildings, or "dens," that housed the krewes were severely damaged. The St. Bernard Parish Civic Auditorium, where many of the gay krewes held their balls, was destroyed.

Fortunately, however, many of the areas most heavily populated by members of the New Orleans glbtq community, including the French Quarter, the Faubourg Marigny, Bywater, and the Garden District, escaped the worst of the flooding that wreaked such havoc on the city. As a consequence, despite the losses incurred by many individual members of the gay Mardi Gras krewes and the damage to the local economy, most of the krewes remain intact.

Celebration of Mardi Gras 2006 was, however, a bitter-sweet affair. Many of the krewes held severely curtailed celebrations, opting to present their royalty at dinners or other functions rather than stage balls. Only the Krewe of Armeinius presented a full-scale bal masqué.

The decision to celebrate Mardi Gras even after the devastation of Katrina bespeaks the importance of Carnival to the city and to its glbtq citizens even--maybe especially--in difficult times.

Bibliography

Osborne, Mitchel L. *New Orleans: The Passing Parade*. New Orleans: Picayune Press, 1980.

www.gaymardigras.com

www.kreweofamonra.org

www.armeinius.com

www.lordsofleather.com

www.mardigrasunmasked.com

About the Author

Albert J. Carey is a life-long resident of New Orleans. An architect by profession, he was one of the designers of the St. Bernard Auditorium where most of the gay Mardi Gras balls are held. He joined the Krewe of Armeinius in 1970, and was a witness to most of the events that shaped the gay Mardi Gras krewes.