

My Favorite World #13

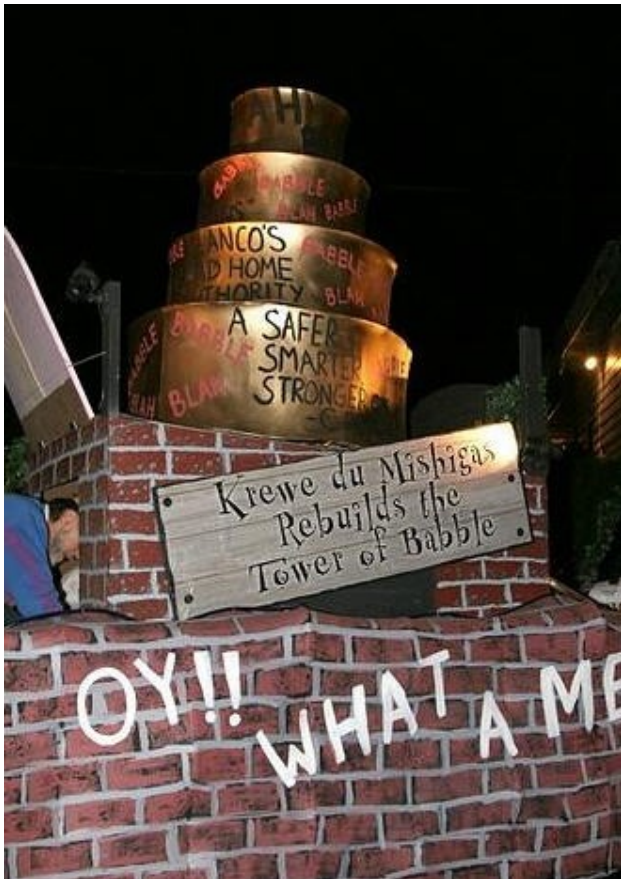


Mardi Gras from the Inside

My Favorite World always has a bit of New Orleans in the mix, even when it doesn't, which isn't often, and even then, it does. So for Ash Wednesday, this raw journal entry recounting the time Your Narrator marched as a member of Krewe du Mishigas in the Krewe du Vieux parade.

We pick up the journey as the Narrator and She Who Makes Me Better arrive at the staging warehouse in the Marigny on the afternoon of the parade, Feb 3, 2007.

... and stayed there until 4:30 when our host drove us to the Den of Muses in Architect Alley. This is a huge, old warehouse in the Marigny district where all the Krewe du Vieux floats are built. Here's a shot of our float.



Krewe du Mishigas – Re-Jewvenating New Orleans

This place is a Fellini set on mushrooms. Huge bits of floats from years past hang from the ceilings – oversized papier mache busts of Pee-wee Herman, Bush, Nixon, local politicians, not to mention the anatomically (extremely) incorrect sculptures of semi-private body bits. A very colorful and lively setting. In the middle of this, a brass band led by the esteemed Trombone Shorty. These guys can get a crowd cooking.





And this crowd was well cooked

All around us, hundreds of creatively festooned paraders, with lots of food and drink, and the aroma of cigars (cheap *and* Cubano), patchouli, and high-grade pot wafting on the breeze.

There are vendors hawking shrimp and oyster po'boys, bowls of jambalaya and gumbo, <fn>A po'boy is a traditional sandwich on a loaf of French bread with lettuce, tomato, ketchup, pickles and mustard, with some kind of meat that is usually deep-fried. It is truly heaven on a stick. Jambalaya and gumbo are traditional Cajun dishes, the first a rice based casserole and the other a stew, usually filled with seafood and other delights. When done well, there is no better food anywhere. Period. All of these foods were originally poor peoples' food, true folk dishes. Now you can pay bookoo bucks at linen napkin restaurants to eat like a pauper.</fn> huge bags of strung beads to toss to parade watchers, pocket-sized bottles of

liquor, and several essentials that fall outside the legal economy. Heavy local TV coverage.

It is fucking cold, and I am under about five layers of clothes. We wander around a bunch to stay warm, checking all the other floats and krewe costumes because once the parade begins all you really see is your Krewe<fn>And the ass of your asses.</fn> and the passing parade route. Sort of an inverted viewing of a parade, if that makes any sense. At one point, someone stops She Who to verify that it is really her – one of her students! So come Monday, J will either be known as the coolest prof in her domain or will be typecast as a representative of the pointy-headed liberal elite, some sort of demented, libertine queen of debauché leading our youth down the primrose path of Sodom and freethinking secularism. Maybe both. The pink wig was certainly an eye-popper. Here we are *en regalia*.



The prettiest accident victim you ever saw



A pair of Jewish carpenters

Finally, at 6:30, we move to the beginning of the parade route, where we stand and wait and apply some more special cough syrup while the handlers lead in the mules<fn> KdV is the only parade that still uses mules for float propulsion. This is both a feature and a challenge. Mules are testy beasts, and we were repeatedly warned that i) they kick, and ii) they bite. They are also highly flatulent and have efficient intestinal function that produce copious steaming piles. Figure a dozen mules in the parade, and our team next to last in line, and you can well imagine that we did a lot of fancy stepping to avoid the mule memories. Mules also have a tendency to stop and back up without reason or warning. On the other hand, there were no nasty diesel fumes, and the humble mule is certainly more true to the tradition of Mardi Gras.</fn> and hitch them to the floats. Then more waiting, and it is getting verry fucking colder.<fn>At this point, mid-30s. By end of the parade, 27*.</fn> Another nip of

special cough syrup to stave off the cold.

By this time, all the brass bands are in place. Several of the best bands are here – Treme, the Original Hurricane Brass Band, Trombone Shorty's gang, this bunch.



Paulin Brothers Brass Band

Our krewe hired NOLA's only marching klezmer band, the Panorama Jazz Band. I did not know about this ahead of time, and when they started a traditional second-line drum beat, I expected the traditional good stuff. Instead, trumpets, saxes, alto horns, tubas, and clarinets began wailing an improvisation in a harmonic minor mode, Eastern European in maximus, and then hit the most jaw-dropping ensemble passage I've ever heard on the streets of New Orleans. This team was ace, and even had several women players, <fn>Especially the incendiary Aurora Nealand. Look her up.</fn> which is pretty rare in the brass band world.<fn>Panorama has since become one of my NOLA faves. And the presence of wymmins in the second line is not quite the rare sight it was then.</fn>

Finally, we begin marching at 7:15. I'm not certain exactly where we are, <fn>SOP for carnival season.</fn> but I eventually suss that we began in the Bywater area and thread through Marigny. Crossing Esplanade, I recognize our route as we forge ahead through the French Quarter to end at the

Central Business District and the State Palace Theatre where the ball is underway. But that's getting the float ahead of the mule.

The crowds in Bywater and Marigny are mostly residents. Lots of people on their front porches and balconies, and very cool crowds in the streets clamoring for beads and trinkets, which we tossed with abandon. Occasionally I would notice a stunning old building like this one.



Hail Krewe!

Peering through one window, I spot a wall of oversized stuffed heads of cartoon characters watching us sashay. No idea what the place was about, but it is somehow an appropriate audience to view our passage.

One of our krewe's trademarks is handing out painted and decorated bagels, so in-the-know revelers know to shout out for these. We also toss beads and bubble gum, fake nose toys, party cups, wooden nickels, and tiny dreidels. Judy received an airline-sized bottle of bourbon in return for a special bagel. More cough syrup.

Once in the French Quarter Krewes du Vieux is the only parade that still traverses the French Quarter. The narrow streets of the Quarter cannot handle the kinds of crowds that

show up for the later parades. </fn>, the mood got very boisterous and the crowds were much bigger. Scores of people hanging from the balconies, the crowd was 10-15 deep in spots. Lots of kisses exchanged for beads and bagels, the occasional naked breast proffered<fn>Hey, Mister!</fn> and heavy excitement over the Tower of Babble's offerings of Double-Bubble Babble Gum. Basically, a great exchange of goodwill energy. I am typically nervous in big crowds, being that a crowd is never more than a turn or two away from becoming a mob. But not tonight. The crowd is generally generous, festive, and filled with joy. Several times, She Who got the crowd going with a chant of "Oy!" For my usually-reticent wife, this is quite something.

Lots of good humor mixed with lingering resentment at the poor performance of local and national government post-Katrina. This pervades all of life in NOLA these days, and it is only natural that the parade theme (Habitat for Insanity – Rebuilding the Tower of Babble) would reflect this.

This parade in particular reflects the "real" New Orleans, and the locals know this is one of the parades that is a must-see during the season. For one thing, the krewes in this parade builds all the floats without professional help.<fn>Some of the 'bigger' krewes spend up to \$40,000 to have their floats built by a local specialty business. These are enormous constructions that can carry several dozen people. Member fees for these krewes can run into the five-figure range. By comparison, it cost us less than \$350 for the whole season, and that included the babysitter to keep our kids while we marched.</fn> And because it comes so far ahead of Fat Tuesday (the peak of the tourist invasion), it is pretty close to a locals-only event. This helps tamp down the wretched excess that accompanies the later parades...this night was simply about excess.

But it was also about joy, and shared community, and resilience and tragedy. Because the roots of Mardi Gras stem

from the deep Catholic culture here, originally a big 3-week celebration of the prevailing *carpe diem* of NOLA before the more sober re-assessment and reflection that accompanies the Lenten season. And because reflection here inevitably leads to contemplation of the loss and horror of Katrina – with all the attendant challenges of dealing with the breakdown of systems like garbage collection and public safety, not to mention the greed-soaked and sloth-like responses of government at all levels.



Vast parts of New Orleans still look like this – this is the house where my grandmother lived when I was a wee sprite

So for these few weeks (and especially at these earlier parades and the other krewes that are less geared for the tourist industry), this is a community that comes together for a rolling thunder of celebration of what remains the most distinctive civic culture in the United States; and a living memorial for all that was lost; and finally, at essence, a mass prayer for what is possible and what could be.

After the parade, we visited the Krewe Ball at the State

Theatre on Canal for about ten minutes. Too crowded, too grungy, too loud. Fittingly for this post-Katrina realm, the bathrooms flooded and there were 4-5 inches of standing water everywhere except the balcony. Not even Ziggy Modeliste and George Porter on the stage could keep us there. We were sensorially overloaded, and had been on our feet for 7 hours, small bits frozen, so we left and found some food and a drink. Alas, the world's very worst blues band began playing (they were ugly, sounded like shit, and were very loud), and we bailed quickly and returned to Chez V to tumble abed at 1 a.m.

This morning, coffee and breakfast and enjoying some quiet time with our friends. And for the past little while, typing this report, hoping to convey some of the essence of a really marvelous and rare experience. I'm not a New Orleans insider, but I have been privileged to see this magnificent celebration from the inside.

My Favorite World.