



Above: The casket of Mercedes Stevenson, Queen Mercy of the Original Wild Tchoupitoulas Mardi Gras Indians and the oldest living Baby Doll, is carried out of the Austerlitz Street Baptist Church towards her awaiting glass hearse. Right: Baby Doll Resa "Cinnamon Black" Bazile dances with a picture of Mrs. Stevenson.



THE QUEEN PASSED ON, BUT THE QUEEN LIVES ON

New Orleans' Mardi Gras Indian queen's legacy continues with her children and grandchildren

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY DAVID JOSHUA JENNINGS



It was an unlikely setting for a procession of prancing Baby Dolls and colorful Mardi Gras Indians: a hot, languid August afternoon in New Orleans' Irish Channel. The residents along Austerlitz Street were lured out of weekend lethargy that Saturday by the procession's booming brass band as it marched towards Tchoupitoulas Street and drawn by the music to their front doors. They were greeted by a wild sight, a celebration of life after death. From the placards that bore her image hoisted above the dancing

crowd, many in the neighborhood undoubtedly knew the final second line of the late Mercedes Stevenson, "Big Queen Mercy" of the Wild Tchoupitoulas Mardi Gras Indians, and the oldest living Baby Doll, was passing by. The Queen herself was riding in a Golden Casket, ensconced in a glass hearse drawn by two stately horses.

Like her life, Queen Mercy's funeral was a conduit of celebratory energy and local tradition. Born on Oct. 22, 1925, Stevenson grew up in New Orleans' 13th Ward. After raising eight children,

she spent much of her adult life prodigiously active in her local community — she was the eldest Indian Queen of the Original Wild Tchoupitoulas Indians; the founder of the Uptown Baby Dolls; a member of the Emerald Social Aid and Pleasure Club; the Ladies of Wales Social and Pleasure Club; and the Sophisticated Ladies Social and Pleasure Club; and an honorable member of the Queens of the Nation and the Mardi Indian Hall of fame.

Before she assumed her role as Queen of the Wild Tchoupitoulas, Mercedes



Above: Friends and family wait for Mercedes Stevenson's casket to be carried down out of Austerlitz Baptist Church. Above right: Joseph Stevenson, Mercedes Stevenson's grandson, dancing alongside family and friends during the second line. Right: Da Truth Brass band, leading the procession.



was brought into this purview of local tradition by her mother. She had her first experiences masking as a Baby Doll, parading alongside other Baby Dolls in their signature satin skirts, bonnets and bloomers during Mardi Gras — helping, in her way, to carry forward an iconic carnival tradition that originated in black Storyville in the early 20th century.

This penchant for masking and dancing led Mercedes into the Wild Tchoupitoulas in 1974, when her friend, George "Big Chief Jolly" Landry founded the tribe. Her daughter, Mary Kay Stevenson was age 9 at the time.

"When she put on her suit she looked to me just like a princess," says Mary Kay. "Her hair was like two long black pretty flags and she had a smile that was glowing. She looked like she ruled the world. I thought she was a princess. I didn't know then — I only found out later — that she was really a queen."

Every year, those who mask as Indians — often appearing only on Mardi Gras, St. Joseph's Day and Super Sunday (the third Sunday of March) — spend countless evenings during the months leading up to Mardi Gras hand-sewing their dazzling and elaborate suits, incorporating bright, colorful feathers, beads, glittering sequins and rhinestones. It is a painstaking creative process (some suits tower over eight feet and can weigh as much as 150 pounds) that is a hallmark of the Mardi Gras Indians, whose traditions have their roots in Native American culture, believed to have been passed on to escaped slaves who found safe haven among southern tribes in the Antebellum period.

Above left: Floyd Track, Second Chief of the Wild Tchoupitoulas, in full dress in honor of Queen Mercy. Left: Darryl Press, Mercedes Stevenson's son and Grand Marshal of her funeral second line, leading mourners down Tchoupitoulas Street. Right: Baby Doll Resa "Cinnamon Black" Bazile waiting outside Austerlitz Street Baptist Church with a portrait of Mrs. Stevenson.





“Every time you see an Indian suit, you know it’s made with love, because there’s blood in those suits, real blood.” says Mary Kay, who has inherited many of her mother’s traditions and, like her, sews all of her own suits. “When we’re sewing and stitching, we stick ourselves with needles and the blood comes out. Nine out of 10 of the beads might have blood on them. You give your own blood to your suit, each is a creation of yourself.”

Mercedes sewed every suit she wore, Mary Kay says. She also helped others sew theirs, including her children and grandchildren, all of whom she made sure had the opportunity to mask as an Indian, whether they wanted to or not. Mary Kay was one of those children who never wanted to mask. She was frightened by the Indian practices that her mother brought her to as a child.

“Everyone would be hollering and ripping and running around,” Mary Kay says. “Back then they didn’t have wooden floors, it would just be sand and dust on the floor, and all the Indians would be in there hollering, and I would just hide in the doorway, cause I was afraid.”

After Big Chief Jolly died, the Wild Tchoupitoulas slowly began to disband, and Mercedes masked for the final time with three of her grandchildren in 1987. She diverted her energy into other community pursuits, and it wasn’t until Mary Kay’s daughter showed interest in masking as an Indian in 2007 that Mercedes took her under her wing and revived the tradition in their family. Seeing her daughter mask compelled Mary Kay to join the procession and sing the Indian songs of her childhood. On that day that she decided to come

Left: Baby Doll Vanessa of the Ernie K-Doe Baby Dolls, dancing ahead of Queen Mercy’s casket. Upper Right: Baby Doll Chocolate of the Gold Digger Baby Dolls, with Mrs. Stevenson’s grandson Wormy Madison (L) and 2nd Grand Marshall Little Wardell Lewis. Center Right: The funeral procession honors Mercedes Stevenson as it dances down Tchoupitoulas Street towards the cemetery, in New Orleans’ Irish Channel neighborhood. Lower Right: A Mardi Gras Indian, come to honor Queen Mercy.





Above Left: Flag Queen Kelly A. Pearson of the Creole Osceolas Mardi Gras Indians. Below Left: Da Truth Brass Band, blowing the second line down Tchoupitoulas Street. Above Right: Baby Doll Handa Wanda, of the Original Wild Tchoupitoulas Mardi Gras Indians, dancing with feather fan down Austerlitz Street.

back into the tradition, to carry on her mother's legacy, and now, 10 years later, she has assumed her mother's role as Big Queen of the Wild Tchoupitoulas, and continues to honor her mother's style in the sewing of her suits, with her signature cape, high boots, crown and armband.

The Baby Dolls, the Mardi Gras Indians, the Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, with their signature second line parades — these converging aspects of Mercedes' life flowed through the soul of her jazz funeral, through the souls of her granddaughters

dancing on the residential front porches, in the steps of her grandsons strutting and jumping down Tchoupitoulas, in the pure joy of the traditions she lived and passed on to her progeny, which surrounded her like a fragrance as she floated aloft in her golden casket, the white horses drawing her nearer to St. Patrick Cemetery.

The legacy of her life and community involvement was on full display, so much so that one might wonder, considering her eight children, 29 grandchildren, 52 great-grandchildren and four

great-great grandchildren, how she had the time to dedicate so much of her life to so many clubs and traditions.

"I used to ask her 'how you do all that and still manage to raise eight kids?'," Mary Kay says. "And you know what she said? She said 'because I love life.' She said happiness is the best thing you can do, and she did it well. Until the day she died, she was living her cultural events. She stayed involved in her community. And that life she lived lives on through us."