

Mardi Gras is difficult for those outside of New Orleans' unique culture to understand. Its traditions come from New Orleans' colonial history and secret societies. Modern events, like the Zulu parade, satirize the city's racist history. Zulu was organized by African-Americans in 1909 to mock the stereotypes Whites held toward Blacks. Still today, members of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club masquerade in black-face makeup and throw coconuts from floats on Fat Tuesday. This is just one in a long series of puzzling events a tourist may experience during the Mardi Gras season in New Orleans.

One cultural phenomenon that is mysterious even to New Orleans locals, and unknown to most outsiders, is the Mardi Gras Indians. The Black Indians have masqueraded at least as long as the Zulus, but their customs, and even much of their musical dialogue, has remained a mystery. The world outside of the Crescent City first heard the language of the Mardi Gras Indians when a popular vocal trio from New Orleans, The Dixie Cups, concluded a string of hits from their album "Chapel of Love" with "Iko Iko" in the spring of 1965. "Iko Iko" was described as "an old Mardi Gras chant that most New Orleans kids had heard all their lives." Sisters Rosa and Barbara Hawkins, and cousin Joan Marie Johnson, chanted the catchy verses during the recording of "Chapel of Love."

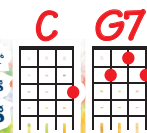
The song had actually been a local hit for "Sugar Boy" Crawford during New Orleans' Mardi Gras Carnival in 1954 as "Jock-A-Mo." Crawford commented, "'Jockamo -A-Mo' came from two songs that I used to hear the Mardi Gras Indians sing. When I was growing up I lived near the Battle Field where the Indians paraded on Mardi Gras Day." The version by the Dixie Cups remains a commercial success to this day. It features percussion performed on metal chairs and a Coca-Cola bottle similar to the Indians' style. The complex rhythm has been part of the Mardi Gras Indians' heritage for well over 100 years.

While the exact meaning of the words is not known, the rhythms of the Mardi Gras Indians come from Africa and the Caribbean. Slaves performed the elaborate African rhythms at weekly gatherings, a tradition that continued into the Twentieth Century at New Orleans' famous Congo Square. The origins of the chanted phrases, however, are not known. Phrases like "Jockomo-Fee-Nah-Ney" may have been defiant secret dialogue used to tell slave masters or chain gang bosses to "Go to Hell." There are more than thirty known Mardi Gras Indian tribes in New Orleans.

The most historic, like Yellow Pocahontas and Creole Wild West, are legendary in New Orleans lore. Some believe that Creole Wild West was established soon after Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show toured to New Orleans in the 1880s. Each tribe is lead by a "Big Chief" and its ranks usually include a "Flag Boy," "Spy Boy," and "Wild Man." Some of New Orleans' biggest names in music have led Indian groups. Donald Harrison has been Big Chief of Creole Wild West, Cherokee Braves, White Eagles and Guardians of the Flame. Champion Jack Dupree was the "Spy Boy" for Yellow Pocahontas in the 1920s. Recording history was made in 1976 when the Neville Brothers, including Art Neville and his band The Meters, decided to record their uncle George Landry, also known as Big Chief Jolly, and his Mardi Gras Indian tribe, The Wild Tchoupitoulas.

Like most traditional groups in New Orleans, the Mardi Gras Indians celebrate by parading. Neighborhood processions are common by the Black Indians on Mardi Gras Day. But the large gatherings of Mardi Gras Indians actually occur on "Super Sunday," the Sunday nearest St. Joseph's Day, March 19th. The connection to this date is unknown, but St. Joseph's Day represents benevolence to New Orleans' historic population of poor Italian immigrants and may have similar meaning to the Black Indians. The Indians are most known for their complex and hypnotic percussion played on tambourines as they parade, but groups like the Flaming Arrows and Young Keepers of the Flame are combining traditional Second Line Jazz and modern influences such as Hip-Hop. As the Indians began to record in the 1970s, now-legendary Chiefs, such as Bo Dollis of the Wild Magnolias and Monk Boudreaux of the Golden Eagles, infused other African-American styles, like funk and brass band music, as they recorded with musicians like Willie Tee and the ReBirth Brass Band. New Orleans benefits from a Billion dollars of new money in its economy -- the equivalent of four Super Bowls -- each year during Carnival. Mardi Gras goes from all over the nation and the world invade the city in the days before Fat Tuesday and leave their small fortunes behind almost overnight, and yet many of New Orleans' African-American populations remain among the poorest in the nation. This leaves the Mardi Gras Indians to deal with subjects common in Louisiana, such as imprisonment in the notorious Angola Penitentiary, as well as drug addiction and the premature deaths of young Black men.

Originally a Mardi Gras Indian song, the version "everyone" is familiar with was popularized by "Jockamo" James Crawford 1950 in New Orleans and later recorded by another New Orleans group - The Dixiecaps



Start this out with a strong rythm solo ...

C **G7**
 My grandma and your grandma, were sittin by the fire,
G7 **C**
 My grandma told your grandma, I'm going to set your flag on fire

CHORUS

C **G7**
 Talkin bout hey now, hey now Iko! Iko! an de'
G7 **C**
 Jackomo fe no nan e' , Jackomo fee nan e'

C **G7**
 Look at my King all dressed in red Iko! Iko! an de'
G7 **C**
 I bet you 5 dollars, he kill you dead! Jackomo fee nan e'

CHORUS

C **G7**
 My flagboy and your flagboy, sittin by the fire,
G7 **C**
 My flagboy told your flagboy, I'm going to set your flag on fire

CHORUS

C **G7**
 See that gay all dressed in green, Iko! Iko! an de'
G7 **C**
 He's not a man, he's a lovin machine! Jackomo fee nan e'

CHORUS

and here's a good place for a nice rowdy instrumental solo

CHORUS and fade out...