

Following in his father's footsteps

Big Chief Bo Dollis Jr. leads the Wild Magnolia Indians

By Dean M. Shapiro



Barring any unforeseen circumstances, Mardi Gras will be back in full swing in 2022 after a one-year hiatus and no one could be happier than Big Chief (Gerard) Bo Dollis Jr. of the Wild Magnolias Mardi Gras Indian tribe.

“I made a beautiful, brand new Indian suit for last year and only wore it one time: on Mardi Gras Day,” Bo Jr. lamented. “By the time St. Joseph Night on Super Sunday came around (in March 2020) the Coronavirus hit and we had to shut it down. I wasn’t too happy about that.”

But, if there can be an up-side to the pandemic which forced people to self-quarantine for much of the time, it gave Bo Jr. more time to work on his next suit which he is eagerly looking forward



to finishing and wearing. “Our people are busy sewing away and getting ready for next year’s Mardi Gras on March 1,” he said, adding that the Wild Magnolias will also be taking part in Super Sunday events several weeks after that.

Before all of that happens, however, Bo Jr. is also looking forward to the upcoming release of the tribe’s latest CD, a two-sided vinyl record and a double CD with the same material as the record.

“This one is going to be a little bit of everything that’s New Orleans,” Bo Jr. proudly stated. “Some second-lines, some zydeco, some blues, funk and everything else. One side is traditional with the bass drums, the tambourine and the like. All the instruments we perform with on Mardi Gras. And the other side is the funk.” The funk side will feature such iconic guest artists as Rockin’ Dopsie Jr., Cyril Neville, Leo Nocentelli, Big Sam, Donald Harrison and the Preservation Hall Jazz Band.

“It’s a whole gumbo of sounds. That’s the best way I can describe it,” he explained.

The Wild Magnolias are considered to be the pioneers of recording New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian music. “Handa Wanda,” pressed as a 45 RPM single in 1970, has become a local classic and is standard fare for live performances by the tribe and others throughout the city during festive occasions.



The new recordings will be available in local record stores and other locations in early August 2021. It will be the Wild Magnolias’ second recording under Bo Dollis Jr.’s leadership.

The Mardi Gras Indian tradition runs prominently through the Dollis clan. Bo Jr.’s famous father, Theodore “Bo” Dollis, reigned as the Wild Magnolias’ Big Chief for more than 50 years and he suited up with two other tribes for several years before that. When he passed at age 71 in January 2015, Bo Jr., having been designated his eventual successor in 2006, followed - literally - in his father’s footsteps, parading on foot with his tribe from Uptown to Treme and back on Fat Tuesday.



The years in between his designation and when he actually took charge of the group were a learning experience for Bo Jr. Having his father still officially leading the tribe gave him the opportunity to learn the tribal customs, rituals, music and, above all, the skills that go into creating a Mardi Gras Indian suit. In accordance with tradition, a new outfit has to be created from scratch every year and all of the work must be done manually. Every bead, button, sequin and feather must be sewn into the fabric material by hand.

Bo Jr.'s early years with the tribe were the later years of his father's reign and his father was gradually slipping into declining health. "He couldn't walk distances and so I was really taking charge of the Indians parading together," Bo Jr. said. "But he was still the Chief and I gave him that respect," he added.

And even though it had become a struggle for the Chief to parade and perform onstage at festivals and other special events, when he did so he remained upbeat and positive, Bo Jr. recalled. "He never really was the grumpy kind. He could be feeling bad but you would never know it because he was always just in a good mood. Nothing bothered him."

Since taking over as Big Chief, Bo Jr. has made some small modifications to the tribe's traditional rituals and offerings while still keeping the basic structure intact. "For one thing, it's gotten bigger since my daddy last masked," he said, noting that the tribal membership has grown from 4 or 5 to 16 members. "I've got more music into it now, especially more funk," he added.

One of the things that hasn't changed is the route the group follows from Uptown to the Treme and back on Fat Tuesday. They start out at 2nd and Dryades streets, then go down Jackson Avenue, passing by and paying respects to the house where Big Chief Bo Dollis lived. Eventually they reach Claiborne Avenue and follow it all the way to Hunter Field at Claiborne and Orleans avenues in Treme. Then they return by the same route.

Now 40 years old, Bo Jr. has already begun passing on the family legacy to his two daughters, ages 8 and 3. "Both of them have masked almost since they were born," he said, noting that the tribe brings along a wagon or a stroller for when



the kids get tired. Bo Jr.'s mother, Big Queen Rita (Laurita) Dollis, also masks and parades with the group "as far as she can," he said.

Bo Jr. continues to own and operate the barber shop at the corner of Baronne Street and Louisiana Avenue that he inherited from his father and he spends his spare time working on next year's outfit. Eagerly looking forward to the occasion when he can wear it after a year's absence, he predicts, "Next year is going to feel like it was after Katrina.

"When everybody came back from Katrina, it was just like a joyous type of Mardi Gras," he said. "So I'm thinking that this one is going to be bigger and better because everybody who has been inside is really just starting to get out. Now all of this is starting to come back up again and it's going to be better than ever."

For more information on Bo Dollis Jr. and the Wild Magnolias follow them on Facebook, Instagram and other social media platforms. A review of their upcoming CD will appear in the next issue of Breakthru Media magazine.