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NEW ORLEANS -- Joseph Pierre "Monk" Boudreaux is sitting on a sofa in the dimly lit dressing room of Tipitina's nightclub. He has been chief of the Golden Eagles Mardi Gras Indian tribe since 1966. He has yet to begin work on this year's Mardi Gras suit, but at least one thing is certain in this uncertain city: He will be wearing it.

"I'm coming out all white," he says. "To cleanse out everything."

And Boudreaux, 64, has no doubt Mardi Gras should continue, despite a growing number of critics who think next month's celebration should be called off -- out of respect to a city in ruins.

"Let me tell you something," Boudreaux says as he leans forward out of the darkness. "Katrina is gone. There ain't no sense in hanging your head. You might as well go on and do what you been doing, because no Mardi Gras ain't going to make it better and it ain't going to make it worse.

"Besides, this is where I belong. I won't go to Texas and talk about how there shouldn't be Mardi Gras. This is in us."

Boudreaux is a second-generation Black Mardi Gras Indian, a society group with a popular parade in the annual New Orleans festival. The lineage of the Black Mardi Gras Indians dates back to the early 1700s, when native Indians (Chickasaw, Choctaw and other tribes) were taken as slaves. Boudreaux's father, Jumper, was a Spy Boy for the Wild Squatoulas during the 1940s. At the age of 5, Boudreaux was helping his father dress in his regal Indian suit.

Boudreaux recorded the 2003 album "Mr. Stranger Man" with fellow Golden Eagles, plus guests Dr. John, Cyril Neville and album producer Anders Osborne.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of Mardi Gras (French for "Fat Tuesday"). A truncated version of the celebration is scheduled Feb. 18-27, the traditional closure on the day before Ash Wednesday. Typically, there are two weeks of Mardi Gras parades and festivities. Last week, AP reported that Laura Claverie, editor of New Orleans Online, a tourism Web site, said that 20,000 hotel rooms are expected to be available by Mardi Gras and about half the flights into the city will have resumed to pre-Katrina levels. More than 700 restaurants are expected to be open.

But besides possibly inappropriate timing, another problem facing Mardi Gras is a lack of funds to pay the overtime New Orleans police officers incur during the festivities. Corporate sponsorship has been suggested, but carnival participants are purists. There never has been commercial sponsorship of a Mardi Gras parade

or float. But in an effort to help the city clean up, longtime New Orleans Councilman (and former agent for late baseball great Billy Martin) Eddie Sapir has suggested ramping up with Clorox, Mr. Clean and Tide.

An old steel suitcase rests on the sofa next to Boudreaux. Inside the case is a clean purple Mardi Gras Indian suit with detail and family memories that date back 40 years.

When Boudreaux heard about the ensuing floods in the days after Hurricane Katrina sacked New Orleans, Boudreaux promptly moved the suitcase to higher ground in his house, near Vallance and Magnolia in Uptown. He evacuated his home onto a small boat he owned.

"Everything else in the house I had to throw out," and he looks down at the neatly pressed costume. "We add on to the costume each year. Every three years we move the front to the back. I do that, and I hand down my older patches to my grandchildren to keep the tradition going. Some patches on my suit are more than 40 years old."

Each patch tells a story and each patch should be in concert with the main color of the costume. He sighs and says, "I just can't get rid of them."

The Mardi Gras Indians are a vanishing species. The rising cost of material can prohibit some Indians from making costumes. And musical tastes are moving away from the Indian rhythms, driven by the language of African drums.

"My son 20 years old is into rap," says Boudreaux, who knew legendary piano player Professor Longhair as a boy. "Ours isn't his kind of music."

But in early December, Boudreaux was in Austin, Texas, recording a benefit CD with New Orleans musicians Dr. John, Henry Butler, Irma Thomas and others, which will be released in time for Mardi Gras.

During a separate interview in Chicago, Cyril Neville of the Neville Brothers explained, "Mardi Gras is the European version of what African Americans call Carnival. As I grew up I realized Mardi Gras was somebody masking, something other than they were. But the event that was being celebrated was Carnival. It was something that came with us on the slave ships through the islands.

"I always said New Orleans was never the Deep South. It was the northern most point in the Caribbean."

Tiptitina's Foundation director Bill Taylor says it's essential to keep the Black Mardi Gras Indian heritage alive.

"It is a cultural tradition that makes New Orleans what it is," Taylor says. "It also

represents the roots of American music and an important part of the African-American community in New Orleans. It unites people in some of the poorer neighborhoods of the city. It is absolutely critical to continue."

The typical Black Mardi Gras Indian tribe has three Flag Boys and three Spy Boys, according to Boudreaux. They march in front of the gang. Unlike organized Mardi Gras parades, the Indians conduct mock battles that develop when they come upon rival troupes. The first Spy Boy knows all that is going on. "If he sees trouble, he will throw a signal that relates back from the first flag to the second spy, on down the line to the Big Chief," Boudreaux explains. "The Spy Boy will stop and start dancing, letting the Big Chief know there's trouble ahead. The chief will tell him what to do to avoid the trouble."

Boudreaux was chosen to be Big Chief as a young boy. Boudreaux had assisted his father with his Mardi Gras costume until he was 12 years old.

"Then it was time for me to let this feeling that has been inside of me to come out," he says. "The only way I was able to do that was to learn how to sew. And I was a 'runner.' When you are a runner, if the Spy Boy needs something you get it for him regardless. If he needed thread, you go get it. If he needed stones, you go get it. That's all in our teachings. I did all that. And I watched it all closely."

Some Mardi Gras Indian suits weigh as much as 150 pounds. The Indians begin working on their costumes at different times. "It all depends on the feeling you have," Boudreaux says. "Some guys start right after Mardi Gras. I don't have to start that early. Once the spirit is into me, I just do it, whether it is five months before or two months before."

Boudreaux begins sketching his costume on canvas, just like a painter. "We'll outline in white beads and then fill it in with rhinestones. We're Uptown Indians so we use rhinestones," he says. (Downtown Indians use more sequins and create three-dimensional suits). "After we rhinestone it out, we go to velvet. You have to use the finest material for trim. Then we put on ostrich feathers. Back in the days, we used turkey feathers, and after that was quill feathers. Ostrich feathers are bigger and more lavish."

The Tipitina's Foundation has been distributing grants to assist the Indians with their costumes. Boudreaux received the first grant. The foundation would not disclose the grant amount. Some rhinestones cost more than $1,000.

At 9 p.m. every Sunday, Boudreaux and the Golden Eagles have practice sessions at Tipitina's in Uptown. They are free open to the public.

"They practice what they will do on Mardi Gras Day Feb. 28," Taylor explains. "They're not dressed in their suits, but whomever the chief is that hosts the practice Boudreaux will set up percussion: bass, drum and there's usually a conga player.

Most of the Indians bring their tambourines. They will have anywhere from five to 50 tambourines in the room. Their chants are all call and response. The chant may be 'Hey Pocky Way,' and the response from the chief will always be something different. It's very improvisational by nature."

"The real culture of New Orleans is not the French Quarter," Neville suggests. "The real culture is the Mardi Gras Indians. The people who have been eating gumbo in the French Quarter have been cheated because if they hadn't been redlining the 6, 7, 8th, and 9th Wards you would have gotten real gumbo. I ain't gonna' lie. Paul Prudhomme can cook. But Leah Chase at Dookie's can give him a run for his money.

"The bottom line is the real New Orleans is its people."