

TAKE ME TO THE RIVER NEW ORLEANS

Forward

In the words of the renowned saying, “it takes a village to raise a child.” Filmmaker Martin Shore, New Orleans music educators and cultural bearers, along with music educators from Berklee, Boston and New York City, enthusiastically came together to develop a dynamic set of cross-disciplinary resources to excite, engage and inspire your students in learning the music culture of New Orleans. The remarkable film *Take Me to the River New Orleans* richly documents music-making in New Orleans, which is at the core of American music culture. It infuses a multiplicity of genres, making historical linkages and informing the through lines of American culture and history. The thoughtful curriculum unit design maintains the integrity of music culture, which holds reverence for the past, and presses forward into a future that continues the inclusive, communal spirit of human connections through storytelling and music-making. What a privilege it is to welcome and expand music-cultural engagement that furthers the all-embracing influences of New Orleans music.

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New Orleans is the perfect *mélange* of culture, legacy, and music. Visit New Orleans and you will find yourself transported to a storybook place of sounds, sights and aromas so appealing you’re compelled to explore and understand the culture. Culture with a diverse and inclusive community that not only built this city, but ensures this special place continues to flourish and grow on the foundation of its storied legacy and history.

The origins and influences of the cultural foundation are a wonderful blend of African, French, Spanish, Caribbean, Haitian, Cuban, and Native American Choctaw. New Orleans music is in fact the FIRST World Music. It is a unique cultural jewel and musical gift to the world which gave birth to multiple genres while inspiring the world’s popular culture and musical landscape.

New Orleans Music is rich and encompassing. It combines West African rhythms, Afro Cuban beats (*tresillo* and *habanera*), Haitian syncopation, European military marching brass bands, and so much more. Its only true definition can be compared to one of the most famous culinary dishes of the region: Gumbo!

Within these curricular units, our desire is for you as teachers to learn more about New Orleans' rich culture, heritage and legacy as seen in the film. But also, as seen in the film, our goal is to pass this knowledge to the next generation, your students, and we hope it inspires you to find new music and cultures to explore, learn about, and teach in your classroom, that are relevant to your students.

We are committed to making sure generations that follow will know where the music and this precious culture came from. What's important is that the world supports this culture, this city, these musicians. We must stay true to its rich culture and steadfast heritage. We are all cultural custodians.

- Martin Shore
Director, *Take Me To The River New Orleans*

Unit Overview

Berklee PULSE, Soundtrap for Education and the Take Me To The River Education Initiative present the following educational resources based on the documentary *Take Me To The River New Orleans* by filmmaker Martin Shore. These lessons strive to share the story of where American music came from, promote tolerance and respect for all people and cultures, and create a deeper understanding of history and civil rights through music. Teachers can select from a variety of lesson types, including a mix of history, listening activities, hands-on musical activities (singing, transcribing, playing instruments, clapping), and opportunities to use Soundtrap, or another DAW to create unique compositions.

In Unit 5: Won't Bow Down - The Traditions of the Mardi Gras Indians, students will learn about the history and traditions of the Mardi Gras Indians, study the art and cultural importance of the Mardi Gras Indian beaded suit, explore their own personal cultural traditions, and study the influence of the Mardi Gras Indian music on popular music.

Unit 5: Won't Bow Down - The Traditions of the Mardi Gras Indians

Essential Questions:

- Who are the Mardi Gras Indians? (Lesson 1)
- What is a Mardi Gras Indian suit? How has the beadwork tradition evolved? (Lesson 2)
- How do we pass on traditions within our families and communities? (Lesson 3)
- How has music brought Mardi Gras Indians into mainstream culture? (Lesson 4)

Grade Level

8 - 12

Content Area

- General Music

Unit Overview

Mardi Gras Indians - also known as Black Masking Indians - are a distinctly New Orleans tradition. Mardi Gras Indians are African American men, women, and children in New Orleans who are part of tribes (also referred to as gangs) that mask in elaborately hand-beaded and feathered suits inspired by Native American and African ceremonial dress.

Excluded from mainstream Carnival celebrations, Black New Orleanians started their own unique traditions and celebrations, including the Mardi Gras Indians. The precise date of the birth of the Mardi Gras Indians is unknown, as much of the history and tradition of the Mardi Gras Indians has been passed down orally. The Mardi Gras Indian tradition is linked to encounters between New Orleans Indigenous and Black communities. New Orleans sits on the native lands of the Chitimacha Tribe. Members of this tribe assisted enslaved people seeking refuge from the brutal system of chattel slavery. The Mardi Gras Indians tradition is a homage to the indigenous people who helped the enslaved people reclaim their freedom. Today, Mardi Gras Indians are known for the larger-than-life, hand-beaded suits, which

incorporate beads, rhinestones, and ostrich feathers. Individuals create a brand new suit each year and reveal it on Mardi Gras Day.

In this unit, students will learn more about who the Mardi Gras Indians are and their unique history. Utilizing first-hand information about beadwork, students will explore what goes into this unique art form, using this contextualized information to explore more about their own culture and traditions. Lastly, students will explore the music of Mardi Gras Indians and learn how it continues to be a vital part of New Orleans music today.

This unit is designed to be taught over several classes and should be introduced after teaching the unit on Congo Square.

Objectives (for all lessons)

Students will be able to:

- Describe who the Mardi Gras Indians are. (Lessons 1 and 2)
- Articulate and interpret artistic ideas as presented in Mardi Gras Indian suits. (Lesson 2)
- Describe how traditions are passed on within their own communities. (Lesson 3)
- Understand the forms and influence of Mardi Gras Indian music. (Lesson 4)

National Core Arts Standards

Responding:

Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Connecting:

Anchor Standard #10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Anchor Standard #11. Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

Materials Needed

- Computer or Tablet
- Berklee PULSE Account
- Media Links (see below)
- Whiteboard

Media (All available through Berklee PULSE)

- Lesson 1: Who are the Mardi Gras Indians?
 - Videos:
 - [The History of Mardi Gras](#) (1:00)
 - Mardi Gras Indians from *Take Me to the River New Orleans* (video embedded in the [lesson](#)) (7:02)
 - [The History of Super Sunday and the Mardi Gras Indians](#) (8:06)
 - [Black Masking Indians on Super Sunday](#) (3:50)
 - Lesson 2: Sew, Sew, Sew - Community Traditions of the Mardi Gras Indians
 - Videos:
 - Big Chief Bo Dollis, Jr. describes Carnival Traditions (video embedded in the [lesson](#)) (2:07)
 - [Mardi Gras Indians from St. Joseph's Night](#) - Jules Cahn, 1970 (7:07).
 - [Big Chief Demond Melancon from the documentary All on a Mardi Gras Day](#) Stop the video at the 2:30 mark.
 - [One Bead at a Time](#) (2:42)
 - [Witch Doctor Bird Beading \(1982\)](#) (2:57)
 - Big Chief Bo Dollis, Jr. Beadwork (video embedded in the [lesson](#)) (3:43)
 - Timelapse of Big Chief Bo Dollis, Jr. Beadwork (video embedded in the [lesson](#)) (:22)
 - [Big Chief Bo Dollis, Sr. on Mardi Gras Dancing](#) (1:59)
 - [Big Chief Bo Dollis, Sr. on the Making of Mardi Gras Indian Suits](#) (1:41)
 - Worksheet - the Mardi Gras Indian Suit
 - Photos:
 - [Big Chief Bo Dollis, Sr. at Jazz Fest 1971](#)
 - [Mardi Gras Indians, 1988](#)
 - [Contextual Portraits of Mardi Gras Indians](#)
 - [Erika Goldring's Photos of Mardi Gras Indians](#)
 - Lesson 3: How Do We Pass on Traditions?

- Worksheet - What Are Your Traditions?
- Lesson 4: Firewater - the Music of Mardi Gras Indians
 - Videos:
 - [2022 Uptown Super Sunday](#) (5:44)
 - [Big Chief Jake Millon and White Eagles rehearsing My Big Chief's Got a Golden Crown](#) (8:23)
 - Quint Davis describes recording *Handa Wanda* (video embedded in the [lesson](#)) (4:11)
 - [Handa Wanda](#) (3:16)
 - [To-Way-Bac-A-Way](#) (1958) (play clip to 1:06)
 - [Two Way Pak E Way by The Wild Magnolias](#) (1974) (7:49)
 - [Tu Way Pocky Way by Big Chief Juan Pardo and the Golden Comanches](#) (2015) (3:32)
 - [Tu Way Pocky Way by Flagboy Giz](#) (2021) (2:22)
 - *Firewater* from *Take Me to the River New Orleans* (video embedded in the [lesson](#)) (5:16)
 - *Firewater* by Big Chief Bo Dollis, Jr. and the Wild Magnolias (video embedded in the [lesson](#)) (4:28)
 - [Firewater by Cha Wa](#) (4:49)
 - Recordings:
 - [Big Chief Bo Dollis, Sr. Describes recording Handa Wanda](#) (4:53)
 - Worksheet - Mardi Gras Indian Songs

Key Terms

- (4) Bamboula Rhythm (Also known as the Second Line Rhythm or Street Beat) - A rhythm that derives from the structural core of sub-Saharan African music traditions. It is at the foundation of New Orleans African American musical styles including jazz, brass band music, and the music of Mardi Gras Indians. This rhythm is also prevalent in musical traditions found in many parts of the African Diaspora.
- (2) Beadwork/Beading - The art of attaching beads to one another by stringing them onto a thread with a sewing needle or sewing them onto fabric, suede, or leather. Mardi Gras Indians use beading to create intricate panels on their suits.
- (1) Big Chief - This individual is responsible for a Mardi Gras Indian tribe's leadership. They often provide support and space for the tribe's activities and help pass on the traditions to the next generation.
- (1) Big Queen - This individual is the one responsible for keeping a Mardi Gras Indian tribe in order. In the processional, they stay on the side of the Big Chief.

- Carnival - The season in which Mardi Gras occurs. Carnival begins on Twelfth Night (January 6th) and runs until Mardi Gras day. During this time, there are countless parades and celebrations.
- (4) Call and Response - The succession of two musical phrases where the second phrase is a direct response to the first phrase.
- (3) Community - A group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common; A feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, traditions, and goals.
- (1) Flag Boy - A role in a Mardi Gras Indian tribe in which an individual carries a flag with the name of the tribe. These flags are often raised to pass along messages to other tribe members.
- (1) Enslaved person - A person who was forced to perform labor or services against their will under threat of physical mistreatment, separation from family or loved ones, or death. We utilize language like "enslaved people" versus "slaves" to help separate a person's identity from the circumstance they were placed in. Using the terms enslaved and enslaver are subtle but powerful ways of affirming that slavery was forced upon that person, rather than an inherent condition.
- (1) Mardi Gras - Translating to "Fat Tuesday" in French, Mardi Gras is the day before Ash Wednesday. This is the final day of Carnival celebrations, and many reflect on the practice of eating foods and indulging in things that they may give up during the Lenten season.
- (1, 2, 3, 4) Mardi Gras Indian - Mardi Gras Indians are African American men, women, and children in New Orleans who are part of tribes (also referred to as gangs) that mask in elaborately hand-beaded and feathered suits inspired by Indigenous and West African ceremonial dress.
- (1) Maroon Camp - Makeshift settlements in Louisiana's swamps and bayous where enslaved people sought shelter once they escaped from plantations.
- (1) Spy Boy - An individual whose role in a Mardi Gras Indian tribe is to scout out and look out for other Mardi Gras Indian tribes. They use signals to let the gang know another tribe is coming.
- (2) Suit - Hand-sewn attire worn by Mardi Gras Indians that features intricate beadwork with imagery that tells a story. Mardi Gras Indians make a new suit each year to be worn on Mardi Gras Day, Super Sunday, and St. Joseph's Night. The suits are made of brand new materials each year, cost thousands of dollars to create, feature thousands of beads, ostrich plumes, sequins, velvet, and rhinestones and can weigh up to 150 pounds.
- (3) Tradition - The passing down of customs or beliefs from generation to generation.
- (1) Wild Man - An individual whose role in a Mardi Gras Indian tribe is to protect the chief. In the early 20th century, meetings between tribes were often violent, so the wild man played a vital role. Today, they help ensure that the Big Chief isn't crowded, and they move in and out of the procession.

Lesson 1: Who Are the Mardi Gras Indians?

1. Ask students what they know about Carnival and Mardi Gras celebrations.
 - a. What are some of the sights and sounds they might experience during these celebrations?
2. Play students the video [The History of Mardi Gras](#) (1:00) to provide students with context about Mardi Gras.
3. Explain to students that the earliest Mardi Gras celebrations started when New Orleans was founded in 1718, although these early celebrations looked much different than those that are held today.

The first Mardi Gras Krewe (a social organization that stages parades) that helped establish parades as we know them was Mistick Krewe of Comus, who started their parade in 1856. Today, there are over 80 Krewes who organize parades in the Greater New Orleans area.

4. Ask students if they know of ways *other than parades* that people celebrate Mardi Gras.
5. Once students have a chance to respond, explain that while it's easy to associate Mardi Gras with the revelry of parades and beads, there are other cultural traditions that make the Carnival season unique. One of these traditions is that of the Mardi Gras Indians, a unique tradition where Black men, women, and children mask in elaborate, hand-beaded, and feathered suits inspired by Indigenous and West African ceremonial dress.
6. Show students the video on Mardi Gras Indians from *Take Me to the River New Orleans* (video embedded in the [lesson](#)) (7:02).
 - a. In the video, Big Chief Bo Dollis, Jr. noted that during early Mardi Gras celebrations, Black people couldn't go onto St. Charles or Canal Streets, where Mardi Gras parades are held. What do you think was happening during this time that prohibited Black individuals from attending parades?
 - b. Why do you think it was vital to bring a different form of Mardi Gras celebration to the community?
7. Explain to students that there is still a lot of uncertainty about the exact origins and starting of Mardi Gras Indians, as the majority of their traditions have been passed down orally from generation to generation. One thing is certain; the Mardi Gras Indian tradition is one that is distinctly African American and only exists in New Orleans.

The Mardi Gras Indian tradition is linked to the early encounters between New Orleans Native and Black communities. Founded by the French in 1718, New Orleans

sits on the native lands of the Chitimacha Tribe. Enslaved people were brought to New Orleans from West Africa as early as 1719.

In 1722, the first known enslaved person escaped from a plantation. The surrounding tribes, including the Choctaw, Seminole, and Chickasaw helped enslaved Africans escape from plantations and live off the land. With help from indigenous people, Africans learned to survive off the land, living in maroon camps, makeshift settlements in Louisiana's swamps and bayous.

This resistance continued, with many uprisings across the bayou, including the 1729 Natchez Revolt, where 280 enslaved Africans joined with the Natchez Indians to help prevent the Indigenous lands from being seized by the French. The Natchez promised the enslaved people their freedom in exchange for their help. Records of uprisings continued throughout the 1700 and 1800s, with indigenous and enslaved populations working together.

Between the 1740s to 1840s, enslaved and free people of color and Indigenous people convened in Congo Square on Sundays to socialize and set up a marketplace to sell food, arts, and crafts. In addition, they would sing and dance in their traditional styles. While this blending of cultures was highly documented in Congo Square, it took place in other parts of New Orleans.

In 1746, there are mentions of enslaved people dressing up as Indigenous people to celebrate Mardi Gras in their own unique fashion in journals and newspaper articles. Some attribute this as the first time "Black Indians" or Mardi Gras Indians were observed. Previously, it was suggested by several ethnographers that the Mardi Gras Indian tradition stemmed from the Black Cowboys in the Buffalo Bill Wild West shows in the late 1800s, as specifically cited in the *African American Registry*: "An appearance in town of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in the 1880s was said to have drawn considerable attention and increased the interest in masking as Indians for Mardi Gras. When Caribbean communities started to spring up in New Orleans, their culture was incorporated into the costumes [suits], dances, and music made by the "Indians"."

The first documented Mardi Gras Indian Tribe, the Creole Wild West, was formed in the mid-to-late 1880s by Becate Batiste, although there is uncertainty about who else was part of the tribe or how many people were a part of its founding.

8. Ask students:
 - a. Why do you think it is difficult to identify the exact starting date of the Mardi Gras Indians?
 - b. What common theme did you hear both in the video from *Take Me to the River New Orleans* and in the historical context about how the Mardi Gras Indians formed?
 - c. Why is it important to listen to primary sources and those within the Mardi Gras Indian culture when understanding how Mardi Gras Indians formed?

9. Explain to students that Mardi Gras Indians are organized into tribes (also referred to as gangs) which work together all year long to create intricate hand-beaded suits. They often wear long wigs or wear bandanas on their heads to shield their headpieces from oil and dirt.

In the early years, there was a significant amount of violence between the Mardi Gras Indians, with groups getting into physical fights, sometimes involving weapons such as guns and knives. Since the New Orleans Police Department would be busy controlling the streets during Mardi Gras parades, this often was a time when Mardi Gras Indians would seek revenge for any perceived wrongdoings.

In the 1970s, Big Chief Allison "Tootie" Montana of the Yellow Pocahontas partnered with other Big Chiefs, including Big Chief Bo Dollis, Sr. to end the violence and shift the focus to a more friendly battle of beadwork.

In 1985, the New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian Council was established, and has helped bring together the Mardi Gras Indian community, organizing events including Super Sunday, a day that is just about the Mardi Gras Indians. There are no parades to compete with and it's about the act of masking and defiance.

10. Watch the video [The History of Super Sunday and the Mardi Gras Indians](#) (8:06). Then ask students:
- What did you notice about what happened when the Mardi Gras Indians interacted with each other?
 - Why do you think it's important that there is a day for Mardi Gras Indians to be able to celebrate and have a day to parade on their own?
11. Explain to students the many distinct roles in a Mardi Gras Indian tribe. These include:
- Spy Boy - An individual whose role in a Mardi Gras Indian tribe is to scout out and look out for other Mardi Gras Indian tribes. They use signals to let the gang know another tribe is coming.
 - Flag Boy - An individual whose role in a Mardi Gras Indian tribe is to carry a flag with the name of the tribe. These flags are often raised to pass along messages to other tribe members.
 - Wild Man - An individual whose role in a Mardi Gras Indian tribe is to protect the chief. In the early 20th century, meetings between tribes were often violent, so the wild man played a vital role. Today, they help ensure that the Big Chief isn't crowded, and they move in and out of the procession.
 - Big Queen - This individual is the one responsible for keeping a Mardi Gras Indian tribe in order. In the processional, they stay on the side of the Big Chief.
 - Big Chief - This individual is responsible for a Mardi Gras Indian tribe's leadership. They often provide support and space for the tribe's activities and help pass on the traditions to the next generation.
 - Additional roles in the tribe can also include Little Chiefs and Little Queens, with young people as young as 3 or 4 participating in the tradition.

12. Watch the video [Black Masking Indians on Super Sunday](#) (3:50).

13. Ask students:

- a. What roles did they observe in the Super Sunday video?
- b. Why do you think these roles were created within the tribes?
- c. How do you think the roles in the tribes may have evolved?

14. Then ask students - in these videos, you heard individuals refer to themselves as Mardi Gras Indians, Black Masking Indians, and Masking Indians. Why do you think they refer to themselves with these different terms?

- a. Explain to students that they often use the term Mardi Gras Indians because of their association with masking and revealing their suits on Mardi Gras Day.
- b. Many have adopted the term Black Masking Indian to reflect and root the unique Black culture of masking.

Assessment/Extensions for Lesson 1: Who are the Mardi Gras Indians?

Assessment:

- Students can describe the history of the Mardi Gras Indians.
- Students can express why primary sources help better articulate the history of the Mardi Gras Indians

Extension:

- Have students research major figures in New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian history, including Big Chief Tootie Montana, Big Chief Bo Dollis, Sr., Big Chief Jolly Landry, and Big Chief Monk Boudreaux. While learning more about these Big Chiefs, students should explore how these Big Chiefs help move forward the culture and traditions of Mardi Gras Indians.

Lesson 2: Sew, Sew, Sew - What Goes into a Mardi Gras Indian Suit?

1. Explain to students that masking was a way for Black New Orleanians to walk with pride during Carnival celebrations, especially since many faced racism at these celebrations.
 - a. Watch the video of Big Chief Bo Dollis, Jr. providing context about Mardi Gras Indians on Mardi Gras Day and during Carnival celebrations (video embedded in the [lesson](#)) (2:07).
2. Watch the video of the [Mardi Gras Indians from St. Joseph's Night](#) (7:07) taken by Jules Cahn in 1970. While watching the video, ask students to write down:
 - a. What do they observe about the Mardi Gras Indian tradition? Are Mardi Gras Indians the only ones present, or are other people there to watch and join in?
 - b. What materials do they observe in the Mardi Gras Indian suits?
 - c. How many beaded patches do they see on the suits?
 - d. How are the Mardi Gras Indians interacting with the crowd?
3. Then watch the video of [Big Chief Demond Melancon from the documentary *All on a Mardi Gras Day from 2022*](#). Stop the video at the 2:30 mark. While watching the video, ask students to write down:
 - a. What materials do they observe on the suit Big Chief Demond was working on?
 - b. How many beaded patches did they observe Big Chief Demond assembling?
 - c. Big Chief Demond mentioned he started beading at 5 a.m. and stopped around midnight. How long do they think it takes to make a suit like the one being worked on in this video?
 - d. In this video, Big Chief Demond described being the "prettiest." Why do you think they're trying to look the prettiest each year?
4. Explain to students that a part of Mardi Gras Indian culture is to work to make your suit the "prettiest" each year. The prettiest doesn't just mean in comparison to someone else's suit, but how it compares to their suits from the year before. Mardi Gras Indian suits are works of art.
5. Ask students what they think the process to make a suit is like each year.
6. Explain to students that Mardi Gras Indians create a brand new suit each year. As Big Chief Bo Dollis, Jr. from *The Wild Magnolias* explained, the process to make a new suit is the same each year.
 - a. First, they choose a storyline or a theme for the suit. This theme will help as they design the imagery for the beadwork panels.

- b. Next, they draw up the suit. In this process, they make a sketch out the outline for their beadwork or get copies made of concepts and images they like. Some Mardi Gras Indians may use a piece of paper with the copy on top of the canvas material.
 - c. As they create their suit design, the Mardi Gras Indians also choose the colors for their suit. There are local stores that carry items like ostrich feathers and plumes that will order items in the colors that the Mardi Gras Indians request.
 - d. Once they design the imagery and choose their colors, they begin the rigorous sewing process. As Big Chief Demond mentioned, the small beads take much longer to sew, but they get the most detail out of them. He noted he beads "all day, every day." Many Big Chiefs mention that they barely eat and sleep when they're making their suits. They often sacrifice things to make time to sew.
 - e. The final part of the sewing process is assembling the suit, ensuring that it fits and that the beadwork is securely attached.
 - f. Due to the size of their suits, once they're ready to reveal their suit on Mardi Gras day, they use uHauls, pick-up trucks, and buses to travel to the start of their processions, which occur at top secret locations each year on Mardi Gras day.
7. Have students watch the video [One Bead at a Time](#) (2:42) where Big Chief Tyrone Casby of the Mohawk Hunters shows a part of the sewing process. Have students observe his beading process and the storytelling that is in the suit.
8. For additional examples of beadwork, students can also watch the video of [Witch Doctor Bird beading his suit in 1982](#) (2:57). Note: this video has no sound.
9. Watch the video of Big Chief Bo Dollis, Jr. Beadwork (video embedded in the [lesson](#)) (3:43) and a Timelapse of Big Chief Bo Dollis, Jr.'s Beadwork (video embedded in the [lesson](#)) (:22).
 - a. What is similar between all of the beadwork processes between the Big Chiefs?
 - b. What is different about their processes?
 - c. Do you think that the ways suits are designed today are different from the suits designed back in the 1970s? If so, why?
10. Watch: [Big Chief Bo Dollis Sr. of the Wild Magnolias discusses how parts of the Mardi Gras Indians' traditions have evolved](#) (1:59).
 - a. What were some of the reasons Big Chief Bo Dollis, Sr. discussed in terms of why there was less dancing?
 - b. Why do you think the suits got bigger?
11. Explain to students that traditionally, Mardi Gras Day is the first time a suit is revealed, with Super Sunday as the last time the suit is worn that year. Suits are retired during Super Sunday each year.

12. Watch: [Big Chief Bo Dollis Sr. discussing the making of Mardi Gras Indian Suits](#) (1:41). Explain to students that there were numerous reasons why suits weren't worn year after year.
 - a. Many Mardi Gras Indians used materials like fish scales and chicken feathers in their suits. Since the suits were made of decomposable materials, they had to retire the suit. Others used to recycle materials into their future suit, as Big Chief Bo Dollis, Sr. explained.
 - b. Today, suits are made using all new materials, and so there is an attempt to outdo each other to be the prettiest one each year.
 - c. To store their suits after they're worn, many keep the suits in their homes, in storage units or donate them to museums like the [Backstreet Cultural Museum](#).
13. Explain to students about the pieces of a Mardi Gras Indian suit. A basic Mardi Gras Indian suit has 3 main pieces, although they can be much more elaborate. The pieces of their suits include:
 - a. The crown: an elaborate headdress worn with their suits. The Big Chief's headdress can weigh anywhere from 40 to 100 pounds.
 - b. The dickie: the portion of the suit that goes from the upper chest to the waist, with a design that portrays a story.
 - c. The apron: the part of the suit from the waist to the ankle, and it comes in various shapes and sizes.
14. Distribute the Worksheet - the Mardi Gras Indian Suit.
15. Ask students to view early photos of the Mardi Gras Indians:
 - a. [Big Chief Bo Dollis, Sr. at Jazz Fest 1971](#)
 - b. [Mardi Gras Indians, 1988](#)
 - c. [Contextual Portraits of Mardi Gras Indians](#)
16. Then ask students to view photos of the Mardi Gras Indians today:
 - a. [Erika Goldring's Photos of Mardi Gras Indians](#)
17. Encourage students to research Mardi Gras Indians suit photos to observe ways the suits have evolved.
18. Using the worksheets, students answer the following questions:
 - a. What kinds of materials do you observe in the early Mardi Gras Indians suits (pre-2000)?
 - b. What kinds of materials do you observe in more recent Mardi Gras Indians suits (post-2000)?
 - c. What sort of imagery do you see in the panels? What story do you think it's trying to convey?
 - d. How does the storytelling change in the panels on the suits?
 - e. Did the suits get larger or smaller post-2000?

19. Once students have an opportunity to fill in the worksheet, ask them to share some of their observations. Why do you think that sewing is such an important part of Mardi Gras Indian culture?

Assessment/Extension for Lesson 2: Sew, Sew, Sew - What Goes into a Mardi Gras Indian Suit?

- Assessment:
 - Students can describe the evolution and importance of the Mardi Gras Indian suit
- Extension:
 - Have students watch [*We Won't Bow Down*](#), a documentary that provides students with first-hand accounts from those who are a part of Mardi Gras Indian culture. The film provides more insight for students to understand the process of beadwork and the rich history and traditions passed on between generations.

Lesson 3 - How Do We Pass on Traditions?

1. Ask students what they think of when they hear the word community.
 - a. Write student responses on the board.
2. Explain to students that community can be defined as:
 - a. A group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common
 - b. A feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals.
3. Ask students what they think of when they hear the word tradition.
 - a. Write student responses on the board.
4. Explain to students that a tradition is the passing down of customs or beliefs from generation to generation.
5. Ask students to reflect on the community that the Mardi Gras Indians have created. What are some of the things that they have done to build their community where they are able to celebrate and pass down their traditions?
6. Distribute the Worksheet - What Are Your Traditions? Students will fill in the worksheet for steps 7 - 10 below.
7. Ask students to think about traditions they have, whether it's with family members or as a part of a larger community.
8. Then ask students to fill in the worksheet, responding to the following questions:
 - a. What is a tradition that you have with your family or within your community? Some ideas for traditions to explore include traditions around food and holiday celebrations.
 - b. How do you celebrate or continue this tradition today?
 - c. Where does the tradition take place? Can it occur in any location?
 - d. When does this tradition occur? Is it during a specific time of year?
 - e. Who taught you this tradition? How did they pass this tradition on to you?
 - f. Has this tradition changed at all over the years? How?
9. Once students have had an opportunity to fill in the worksheet, have them split into pairs or small groups to share their traditions with one another. As they share their traditions in small groups, have them discuss:
 - a. How their traditions are different.
 - b. How their traditions are the same.
10. Then ask students to share any takeaways they had from this experience.
 - a. Was it difficult or easy to share information with one another about their traditions?
 - b. How were their traditions similar to those of the Mardi Gras Indians?

- c. How were their traditions different from those of the Mardi Gras Indians?
- d. How do they think traditions can sustain over multiple generations?

Assessment/Extensions for Lesson 3: How Do We Pass on Traditions?

- Assessment:
 - Students are able to articulate a personal tradition and be able to compare and contrast their tradition with both their peers and with Mardi Gras Indian Tradition.
- Extension:
 - Have students conduct oral histories with family members around their family traditions. Students can explore questions and lines of inquiry around the traditions they named and can use Soundtrap to record their family member's responses.

Lesson 4 - Firewater - the Music of the Mardi Gras Indians

1. Watch the video of [2022 Uptown Super Sunday](#) (5:44). After watching the video, ask students:
 - a. What instruments did you hear in the video?
 - b. What did you notice about the songs they performed?
 - c. Were the songs repetitious? Did they involve singing?
 - d. What happened when Mardi Gras Indians from two different tribes interacted with one another?
2. Explain to students that in addition to their elaborate suits, the Mardi Gras Indian tradition also includes music. Many Mardi Gras Indian songs utilize call and response exchanges between the Big Chief and the rest of the tribe. These songs can last for a couple of minutes or much longer.
 - a. The songs are structured with repeated rhythms, like the Bamboula or Street Beat and repeated melodic lines.
 - b. The Big Chief often puts their own stamp or flair on songs within the Mardi Gras Indian repertoire.
3. Explain to students that Mardi Gras Indians get together to rehearse their songs and dance. These practice sessions are similar to festivities that have been held on Sunday afternoons in [Congo Square](#).
4. Watch the video of [Big Chief Jake Millon and White Eagles rehearsing *My Big Chief's Got a Golden Crown*](#) (8:23) during their practice in 1982. Note: This video can be presented in shorter segments to adjust to allotted class time.
5. Ask students:
 - a. What did they observe about this practice? Are the instruments the same or different than those observed in some of the other Mardi Gras Indian videos they watched? What instruments or found objects do they play on?
 - b. How would they describe what's happening in the music? Is there a leader in this music?
 - c. Why do you think the music you've heard is so uptempo? Note: The music is meant to help keep people moving, especially recognizing their suits are so heavy.
6. Explain to students that Mardi Gras Indian music began to evolve from what they heard in the Super Sunday video and White Eagle rehearsal due to the music being recorded for the very first time.

7. Watch the video of Quint Davis, producer of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, describing recording the first Mardi Gras Indian recording of Big Chief Bo Dollis, Sr. (video embedded in the [lesson](#)) (4:11).
8. Listen to [Big Chief Bo Dollis, Sr. as he describes recording the song *Handa Wanda*](#) (4:53).
 - a. Explain to students that by recording Mardi Gras Indian music, it not only allowed more individuals to access the music, but it also allowed for the merging of a new sound - Mardi Gras Indian funk.
9. Listen to [Handa Wanda by the Wild Magnolias](#).
 - a. What elements of the song retain the traditional qualities of Mardi Gras Indian music?
 - b. What's the instrumentation on this song? How does it help emphasize the call and response patterns known in Mardi Gras Indian music?

Note: The song features Big Chief Bo Dollis, Sr., Big Chief Monk Boudreaux, along with members of the Wild Magnolias, as well as Wille Tee, saxophonist Earl Turbinton, conga player Alfred "Uganda" Roberts, drummer Joseph "Zigaboo" Modeliste, bassist George French, and Snooks Eaglin.

10. Explain to students that several Mardi Gras Indian tribes performed at the first annual New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival in 1970. This was the first time that Mardi Gras Indians performed at a major music festival and along with the first Mardi Gras Indian recording marked an increase in visibility and interest in the Mardi Gras Indians.
11. Hand out the Worksheet - Mardi Gras Indian Songs. Students will fill in the worksheet for steps 13 to 19 below.
12. Explain to students that they'll be listening to the same song, Tu Way Pocky Way; however, the interpretations between Big Chiefs changes.
13. Listen to [To-Way-Bac-A-Way](#) (1958). Note: this recording is a field recording, with the song clip ending at 1:06. The recording contains the phrase "don't give a damn." After listening to the song, ask students:
 - a. What instrument(s) do you hear on the recording? Which one is playing the rhythmic foundation of the song?
 - b. What sort of song form is used?
 - c. Do the song lyrics seem to be pre-written or improvised?
14. Explain to students that Mardi Gras Indians may use drums, tambourines, bottles tapped with sticks, cowbells, and anything else that can be played in a percussive manner. When learning songs, everything is learned by ear rather than via sheet music or formal methods of learning.

15. Listen to [Two Way Pak E Way by The Wild Magnolias](#) (1974) (7:49). After listening to the song, ask students:
 - a. What instrument(s) do you hear on the recording? Which one is playing the rhythmic foundation of the song?
 - b. What sort of song form is used? How does this form differ from the previous version?
 - c. Do the song lyrics seem to be pre-written or improvised? What references do you hear in the lyrics?
 - d. What sort of musical influences do you hear in this recording?
16. [Tu Way Pocky Way by Big Chief Juan Pardo and the Golden Comanches](#) (2015) (3:32). After listening to the song, ask students:
 - a. What instrument(s) do you hear on the recording? Which one is playing the rhythmic foundation of the song?
 - b. What sort of song form is used? How does this form differ from the previous version?
 - c. Do the song lyrics seem to be pre-written or improvised? What references do you hear in the lyrics?
 - d. What sort of musical influences do you hear in this recording?
17. [Tu Way Pocky Way by Flagboy Giz](#) (2021) (2:22). After listening to the song, ask students:
 - a. What instrument(s) do you hear on the recording? Which one is playing the rhythmic foundation of the song?
 - b. What sort of song form is used? How does this form differ from the previous version?
 - c. Do the song lyrics seem to be pre-written or improvised? What references do you hear in the lyrics?
 - d. What sort of musical influences do you hear in this recording?
18. After listening to and analyzing the different versions of Tu Way Pocky Way. Ask students:
 - a. What do you think Tu Way Pocky Way Means? Note: it means “get out of the way”.
 - b. Do you think that the more modern recordings have been able to retain feeling as more traditional interpretations?
 - c. Different genres were reflected in each version you heard of this song; which one did you like the most? Why?
19. Continue the listening explorations using the song *Firewater*.
 - a. Students will first listen to *Firewater* from *Take Me to the River New Orleans* (video embedded in the [lesson](#)).
 - i. What instrument(s) do you hear on the recording? Which one is playing the rhythmic foundation of the song?
 - ii. What sort of song form is used?

- iii. Do the song lyrics seem to be pre-written or improvised? What references do you hear in the lyrics?
 - iv. What sort of musical influences do you hear in this recording?
 - v. Does this recording have a more traditional or modern feel?
- b. Then students will listen to *Firewater* by Big Chief Bo Dollis, Jr. and the Wild Magnolias (video embedded in the [lesson](#)) (4:28).
- i. What instrument(s) do you hear on the recording? Which one is playing the rhythmic foundation of the song?
 - ii. What sort of song form is used?
 - iii. Do the song lyrics seem to be pre-written or improvised? What references do you hear in the lyrics?
 - iv. What sort of musical influences do you hear in this recording?
 - v. Does this recording have a more traditional or modern feel?
- c. Then students will listen to *Firewater by Cha Wa* (4:49).
- i. What instrument(s) do you hear on the recording? Which one is playing the rhythmic foundation of the song?
 - ii. What sort of song form is used?
 - iii. Do the song lyrics seem to be pre-written or improvised? What references do you hear in the lyrics?
 - iv. What sort of musical influences do you hear in this recording?
 - v. Does this recording have a more traditional or modern feel?

Assessment/Extensions for Lesson 4: Firewater - the Music of the Mardi Gras Indians

- Assessment:
 - Students are able to identify call and response patterns in Mardi Gras Indian music.
 - Students are able to identify the instrumentation in Mardi Gras Indian music.
 - Students can describe how Mardi Gras Indian music changed after it started to be recorded and shared outside of the Mardi Gras Indian community.
- Extension:
 - Connect this lesson to the [Take Me to the River New Orleans Unit on Congo Square](#)
 - Connect this lesson to the [Berklee PULSE page on Funk](#)

Attributions

This unit was written by Bo Dollis Jr. and Ashley Shabankareh.

Bo Dollis, Jr's entire life has been shaped and spurred by Mardi Gras Indian Culture. He masked for the first time at the age of ten, though his parents, Big Queen Laurita Dollis and the late Bo Dollis, Sr., Big Chief of the Wild Magnolias, wanted him to wait a few more years before he participated fully. Determined to mask, Bo Jr. managed to get his mother's attention in that regard when he destroyed one of her beaded purses and started sewing on his own. No one could hold him back after that bold and decisive move, and young Bo took his first steps towards becoming a Big Chief. Bo took on the title of Big Chief in 2006, and assumed leadership of The Wild Magnolias in 2012 at the behest of his father. Bo Jr. has masked and performed with the band throughout most of his life, in venues all over New Orleans including Tipitina's and the House of Blues, as well as at multiple Jazz Fests. He and the band played the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia, as well as The White House in 2011 for President Obama when Bo Dollis, Sr., was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. The Wild Magnolias have been honored to share the stage with various luminaries over the years, including Cyril Neville, Dr. John, Big Chief Monk Boudreaux, Troy "Trombone Shorty" Andrews, Galactic, Rockin' Dopsie, Marva Wright, Robbie Robinson, Master P, and Widespread Panic. Bo Jr. and the band released A New Kind of Funk in 2013, their first CD of original recordings since 1999.

Ashley Shabankareh (she/they) is a New Orleans musician, music educator, and arts administrator. Ashley is the Director of Operations and Programs for Trombone Shorty Foundation, and they also work as an Adjunct Professor at Loyola University New Orleans and Xavier University. Ashley has worked with numerous arts organizations during her career, including Artist Corps New Orleans, Upbeat Academy Foundation, New Orleans Jazz Orchestra, New Orleans Jazz Museum, and Preservation Hall Foundation. In her spare time, Ashley serves as the Board President for Folk Alliance International, Vice President of the Jazz Education Network, and Board Secretary for Second Line Arts Collective. Ashley is an avid performer and has performed alongside Allen Toussaint, Aretha Franklin, Big Sam's Funky Nation, Theresa Anderson, and in her own group, Marina Orchestra.

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Take Me To The River New Orleans The Mardi Gras Indian Suit

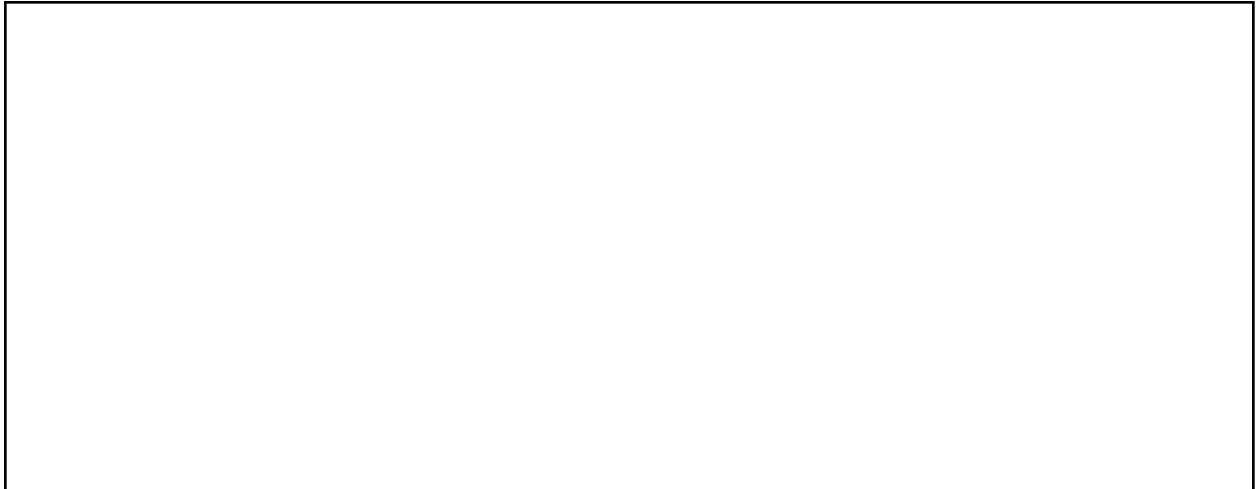
The creation of a Mardi Gras Indian suit is a deeply personal and time-consuming process. It can take a full year to complete all the intricate beadwork panels. In learning about the Mardi Gras Indian suits, you've seen how they have shifted from using recycled and decomposable materials to utilizing all brand-new materials which can cost thousands of dollars. In this worksheet, you'll look at how the Mardi Gras Indian suit has evolved over the years.

Look at photos of Mardi Gras Indian suits from the 1950s - today. Here are some links to get you started:

- [Big Chief Bo Dollis, Sr. at Jazz Fest 1971](#)
- [Mardi Gras Indians, 1988](#)
- [Contextual Portraits of Mardi Gras Indians](#)
- [Erika Goldring's Photos of Mardi Gras Indians](#)

What kinds of materials do you observe in the early Mardi Gras Indians suits (pre-2000)?

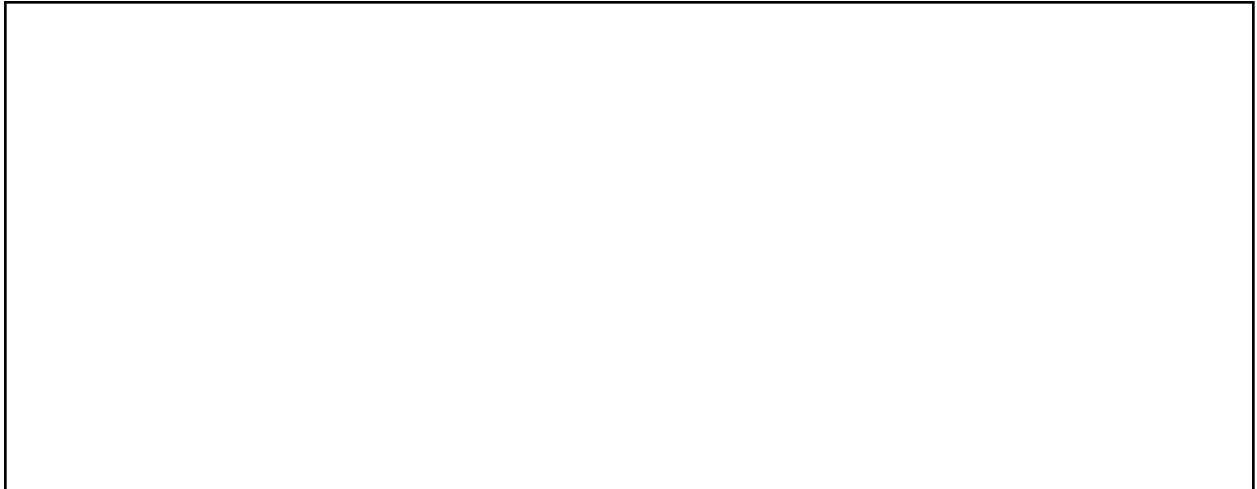
What kinds of materials do you observe in more recent Mardi Gras Indians suits (post-2000)?



What sort of imagery do you see in the panels? What stories are they trying to convey?



Over time, how does the storytelling change in the panels on the suits ?



Did the suits get larger or smaller post-2000? How do you think that impacts the way the wearers move and interact with each other on the streets?



Take Me To The River New Orleans What Are Your Traditions?

Tradition is the passing of customs or beliefs from one generation to another. In New Orleans, traditions are tied to deep personal bonds between elders and culture bearers and the younger generation, allowing for these traditions to remain meaningful in the present. In learning about the Mardi Gras Indians, you've heard Big Chiefs like Bo Dollis Jr. and Monk Boudreaux talking about how they continue to pass on the traditions of beadwork and song to the next generation. In this worksheet, you'll explore some of your own unique traditions.

What is a tradition that you have with your family or within your community? Some ideas for traditions to explore include traditions around food and holiday celebrations.

How do you celebrate or continue this tradition today?

Where does the tradition take place? Can it occur in any location?

When does this tradition occur? Is it during a specific time of year?

Who taught you this tradition? How did they pass this tradition on to you?

Has this tradition changed at all over the years? How?

Take Me To The River New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian Songs

The music of the Mardi Gras Indians is heavily influenced by the gatherings that took place in Congo Square. With repetitious Bamboula rhythms (also referred to as Street Beat or Second Line Beats) coupled with call and response, the music is just as important within Mardi Gras Indian traditions as the beadwork. In this worksheet, you'll explore how these core elements have remained a part of Mardi Gras Indians music from traditional music to Mardi Gras Indian Funk.

"To-Way-Bac-A-Way" (1958)

What instrument(s) do you hear on the recording? Which instrument/s are playing the rhythmic foundation of the song?

What sort of song form is used? Write what you hear.

Do the song lyrics seem to be pre-written or improvised?

What sort of musical influences do you hear in this recording?

“Two Way Pak E Way” by The Wild Magnolias (1974)

What instrument(s) do you hear on the recording? Which one is playing the rhythmic foundation of the song?

What sort of song form is used? How does this form differ from the previous version?

Do the song lyrics seem to be pre-written or improvised? What references do you hear in the lyrics?

What sort of musical influences do you hear in this recording?

“Tu Way Pocky Way” by Big Chief Juan Pardo and the Golden Comanches (2015)

What instrument(s) do you hear on the recording? Which one is playing the rhythmic foundation of the song?

What sort of song form is used? How does this form differ from the previous version?

Do the song lyrics seem to be pre-written or improvised? What references do you hear in the lyrics?

What sort of musical influences do you hear in this recording?

“Tu Way Pocky Way” by Flagboy Giz (2021)

What instrument(s) do you hear on the recording? Which one is playing the rhythmic foundation of the song?

What sort of song form is used? How does this form differ from the previous version?

Do the song lyrics seem to be pre-written or improvised? What references do you hear in the lyrics?

What sort of musical influences do you hear in this recording?

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Unit 5: Won't Bow Down - the Traditions of the Mardi Gras Indians

Lesson 4: Firewater - the Music of the Mardi Gras Indians