



**Ferdinand Bigard**  
**Mardi Gras Indian**

Ferdinand Bigard was the Big Chief of the Cheyenne Black Mardi Gras Indian tribe and was widely known for his unique style of designing and making Mardi Gras Indian suits. With almost fifty years in the tradition, he provided a rare historical perspective on Mardi Gras Indian songs, dances, and other traditions.

Mr. Bigard was born in New Orleans in 1928. He began making costumes in 1946 for Mardi Gras Indian gangs like the "Seminole Braves," the "White Eagles," and the "Cheyenne Hunters." His intricate and creative hand-sewn beadwork was based on Native American designs and original sewing methods. This tradition, his innovative costume design and construction, distinguished his fine work. Some of his beadwork also reflected Haitian influences or depicts aspects of New Orleans culture like second line parades. He drew his designs on canvas before beginning to bead a patch.

He said, "Masking as a Mardi Gras Indian is an important part of African-American culture and tradition in New Orleans. The maskers instill pride and preserve the history of the Native American Indians' contribution to the African American slaves' search for freedom and dignity." He pointed out that for many years, masking as Indians was the only available way of participating in Carnival for many African Americans.

After Retiring from the Postal Service, he devoted himself full-time to sewing and designing Mardi Gras Indian costumes. For more than 45 years, Mr. Bigard designed and made suits. Mr. Bigard was a member of the Louisiana Crafts Program as a master Mardi Gras Indian costume maker. He made beaded patches like those used on Mardi Gras Indian suits, which sold for \$100 to \$3,000.

Several of his costumes are in museums throughout the United States. In 1993, Bigard received a Folklife Apprenticeship grant as a master craftsman to teach tailoring, patternmaking, crown-making, plume arrangement, drawing, and Mardi Gras Indian history to his apprentice, John E. Breaux, Jr. He demonstrated his skill in Mardi Gras

Indian beading and costume making regularly at festivals such as the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. He also devoted considerable time to teaching, lecturing, and demonstrating Mardi Gras Indian crafts to school children in the New Orleans area. He developed a program in which he provided free instruction to children throughout the public-school systems.

The photograph above is provided courtesy of Michael P. Smith, veteran New Orleans photographer. It is entitled "Super Sunday" and was taken in 1980 on North Claiborne Avenue in New Orleans.

Updated November 28, 2016 by NSU-Natchitoches Louisiana Folklife Center Staff