

Montana, Allison "Tootie"



Mardi Gras Indian

Allison "Tootie" Montana, long-time Big Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas, has been a Mardi Gras Indian for close to fifty years. Born in New Orleans in 1922, he began working on Mardi Gras Indian suits at the age of ten. Describing his costume making, he says, "Making Indian and sewing Indian suits is a time-honored tradition in the Montana family." His great uncle, Becate Batiste, is often named in histories of the tradition as the founders of one of the first recorded tribes in the city, the Creole Wild West. Tootie's father, Alfred Montana, also masked Indian for many years and was Big Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas. The tribe that Tootie leads now.

Tootie began to mask Indians in 1947 after seeing his father helping young men in the Eighth Ward. He quickly made himself a suit, and has been masking since. At present, the oldest active Big Chief, Tootie provides an invaluable perspective on the history and changes of masking Indian in New Orleans. In the old days he says, "Violence was frequently associated with the Mardi Gras Indians. After World War II Carnival began to change and the fighting stopped. Today, Mardi Gras Indians don't fight physically, they fight with their costumes, competing to see which can be the prettiest."

Tootie Montana says, "I stick to the tradition and mask Indian the way my daddy and them used to do it." He is undoubtedly one of the great masters of Mardi Gras Indian suit making. He is expert at making the suits associated with New Orleans' African-American neighborhood Carnival traditions as well as some of the lesser-known.

He creates costumes from his own ideas. He worked as a metal lather for many years. His job required him to build frames for plaster with metal and wire. He approaches his suit designs the same way, always making sure his costumes are straight and balanced. He changes his costume each year, using a variety of materials including cardboard, rhinestones, pearls, tiny mirrors, and sequins. Describing the differences between Uptown and Downtown costume styles, he explains that Uptown Indians generally use beaded designs and small rhinestones with lots of ribbon and plumes. Downtown Indians like Montana use more sequins, which his father called "fish scales." Tootie uses beads but prefers big stones and feathers instead of plumes.

Masking Indian remains a family tradition among the Montanas. Tootie's son Darryl was very young when he began masking. Now his grandson, Chance Stevenson, has started to mask. The women in the family also play an essential role with masking, they help with the sewing of the costumes.

"Big Chief" Montana has received widespread national and international recognition for his mastery of Mardi Gras Indian traditions. He is the recipient of the National Heritage Fellowship Award and a Louisiana Folk Arts Apprenticeship Grant. With the Yellow Pocahontas, he has also performed at many festivals like the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival.

The photograph included here is provided by permission of [Michael P. Smith](#), author of *Spirit World*. *Spirit World* is a colorful and accurate portrayal of Afro-American spiritualism in New Orleans.