



Second Line Dancer and Mardi Gras Indian

Johnnie Stevenson, better known as "Kool," is dedicated to keeping the unique African-American culture of New Orleans alive. He has masked for years as Gang Flag for the Wild Magnolias Mardi Gras Indian gang. He has also participated in several second line clubs like the Scene Boosters, the Scene Highlighters, and the Money Wasters. Johnnie organized a second line club that children called Kool and the Gang to help get neighborhood children involved in their cultural heritage. He has practiced the second line tradition for at least 27 years, and is knowledgeable about the history of the tradition as far back as the late 1800s. Originally the tradition "had to do with funerals, benevolent associations, and celebrations," he says. "Today, second line clubs don't just march for funerals. We have an annual parade."

When Johnnie Stevenson, a native of New Orleans, returned from duty in the Vietnam War, he decided to join a group of young men his age called the Scene Highlighters. Later, he joined the Scene Boosters.

In 1969, at the age of 21, he began to create the elaborate streamers, decorated umbrellas, and fans sported by second line clubs in their parades. The streamers are decorated with a variety of materials including ribbon rosettes, rhinestones, feathers, caribou, fringes, glitter, and sequins. The matching streamers identify members of a marching club. He points out that Uptown clubs like his carried umbrellas, while Downtown clubs carried baskets. Today club members may carry fans, umbrellas, walking canes, or baskets.

Mr. Stevenson remarks on the changes in the second line over the years. "Streamers are part of a uniform, which identifies the club that is parading. Years ago, marchers in jazz funeral parades wore dark suits and simply took a long piece of ribbon, draped it over their shoulder, and wrote the dead man's name on it. Today, second line clubs wear coordinated outfits for their annual parades, and streamers that are highly elaborate and imaginative."

Fans are made of plywood covered with ostrich plumes, which are very expensive. When he started second lining, he could "hit the streets for \$100.00," but each person in a club today can easily spend \$800.00 to \$1,000.00 each on an outfit. The umbrella was the most traditional part of the second line outfit. Once second liners carried plain umbrellas and little else, but today, the umbrellas are highly decorated with feathers, sequins, and other materials.

When he began masking Indian, he did not belong to any particular group. He decided to get serious about it, and joined the Wild Magnolias, led by Big Chief Bo Dollis, and he continues to mask every year as Gang Flag. Mr. Stevenson learned to mask Indian and to create the elaborate Mardi Gras Indian suits from Harold Fedison and Big Chief Bo Dollis. His son, Joey, masked Indian at four years of age.

With the Scene Boosters, Johnnie Stevenson has performed at the White House and at folklife festivals throughout the United States. He has shared his skills in making streamers, umbrellas, and fans with the public through craft demonstrations and narrative workshops at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and the Louisiana Folklife Festival.