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Essay by Bryan Wagner (guest post)*

“The Wild Tchoupitoulas” is a definitive expression of the New Orleans sound. From “Brother John” to “Hey Hey (Indians Comin’),” the album draws on carnival traditions stretching back centuries, adapting songs from the Mardi Gras Indians. Music performed in the streets and in neighborhood bars with tambourines and makeshift percussion is transformed on the album into electric rhythm and blues accented by funk, reggae, and calypso. The album bridges not only genres but generations, linking the improvised flow from group leader George Landry, better known as Big Chief Jolly, to the four-part harmony vocals provided by his nephews Art, Charles, Aaron, and Cyril—the core members of the soon-to-be-formed Neville Brothers, playing together here for the first time. With support from the Meters, the city’s preeminent funk ensemble, “The Wild Tchoupitoulas” brings an all-star brigade, pressing these old chants into new arrangements that have since become carnival standards. In the process, the album helped to set the terms by which processional second-line music in New Orleans would be commercialized through the record industry and the tourist trade, setting into motion an ongoing process in the city that has raised more questions than it has answered about creativity, autonomy, authenticity, and appropriation under the conditions of a new cultural economy.

Founded in 1974 by George Landry, henceforth Big Chief Jolly, during a long night with some friends at the Patio Bar, an uptown club by the riverfront, the Wild Tchoupitoulas tribe remains active to this day. A black working-class mystic society and fraternal organization, the Wild Tchoupitoulas is one of several dozen tribes whose members mask as American Indians on Mardi Gras and other ritual occasions, taking to the streets in intricate and often astonishingly beautiful handmade costumes, boasting about their beauty and bravery in their own creole patois (“Hu-Na-Nay!”) while beating tambourines, sticks, woodblocks, cowbells, and found percussion instruments ranging from hubcaps to cold-drink bottles. On parade, tribes look out for other tribes, meeting in a ritual that involves improvised competitive wordplay and the display of their suits. Indians traditionally make a new suit every year. Working throughout the year, often in
group situations where older members help out younger members, Indians devote significant financial resources and countless hours to the manufacture of garments featuring brightly dyed ostrich plumes, sequins, rhinestones, and ornate beadwork. Organized into hierarchical roles—from Big Chief to Flag Boy, Spy Boy, and Wild Man—tribes are based in local neighborhoods. On Sunday evenings, from October to February, they meet in open practices in nearby bars, with increasing frequency in the run-up to carnival, working on their chanting, battle dancing, and drumming with assistance from a chorus of neighbors and supporters who also follow them in procession on Mardi Gras and St. Joseph’s Night, providing the second-line accompaniment.

Things began to change in the 1970s when the Mardi Gras Indians became important figures in the new cultural economy that emerged in New Orleans in the wake of desegregation. “The Wild Tchoupitoulas” helped set the terms by which Mardi Gras Indian traditions would be commercialized during this decade in the music and tourist industries, but the album followed the important precedent of the Wild Magnolias, led by Bo Dollis, which was the first tribe to record traditional chants with a full backup band. Jolly was masking with Bo Dollis before he founded the Wild Tchoupitoulas, and he was inspired by the Wild Magnolias to record his own album with his tribe and family members. Jolly’s nephews all came into the project with a lot of experience in the music industry. Keyboardist Art Neville had the longest run, with hits going back to “Mardi Gras Mambo” (1955), and for nearly a decade leading the Meters, local legends with tunes like “Cissy Strut” (1969) and credits behind artists like Paul McCartney and Patti LaBelle. Saxophonist Charles Neville had toured and worked as a session player since he left home in the 1950s with Gene Franklin’s Houserockers to join the Rabbit Foot Minstrel Show. Vocalist Aaron Neville worked in Art’s first band, the Hawkettes, before recording a string of solo records, leading to the chart-topping “Tell It Like It Is” (1967). Percussionist Cyril Neville, years younger than his brothers, came up playing percussion in Deacon John’s Electric Soul Train and in family bands like the Neville Sounds, Soul Machine, and the Meters. On “The Wild Tchoupitoulas,” Jolly and his nephews are joined by Second Chief Norman Bell, Trail Chief Booker Washington, Flag Boy Carl Christmas, and Spy Boy Amos Landry—and backed by the remaining Meters--Leo Nocentelli on guitar, George Porter, Jr. on bass, and Zigaboo (or “Zig”) Modeliste on drums.

“The Wild Tchoupitoulas” fuses the deep knowledge and reverence for tradition brought by Jolly and his tribe members with the talent and a wide range of musical expertise brought by his nephews and their collaborators. When call-and-response chants like “Hey Pocky A-Way” are performed on the streets, the leader’s improvisation is interspersed with the same one or two melodic phrases sung in unison by the tribe and second line. This simplicity helps the chants cut through competing noise, and it makes them easy to learn. On “The Wild Tchoupitoulas,” by contrast, these same chants are frequently, though not always, broken into verse and chorus, following the pattern of pop songwriting, and they are embedded into chord progressions that contextualize the melody while giving structure to the harmony vocals that take the place of the unison response. Furthermore, these non-traditional arrangements are funk’d up by Leo Nocentelli’s chicken-scratch guitar and the bright, brittle fills from Art’s turns on the clavinet even as they are extended thematically through allusions to the musical traditions of the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico. These connections to neighboring traditions are stressed in percussion patterns, like the clave, laid down across the album, marking the Afro-Cuban influence long integrated into New Orleans, as well as in stylized figures that reach out to
Jamaica (the sparse, ascending reggae bass lines) and Trinidad (the calypso-based chorus to “Meet de Boys on de Battlefront”).

Across the album, this approach feels intuitive, not forced, and incremental, not disruptive, precisely because all of this music is already related. By nesting traditional chants inside pop and funk arrangements derived from the very same vocal and percussion lines they now enclose, “The Wild Tchoupitoulas” acts out a recursive history of popular music. The album is less about folk music going electric than about the enlivening tension between a flourishing street tradition and its ongoing commercialization, a tension that facilitates not only buying and selling but also the remixing of some very old sounds with other styles, other approaches, and other instruments. In the process, the album raises important questions about tradition and innovation, inheritance and appropriation, culture and commerce that are still as pressing and unresolved today as they were when Big Chief Jolly brought his group into the studio.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.