

# The King Who Walks the Beat

BEAT STREET — Some people march to the beat of their own drummer. Lionel Batiste *is* his own drummer — as well as being a merry prankster, raucous raconteur and a man of many nieces.

To his long list of accomplishments, Uncle Lionel can now add the title of King of Krewe du Vieux 2003.

A lifelong resident of one of the city's more colorful neighborhoods, Treme, Lord Lionel holds all that is unique and wonderful about New Orleans deep in his heart, and shares it freely with all he meets. One of the legends of the heyday of the brass bands, he is the oldest musician of that era still marching, still setting the beat on his customized bass drum.

The son of a blacksmith and musician who always had a variety of instruments around the house, his majesty experimented with whichever one was closest any time his dad left the house. "But I always wanted to play drums," he recalls. "So when I was 11 years old, he bought me my first snare drum for five dollars."

Soon the precocious potentate was performing in his school band, happily snapping out rhythms on the trap. Then one day the bass drum player was sick, and King Lionel got the call.

"The drum was probably bigger than I was," recounts the king, "so they had a guy in front of me carrying it while I played. Only problem was when he stopped suddenly, and I'd run right into the drum."

Over the years, Uncle Lionel toyed with other instruments, especially the banjo, but the bang of the drum always called him back. "There are so many riffs you can put into the drum. The whole band looks to the bass drum to hold the time together."

And it was always the bass drum alone that our cacophonous king favored, having no interest in taking on a full drum kit. "Those guys always had a lot of stuff to drag around and

set up," he sniffs. "I was always too busy talking to the girls for that. And if I wasn't playing music, I was out on the dance floor."

Indeed, his majesty still steps lively to the music, and never misses an opportunity to assist a young lady in learning a few new moves.

While music never provided a living for King Lionel — he has had more careers than JLo has had tabloid romances, including electrician, decorator, bricklayer, candy maker, plumber, and float builder, to name just a few — it has always been his life. Starting with his five sisters and eight brothers, not to mention innumerable uncles, cousins, etc., there are few Batistes in the clan who don't play at least one instrument.

Marching to music has been a lifelong entertainment for our drumming despot. There was the time when Uncle Lionel and his fellow revelers marched late into the night, shedding much of their clothing along the way, which ultimately earned them a free ride to central lockup.

"The judge asked my brother if he remembered what song we were playing last," is how the king tells the story, "and he told him 'Coming Round the Mountain'. The judge asked if we could play it right there, and we ended up marching out of jail to that song."

King Lionel is also one of the few people to have marched in every Krewe du Vieux parade — and one of the very few to remember all of them. He loves the costumes (or lack thereof), and the overall spirit of the parade. "I'm proud to be chosen as king," he says with his ever-present sly cat grin.

What's the secret to being the oldest regular second-liner, the guy the young bucks come to for special handmade drum accessories and tuning tips, natty and fit at an age when the only rhythm a lot of people get comes from their rocking chair? "Even though

I grew up in the Depression, I never did have no hard times," he recalls, momentarily semi-serious. "We never went to bed hungry, and we always helped out a lot of the folks around us. People in Treme always took care of each other. That's how you do it."

Uncle Lionel's drum has taken him around the world — England, Switzerland, Japan, Germany, and more — and he has held the beat for bands ranging from the WPA brass band to legendary ensembles like the Olympia, Tuxedo, and of course Treme brass bands.

Now the beat has carried him to that pinnacle of parading, King of Krewe du Vieux. King Lionel will be accompanied by his royal consort and niece, Zandra, as he makes his regal ride on February 15. And you know the rhythm will be right.

## CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS

In all past references to the "Honorable Edwin Edwards," we retract, and deeply regret ever using, the word "Honorable."

Mayoral brother-in-law Cedric "Show Me The Money" Smith was mischaracterized in a recent edition of this paper. What we meant to say was that he is a money-grubbing, greedy, graft-grabbing conniving quintessence of cupidity.

A recent series identified mold as a Louisiana state problem. Mold is actually the Louisiana state plant. Governor Mike "Tooth Fairy" Foster has been identified as the state problem.

Suzanne "Take A Hike" Terrell was previously misidentified as being "formerly pro-choice." She should have been described as "formerly possessed of integrity, scruples, character, and some slight regard for the truth."