krewes such as Bacchus and Endymion invite guest celebrities to ride as their monarch or parade marshal. Stars such as Bob Hope, Billy Crystal, Dennis Quaid, Wayne Newton, Tom Jones, Neil Sedaka, Paul Anka, Dolly Parton and John Goodman have been so honored.

There is no overall theme for Mardi Gras, yet each individual parade depicts a specific subject. Among the more popular are children's stories, mythology, famous people, entertainment and literature. The 15-37 floats in each procession are designed to illustrate the parade's theme, and the maskers are costumed to reflect the title of each float. But Mardi Gras parades are more than just floats. A 200-member parading krewe may actually have 3,000 participants, including band members, motorcycle groups, dance teams, clown units, etc.

Through the Ages

While its precise European origins are shrouded in mystery, Mardi Gras received its first mention in North America in 1699. French explorer Pierre le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville camped on the Mississippi River on a spot 60 miles south of the present location of New Orleans. Knowing the date, March 3, was being celebrated as a holiday in his native France, he christened the site *Point du Mardi Gras*. During the next century, the celebration of Mardi Gras included private masked balls and random street maskings in the cities of Mobile and New Orleans. By the 1820s, maskers on foot and in decorated carriages began to appear on Fat Tuesday, and in 1837 the first documented procession in New Orleans occurred, but it bore no resemblance to today's Carnival.

The modern-day celebration of Mardi Gras in New Orleans was born in 1857 with the *flambeau*-lit (torch-lit) nighttime parade of the Mistick Krewe of Comus. In 1871, the Twelfth Night Revelers presented Mardi Gras with its first queen. In 1872, Mardi Gras' first daytime procession was presented by Rex, the King of Carnival. The event was partially inspired by a visit of the Russian Grand Duke Alexis Romanoff, who, legend has it, journeyed to New Orleans in pursuit of lovely singing sensation Lydia Thompson, who was starring in the burlesque play "Blue Beard."

The show's favorite melody was "If Ever I Cease to Love." With its nonsensical lyrics--*If ever I cease to love, May cows lay eggs and fish grow legs, If ever I cease to love*--the crowds went wild! It was played during the first Rex parade and has remained as the royal anthem of Mardi Gras. Rex also gave Carnival its flag and its official colors--purple for justice, gold for power and green for faith.

Carnival's third oldest parading krewe, the Knights of Momus, presented its first procession on New Year's Eve, 1872, and 10 years later, the Krewe of Proteus debuted.

Les Mysterieuses, Carnival's first female organization, staged its premiere ball in 1896, but it was not until 1941 that the Krewe of Venus presented the first ladies' Mardi Gras parade. In 1909, Zulu, Carnival's first black parading krewe, was founded as a spoof of white Mardi Gras. Its parade is now one of the early highlights on Fat Tuesday.

While membership in parading organizations was once limited to only a few citizens, the expansion of Mardi Gras into the suburbs and democratization of Mardi Gras in the 1960s and 1970s opened up participation to virtually everyone. Super krewes such as Bacchus and Endymion helped modernize the festivities. In New Orleans there are krewes for men, women, men and women, families and gays. On Fat Tuesday, about a dozen marching clubs cavort around town, including the historic Jefferson City Buzzards, founded in 1890, and the celebrity-filled Pete Fountain's Half-Fast Walking Club. For more than a century, the elusive black Indian tribes such as the Wild Tchoupitoulas and Yellow Pocahontas have also gathered on Carnival Day.

Y'all Come

But after all is said and done, Mardi Gras remains an event and a spirit that must be experienced to be understood. It's a mixture of centuries-old traditions and high tech innovations, 1990s style. From the bawdy behavior of Bourbon Street to the family festival that Mardi Gras is everywhere else, the Carnival season in New Orleans truly defies description. Perhaps noted local author Don Lee Keith said it best: "In the truest sense, it is magic. But magic revealed is magic destroyed. And that is why the gods who made Mardi Gras dissolved the secret of that day in a chalice of mystery, leaving their creation forever without definition."

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