



## Big Chief Harrison and the Mardi Gras Indians

By Al Kennedy

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**Big Chief Harrison and the Mardi Gras Indians** By Al Kennedy

From age four in 1937 to his death in 1998, Donald Harrison Sr. embraced the tradition of New Orleans' Mardi Gras Indians. As Big Chief of the Guardian of the Flames, he led with both wisdom and passion. This biography of this remarkable man is based on more than seventy interviews with his family and others he influenced.

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### Editorial Review

#### From the Inside Flap

Based on more than seventy interviews with the subject and his close friends and family, this biography delves deep into the life of Donald Harrison-a waiter, performer, mentor to musicians, philosopher, devoted family man, and, most notably, the Big Chief of the Guardians of the Flame, a Mardi Gras Indian tribe. The firsthand accounts and anecdotes from those who knew him offer insight into the electrifying existence of a man who enriched the culture of New Orleans, took pride in his African American heritage, and advocated education throughout the city.

Beneath a vibrant costume of colorful feathers and intricate beading stood a man of conviction who possessed a great intellect and intense pride. Harrison grew up during the Great Depression and faced discrimination throughout his life but refused to bow down to oppression. Through determination and an insatiable eagerness to learn, he found solace in philosophy, jazz, and art and spiritual meaning in the Mardi Gras Indian tradition. He shared his ideals and discoveries with his family, whom he protected fiercely, until he took his last breath in 1998. Harrison's wife, children, and grandchildren continue to carry his legacy by furthering literacy programs for New Orleans' youth.

From Harrison's birth in 1933 to his desire to become a Mardi Gras Indian to the moment he met his beloved wife, author Al Kennedy shares Harrison's significant life experiences. He allows Big Chief Donald to take center stage and explain-in his own words-the mysterious world of the Mardi Gras Indians, their customs, and beliefs. Rare personal photographs from family albums depict the Big Chief with his family, parading through the streets on Carnival Day, and performing the timeless rituals of the Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans. This well-researched biography presents a side of the Big Chief the public did not see, revealing the rebellious spirit of a man who demanded respect, guarded his family, and guided his tribe with utmost pride.

Al Kennedy teaches American history at the University of New Orleans. He has lectured on the musical heritage of New Orleans and received numerous awards for his research on New Orleans history and culture, including the Jazztown Award, the New Orleans International Music Colloquium Jazz Supporter Award, and the Mardi Gras Indian Hall of Fame Blue Eagle Award. Kennedy resides in Metairie, Louisiana, with his wife, Vickie.

#### From the Back Cover

"Provides an enormously enjoyable, richly informative, and deeply moving insight into the life of a magnificent American hero, Big Chief Donald Harrison, Sr., the late great leader of the legendary Guardians of the Flame Mardi Gras Indians in New Orleans . . . To meet the Harrisons is to encounter an America you can't help but fall in love with and be inspired by forever, while gaining a glimpse into the powerful and meaningful tradition of the Mardi Gras Indians in New Orleans. It's a story of strength, passion, survival, and resistance. It's a story for today."

-Jonathan Demme, Academy Award-winning director, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Philadelphia*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *New Home Movies from the Lower 9th Ward*, *Rachel Getting Married*, and *Neil Young Trunk Show*

"Building on his impressive knowledge of New Orleans culture, Al Kennedy delivers a masterpiece of artistic biography. The world needs to know about Big Chief Donald Harrison, Sr. Al Kennedy tells his full

story in this wonderful book. Two-Way-Pocky-Way [make way] for a powerful read."

-Robert Farris Thompson, Col. John Trumbull Professor, History of Art; Master of Timothy Dwight College, Yale University; and author, *Tango: The Art History of Love, Face of the Gods, and Aesthetic of the Cool*

### **About the Author**

As a teacher of American history at the University of New Orleans, award-winning author Al Kennedy frequently lectures on the city's musical heritage. His expertise has earned him several honors, including the Jazztown Award, the New Orleans International Music Colloquium Jazz Supporter Award, and the Mardi Gras Indian Hall of Fame Blue Eagle Award. Kennedy earned his BA from Loyola University, a masters degree in public administration, and a PhD in urban studies/urban history from the University of New Orleans. He resides in Metairie, Louisiana, with his wife.

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