Celebrate the unique African American Cultural Heritage of New Orleans in Historic Congo Square
June 28, 2009

If there is one place in the United States that can be credited with being the spiritual and mythological birthplace of jazz, it must be the *Place des Negres*, or Old Congo Square, in what is now Louis Armstrong Park. "On Sabbath evening," wrote a visitor to New Orleans in 1819, "the African slaves meet on the green, by the swamp, and rock the city with their Congo dances.

- Come join us for the kick-off event of the 13th Annual New Orleans Dance Festival.

- **Celebrate Dance- Sing – Drum in Congo Square with**
- **Kumbuka African Dance & Drum Collective director Ausettua Amor Amenkum**
- **Darryl Montana, Big Chief Yellow Pocahontas Mardi Gras Indians**
- **Untouchables Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs**
- **Skull and Bones Men**
- **Brass Bands**

Guest Companies
Michigan based Bichini Bia Congo Company directed by Biza Sompa
New York based OYO ORO directed by La Mora

KUMBUKA's signature dance is "Dance de Calinda", a dance that was performed in Congo Square in the 1800's. On Sundays the slaves were allowed to assemble at an open field near Orleans Street and Rampart Street behind the Quarter, an area which over time had many names -- Circus Public Square, Place des Negres, and even Beauregard Square after the Civil War, in honor of P.G.T. Beauregard, a Confederate general from New Orleans. But the locale's most famous title was Congo Plains (meaning the entire grounds), or Congo Square (meaning a smaller, more frequented portion of the field).

Congo Square is in the vicinity of a spot which the Houma Indians used before the arrival of the French for celebrating their annual corn harvest and was considered sacred ground. By 1803, Congo Square has become famous for the gathering of enslaved Africans and free people of color who drummed, danced, sang and traded on Sunday afternoons. By 1819, these gatherings numbered as many as 500 to 600 people. Among the most famous dances were the Bamboula, the Calinda and the Congo. These African cultural expressions gradually developed into Mardi Indian traditions,

the 2nd Line, and eventually New Orleans Jazz and Rhythm and Blues.
The French and the Spanished placed severe restrictions on Voodoo practice as well as the limited freedoms allowed for slaves in Colonial New Orleans. The slaves, most of whom had just been directly transported from the West Coast of Africa or the Caribbean, suffered extremely harsh treatment. When not working under the lash, they were confined in buildings or in chains. Following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, conditions for slaves improved to some extent. Slaves were given Sunday as a day off from labor, and they also had other limited free time at night and on some religious holidays.

It was in the Nineteenth Century in Congo Square in New Orleans that observers heard the beat of the bamboulas, the wail of the banzas and saw the multitude of African dances that had survived through the years. This square located across Rampart Street on the back side of the French Quarter was in use as a gathering place for the residents of New Orleans almost since the city began. It had been an area outside of the fortified walls of the original city where Native Americans and later slaves had sold their wares in an open market by the Bayou St. John, the major avenue for transportation of goods into the city.

Town's folk would gather around the square on Sunday afternoons to witness what went on inside the square. In 1819, a visitor to the city, Benjamin Latrobe wrote about the celebrations in his journal. He was amazed at the sight of five or six hundred unsupervised slaves that had assembled for dancing. He described them as ornamented with a number of tails of the smaller wild beasts, with fringes, ribbons, little bells, and shells and balls, jimgling and flirting about the performers legs and arms. The women, one onlooker reported wore, each according to her means, the newest fashions in silk, gauze, muslin, percale dresses. And the males covered themselves in oriental and Indian dress and covered themselves only with a sash of the same sort wrapped around the body.. except for that they go naked.

One witness from the time pointed out that several clusters of onlookers, musicians, and dancers represented tribal groupings with each nation taking their place in different parts of the square. In addition to drums, gourds, banjo-like instruments and quillpipes made from reeds strung together like panpipes, marimbas and european instuments like the violin, tamborines and triangles were also used.

At Congo Square the slaves performed many traditional African dances, including the Bamboula, to the beat of primitive drums. They may have even performed some Voodoo rituals as well, including the worship of Damballa, the Snake god. Although some sources claim no Voodoo worship per se was held in Congo Square, it is clear that this area was a place reserved for the

free expression of African culture and customs, especially dancing to the music of the drums. And although the historical record is cloudy, it is possible that some aspects of Voodoo ceremonies were performed there.

Mardi Gras Indians

Without a doubt the century-old tradition of certain New Orleans' African-American males dressing on Mardi Gras day in elaborate handmade costumes reminiscent of the American Plains Indian dress and the beadwork of Yoruba peoples in Nigeria ranks high in our city's unique contributions to American culture. It too has associations which stem from Africa by way of the Caribbean. This exhibition celebrating the singular achievements of the Big Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas tribe and the recognized dean of all the Big Chiefs of the Mardi Gras Indians, Allison "Tootie" Montana, presents to the public this folk art form which has been overlooked by many in the art world for many years.

INFO on Tootie

Second-Line Dancing and Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs

Strutting and jumping and high-stepping underneath their decorated parasols, blowing whistles and waving feathered fans, the African-American members of New Orleans' social aid and pleasure clubs are the organizers, originators, and sponsors of the second line parades for which the city is famous. The brass band that follows the parade's grand marshal and club members, who are always dressed in coordinated suits and classy hats, blast out exuberant rhythms to propel everyone's high-spirited march through the streets. The club and brass band are known as the first line, and the audience that forms behind the parade to join in the festivities is the second, hence the term second line parade.

African-American social aid and pleasure clubs aren't just about parading, however. They grew out of organizations of the mid to late 1800s called benevolent societies, which many different ethnic groups in New Orleans formed. Serving a purpose that today has largely been supplanted by insurance companies, benevolent societies would help dues-paying members defray health care costs, funeral expenses, and financial hardships. They also fostered a sense of unity in the community, performed charitable works, and hosted social events. Benevolent societies always had strong support in the African-American population, and some scholars trace the roots of the African-American societies back to initiation associations of West African cultures from where the majority of New Orleans blacks originally came.

For the burial of a member, African-American benevolent associations would often hire bands to play somber, processional music on the way from the church to the cemetery. On the way back, the music would become upbeat and joyous with mourners now celebrating the deceased's life; tears about the person who had passed gave way to gratitude that the person had even been blessed to exist. The brass bands that played in these processions, known as "jazz funerals," mixed military marching music with African rhythms.

In modern times, social aid and pleasure clubs no longer serve all the former functions of benevolent societies, but they do continue to unify communities and neighborhoods and are source of cultural pride among African-Americans. Club dues normally cost hundreds of dollars a year along with additional expenses for the sharp suits, shoes, and general finery that members wear.