

KOP first ball invitation, 1962.



Historic New Orleans Collection

# Krewe of Petronius

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF GAY CARNIVAL / BY HOWARD SMITH

“Nothing is falser than people’s preconceptions and ready-made opinions; nothing is sillier than their sham morality.”

— *Petronius Arbiter, The Satyricon*

The Krewe of Petronius, the oldest active gay Carnival krewe, celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2011. Not only does this represent a major contribution to the history of Carnival in New Orleans but also a milestone in gay history. Taking their name from the chronicler of decadent Rome, Petronius Arbiter, the Krewe of Petronius began a long line of gay krewes that celebrated the often hidden world of gay themes and icons.

Formed in 1961, the Krewe of Petronius gave its first ball in 1962 at the Rambler Room, a day school hall in Metairie off Veterans Boulevard. Many of its members were also members of the Krewe of Yuga, which had formed several years earlier. Following the debut ball of the Krewe of Petronius on Saturday, February 17, 1962, the Krewe of Yuga held its 5th ball in the same hall the next weekend.

Despite harsh laws against gays and lesbians, these early gay groups took up the spirit of Carnival and parody and proceeded to celebrate Carnival with larger-than-life costume parties. A king and queen reigned at these presentations along with a captain and ball lieutenant. Unfortunately, the Krewe of Yuga ball was raided in 1962 by the Jefferson Parish police, and almost all the attendees were arrested and thrown in jail, many in drag. This form of police harassment was common in the early 1960s, and it was a risk even to attend a ball such as this, especially when the laws forbidding costume and masking in public were still on the books.

Carlos Rodriguez, the newly crowned first queen of the Krewe of Petronius, had attended the Krewe of Yuga ball and was arrested along with other members during the raid. His name was only one among almost 100 duly printed in the newspapers. Many members found that they no longer had jobs the next morning. These arrests resulted in the immediate and complete demise of the Krewe of Yuga.

Two important founding members of the Krewe of Petronius somehow escaped the raid. Bill Wooley and Elmo Avet represented the future of gay Carnival as well as an unflinching defiance coupled with an inexhaustible source of creativity. Under their guidance, the Krewe of Petronius obtained a state charter



The Glorification of the American Girl ball at the ILA Union Hall on Claiborne Avenue, 1969.

and successfully became incorporated as a legitimate Carnival group in 1966. In addition, the krewe wisely changed its ball format. They required all guests to come in formal tuxedos and gowns, strictly regulated by invitation. Only the members of the krewe would present their costumed tableau on stage for the amusement of their guests, which now included uptown ladies, as well as mothers and sisters of the krewe members. This strategy served them well, and thus a custom was started that continues today.

During the ensuing 50 years, many diverse and wonderful balls dotted the Carnival landscape and helped define a unique gay culture in New Orleans. Bill Wooley reigned as queen for the 1965 “Wicked Bitches of History” ball. In 1969 the crew presented its 8th ball, entitled “The Glorification of the American Girl” at the International Longshoreman’s Association Hall on Claiborne Avenue on the second Sunday

before Mardi Gras. This extravagant tour-de-force tableau solidified the krewe’s place in the history of gay Carnival. Jamie Greenleaf was the ball captain, and as legend has it, using the knowledge gained from Elmo Avet and his experience working on the sets of Hollywood movies, he steered the krewe into using film and theater as inspiration, much like the old-line krewes had used pagan mythologies and strange literatures.

The Ziegfeld Follies movie of 1929, *Glorifying the American Girl*, was transformed into a daring fashion extravaganza. Lavish costumes, worthy of the court of Louis XIV, graced the stage, representing months of elaborate planning and hard work from the krewe members, who created and paid for the costumes themselves. Six blond showgirls in pink tights with huge pink feathery fans formed a screen and parted way to reveal the costumes, each more extravagant than the last. These showgirls were called “A Potpourri of Plucked Plumage Perfection,” and the captain was dressed in a “Beaded Extravaganza of Shimmering Boa.”

Bill Wooley stopped the show with his dazzling, solid gold lamé costume spouting long curvy tendrils and gold discs, “The Golden Vision.” Elmo Avet followed, covered from head to toe in flowers, “A Floral Tribute to the Flower Child.” The returning king was King Plumus of the Realm Biceptus (Millard Wilson) and his returning queen was Queen Irrisistabus of the Realm Pootius and Impedimenta (Clyde Webb). Both looked like they had stepped off the set of Claudette Colbert’s *Cleopatra*. Other magnificent costumes were the “Fluttering Fulfillment of the Magnificent Moth of Desire,” “A Gushing Geyser of Gorgeous Glitter,” and “A Lustrous Lavishness of Lemon Loveliness.”

At many gay balls, the entertainment always had to be served up with a twist. A simple dance number could quite possibly become an exercise in gender-bending politics. A famous ballroom dance team was portrayed by Astaire and Rogers in the film, *The Story*



Krewe of Petronius 40th Anniversary Ball, *Color Me Red*, 2001; design by Henri Schindler.



KOP Fantasie de la Mer ball, 1977;

design by Charles Kerbs

of Vernon and Irene Castle. This was the inspiration for a dance number in the ball called “The Castles and Then Some.” A man and a woman were dancing across the stage. Midway through the number, they both tugged at their clothes and instantly transformed themselves into their gender opposite.

No Carnival group was immune to strong personalities, power plays, and rivalries. Gay krewes were no exception. The Krewe of Amon-Ra was born in 1966 with former members of the Krewe of Petronius. In 1970, Jamie Greenleaf broke away from the Krewe of Petronius and formed the Krewe of Olympus. His first ball in 1971 was held in the Saint Bernard Civic Center Auditorium. Very few of the once-welcoming venues were now willing to rent to gay krewes, so other places had to be found that not only could accommodate the growing guest list, but also preserve the anonymity of krewe members. Thus began the long-running tradition of holding gay balls in the outlands of Chalmette, which gave the krewes more room for their tableau and seating for hundreds of guests. Special guests sat at elegant tables overflowing with food and drink set up in front of the stage. Costumed krewe members could then come right down from the stage and engage their audience. The tables were cleared after the ball for dancing. What once looked like a dismal situation had been overcome and turned into a golden opportunity.

In 1976, after the 15th anniversary ball, Bill Wooley split off and formed the Mystic Krewe of Celestial Knights, composed mainly of window dressers and dancers. His first ball in 1977, entitled “Heavenly Bodies,” sought to steal the fire from the aging dowager. But the Queen of Petronius would not be outshone by her children. In her “Fantasie de la Mer” ball, the queen’s costume at the end of the ball revealed her in a gloriously sequined octopus gown with tentacles spreading out to cover the entire stage. She had, for the moment, retained her luster.

In 1970, the Krewe of Petronius began the tradition of holding a fall fundraiser like none other. The Satyricon was a party of feasting and entertaining that recalled the excesses of ancient Rome.

Attendees had to wear togas and food was thrown liberally onto the floor. Originally held at the Sir Thomas Hall on Burgundy Street, by the mid 1980s the feast was held at the Country Club in Bywater.

Millard Wilson returned as ball captain for both the “Valentine” (1971) and the “Clowns” (1981) anniversary balls, which featured large posters designed by George Dureau and Charles Kerbs, legendary gay artists of New Orleans. Gay krewes often commissioned posters for their balls along with doubloons and sometimes necklaces. They took their balls very seriously and their ambition continued to grow in proportion to the creativity of their membership and, of course, the desire to outdo their sister krewes. For many, the balls in the mid 1980s were the height of gay Carnival with a burst of creativity that continued to amaze and dazzle their eager audiences. Twelve krewes were active during that time and all but one gave breathtaking balls: Cerci, David, Apollo, Armeinius, Lords of Leather, Ishtar, Polyphemus, Amon-Ra, Celestial Knights, Olympus, Perseus, and Petronius.

At this point, the Krewe of Petronius could look back with well-earned satisfaction, for all roads led back to the grande dame who had spawned so many illustrious children. However, AIDS would begin to decimate the ranks of the gay krewes, and by the late 1980s, gay Carnival faced certain extinction. Only a few krewes would weather this pandemic. Particularly hard hit was the Krewe of Petronius, which continued to lose its members at an alarming rate. But a renaissance came along with the arrival of Mickey Gil. His exuberance and creative style would reinvigorate the krewe and bring it back from the brink of oblivion. In 1987 he became ball captain in perpetuity and his “The Diva in Me” ball was a return to grandeur. His tongue-in-cheek themes, often self-referential and witty, were a welcome return to frivolity and whimsy in the face of such catastrophic loss. “Petronius Gets Culcha” (1990) and “Petronius Punctures Pomposity” (1994) were highly successful balls in the 1990s. The only time he relinquished his role as captain extraordinaire was to become the Grand Queen of Petronius in 1993 with the return of Jamie Greenleaf as his captain. For the 40th anniversary ball (2001), “Color Me Red,” Mickey enlisted designer and author Henri Schindler to create the krewe’s annual poster. The artwork prominently featured Elmo Avet dressed as his idol, Mary, Queen of Scots. Several years later Gil himself broke from the Krewe of Petronius to form the Krewe of Satyricon. Sadly, he passed away in 2010.

The fabulous Krewe of Petronius, despite the bumps and detours along the way, continues today with 50 years of brilliance behind her. Only a future paved with sequins and gold awaits.