

Documentary focuses on Mardi Gras Indian Culture in 'Tootie's last suit'

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Following well-received showings at New York's TriBeCa Film Festival and Durham's Full Frame documentary festival this spring, the feature-length documentary, Tootie's Last Suit, comes to New Orleans in time to commemorate the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina.

The film, to be shown Sunday, Aug. 26 at 7 p.m. at the Treme Community Center, documents the final Mardi Gras and subsequent days of Tootie Montana, the Chief of Chiefs, the man who, over five decades, moved Mardi Gras Indian focus from violence to "pretty." The showing is free.

It will be preceded by a parade led by the Black Men of Labor and the Treme Brass Band, departing from the Montana home (1633 N. Villere, near St. Bernard) at 5 p.m. Members of Mardi Gras Indian tribes will perform following the film, and food from chefs including John Besh (Restaurant August, Luke), Donald Link (Herbsaint, Cochon) and Jay Nix (Parkway Bakery) will be served.

Among those slated to attend are Tootie's wife Joyce Montana and others featured in the film. Produced and directed by New York/New Orleans filmmaker Lisa Katzman with executive production credits to New Orleanians Randy Fertel and Alexa Georges, the film tells the story of the former Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas Hunters, one of the oldest Mardi Gras Indian tribes.

Celebrated throughout the city as "the prettiest," for the beauty and inventiveness of his elaborately beaded Mardi Gras costumes, Tootie Montana masked for 52 years, longer than anyone. When he retired in 1997 from the painstaking labor of creating a new Mardi Gras suit each year, he conferred the title of Chief on his son Darryl. Pressured by his fans, and driven by an unflagging imagination and artistic will to create, Tootie committed himself to making a Mardi Gras comeback in 2004. As he completes his last Indian suit, and decides to parade alone, lifelong conflicts erupt.

The film, winner of the Jean Rouch Award for Visual Anthropology, features Wynton Marsalis and Dr. John, along with a soundtrack of traditional and innovative New Orleans music.