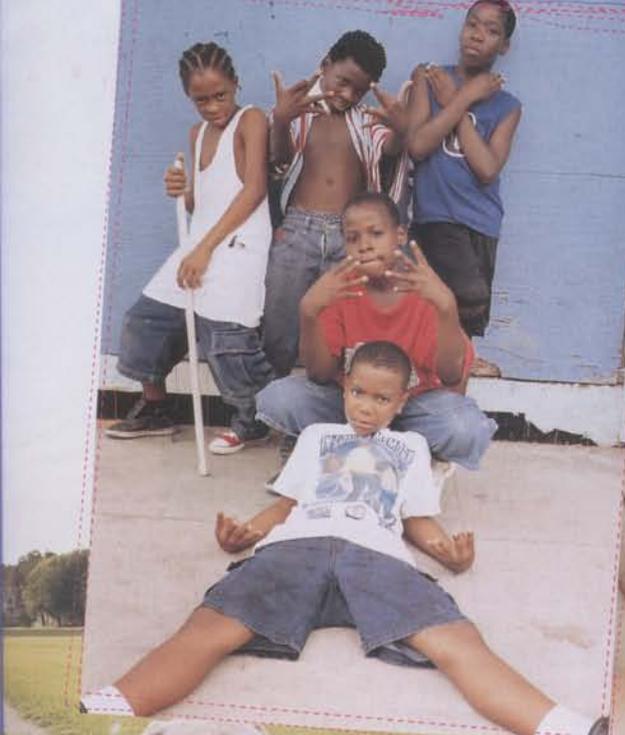


SEWING THE SEEDS OF LOVE





GRAS ROOTS STYLE:
THE MANY SIDES OF NEW
ORLEANS' DIY DESIGN



INSIDE THE NEW ORLEANS FASHION UNDERWORLD

Text ADAM GOLLNER
Photography AIMÉE TOLEDANO

Nearly 300 years ago, *la Nouvelle-Orléans* was founded in a cypress swamp teeming with venomous snakes and alligators. The initial settlement of 25 convicts, 25 carpenters and a handful of *voyageurs* came looking for treasure in wet soil that, according to one historian, “had but to be tickled to give up the laughing gold.” Instead of precious metals, however, they discovered some of the most extraordinary vegetation ever documented in the annals of science.

These botanical curiosities included the hair-plant, whose flowers sprouted human-like hair; the button tree, which provided a 24/7 supply of buttons for the colonists’ clothes; and the water tree, which geysered a steady stream of water when tapped. Just a squirt of viperine (also known as fritter-root or goat’s tongue) applied on an open wound would heal it instantly. There was even a grass called the *semper vipens*, full of juice that miraculously transformed water into ice.

Herbert Asbury, author of *The Gangs of New York*, explored these aberrations of nature in his 1936 book, *The French Quarter: An Informal History of the New Orleans Underworld*. He described how the *savoyanne-root*, when chewed, “rendered the chewer fireproof – occasionally Indians were deeply mortified to find a captive was so full of *savoyanne-root* that it was impossible to burn him at the stake.”

It was in this same swampy muck that renowned naturalist Louis Narcisse Baudry des Lozières discovered something resembling miniature human/potato hybrids in the 1790s. “These strange plants bore some resemblance to a potato but were much larger than the largest yam,” he wrote. “They had the perfect shape and face of a human being, with the features of the face clearly marked, a neck, shoulders,

and a well-defined body. Some had male, others female features. They seemed to form a regular colony, and quivered when touched, and even seemed to move away, as if to defend themselves. They received at once the name of man-plant."

Although these near-mythical flora have since returned to the dimensions from whence they originated, a unique city continues to emerge from the miasma. Forget the tourist clichés – the voodoo, vampires, alligators and daiquiri-guzzling, topless coed hocus-pocus – everyday life in New Orleans is far more surreal.

Parrots fly around freely in the subtropical streets. They live here year-round, as do mountain goats, which can be found grazing on piles of abandoned cars. It isn't unusual for houses to spontaneously collapse due to the infestation of wood-chomping Formosan termites, which cause more than \$300 million in damages annually.

At the end of a deserted street, young lovers flock to an electricity pole called the "juice bar." Due to some voltage malfunction, an exposed current zaps you when you touch it, a sensation that is amplified if you kiss while holding on.

There are streets that aren't on any maps, so unless you go with someone who knows, you won't find that salon where you can "get your hair did" by a midget who goes from customer to customer on a sliding platform.

Odd, carnivalesque music seems to be constantly hovering in the air. It is the haunting hurdy-gurdy sounds of the Steam Calliope, a hand-turned organ on the Mississippi Steamboat Natchez. Walking down Piety Street (which follows Desire Street – or precedes it, depending on which way you're going) as maudlin melodies resonate off decomposing homes slowly sinking into the swamp beneath, you almost expect miniature clowns to pour from the walls like cockroaches.

“NEW ORLEANS IS THE CITY THAT CARE FORGOT... THE LAST PLACE IN AMERICA THAT YOU CAN FEEL FREE TO LIVE, YOU KNOW?”

– LES BLANK'S DOCUMENTARY ALWAYS FOR PLEASURE, 1978

Because New Orleans is so far removed – geographically, economically, culturally – its flourishing creative spirit has sprouted like a mystical beanstalk into the clouds. "People in New Orleans make their lives their art," says Jay Poggi, a.k.a. MC Tracheotomy, at his crumbling colonial castle in the Ninth Ward, one of the city's young bohemian neighbourhoods. Poggi is part of a community of young artists, musicians and fashion designers who cheerfully interchange romance and reality. Their motto? "Every day, I do something fun for me," says Poggi.

Whether it's taking valium and playing horseshoes, drinking local cocktails like "watermelon whup-asses" at roller-skating parties, or hunting for legendary blues singer Slim Harpo's unmarked tombstone in a lost cemetery, people in New Orleans dress the part. "Everybody creates their own fashion here," says Tracheotomy, "because there aren't any boutiques where you can buy designer clothes – and even if there were, nobody has enough money to buy them."

While that could apply to any small town, New Orleans has a fashion sense that is unlike anywhere else. "A sewing machine is more important than a car in New Orleans," explains designer Panacea Theriac. "There is an amazing DIY fashion scene here."



LORNA LEEDY

As the designer of Fancy Pony Land, Leedy loves the city's openness to new fashion. "When I first moved to New Orleans, I was overwhelmed by the possibilities – on any given day I could wear an old debutante gown or a tutu and people wouldn't really look twice. Anything goes, as long as you wear it with flare."

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE NEW ORLEANS FASHION? "Everyday costumes. New Orleans has a real passion for dress-up holidays, like Mardi Gras and Halloween. Every holiday becomes a dress-up holiday, and then every day becomes an opportunity to dress up."

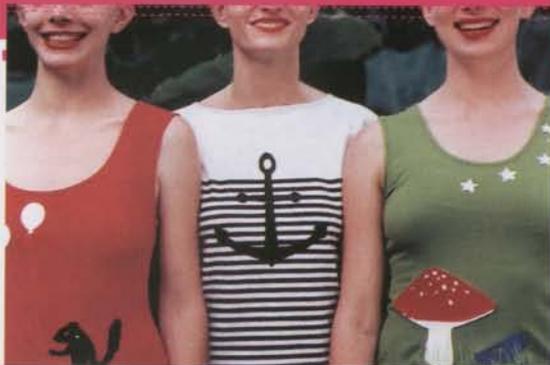
DESCRIBE THE CLOTHES YOU MAKE "Fairy-tale clothing for grown-ups. When people wear my clothes, I want them to look like they stepped out of a children's book, like they're illustrations. I really like Maurice Sendak, Michael Sowa and Edward Gorey; I like how they create such complete worlds. I want Fancy Pony Land to be a world like that."

INSPIRATIONS "Animals, plants and fairy tales."

HANGOUT "The Audubon Zoo's Asian small-clawed otter exhibit. It's best after hours, and worth cultivating the acquaintance of a zookeeper."

IF YOU COULD WEAR ONLY ONE OUTFIT FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE AND FOR ALL OF ETERNITY, WHAT WOULD IT BE? "My favourite caramel-coloured, A-line, wool-knit panel skirt that I got at a thrift store, a red-and-white striped long-sleeved cotton knit shirt that is hanging together by mere threads, and brown, old-lady orthopedic shoes. I would have to be allowed to arrest the decay of the shirt or I'd soon run into trouble."

www.fancyponyland.com; for wholesale inquiries, call Fancy Pony Land 206.890.7658. FPL is available at Bond 07, New York City, 212.677.8487.



ABOVE: LORNA LEEDY WITH UNIDENTIFIED CANINE. LEFT: LEEDY'S DESIGNS FOR HER LINE, FANCY PONY LAND





ABOVE: ANTOINETTE K-DOE WITH THE STATUE OF ERNIE K-DOE, EMPEROR OF THE AFTER-LIFE. AS THE PROPRIETRESS OF THE MOST EXCITING NIGHTSPOT IN NEW ORLEANS, THE MOTHER-IN-LAW LOUNGE, ANTOINETTE K-DOE IS A MENTOR AND A FRIEND TO THE CITY'S MANY ASPIRING FASHION DESIGNERS. "I'VE BEEN A DESIGNER EVER SINCE I WAS A KID, BUT I NEVER REACHED MY TRUE EXPRESSION UNTIL I MARRIED K-DOE," SHE SAYS, REFERRING TO HER HUSBAND, R&B SINGER ERNIE K-DOE, WHO PASSED ON TWO YEARS AGO. "THAT WAS FULL-BLAST DESIGN! ERNIE SAID, 'WHATEVER YOU WILL DESIGN, I WILL WEAR.' ERNIE FOUND MY HIDDEN TALENT." LEFT AND BELOW: TYPICALLY ATYPICAL NEW ORLEANS STYLE



People in New Orleans really do make their own clothes. "There are trends when people learn new tricks – puffy paint pen art, embroidery, tailoring, appliqués, piping, crocheted belts," says Theriac. "Sewing is the most practical thing you can learn – you can dress like a movie star!"

Lorna Leedy, who designs Fancy Pony Land (a new line worn by Avril Lavigne and Shakira, among others), agrees. "There's a sense here that anyone can make a costume; that it doesn't necessarily require sewing skill as much as creativity. There are just so many occasions and non-occasions for dressing up, and outfits are so appreciated in New Orleans, that I think it encourages everyone to make clothes on some level."

Leedy started out by staging "renegade fashion shows" with a group of her friends and fellow designers. These performances involved getting dressed up in homemade clothes, renting a school bus and storming public areas to put on impromptu fashion shows. "We'd drive around drinking, and when we saw somewhere to stop, we'd do a show," she explains. "Nobody would know where we'd show up. We had a boom box, and we'd just go into places like Walgreens Pharmacy or the Columns Hotel. We crashed a wedding and took photos with the bridesmaid. My favourite moment was when we got forcibly evicted from Home Depot."

“YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A MILLIONAIRE TO LOOK LIKE ONE”

– ERNIE K-DOE, R&B SINGER, 1936–2001

This movement of Crescent City people making their own clothes can be traced back as far as the button tree. Many current designers are inspired by a couple of Hungarian sisters/exotic dancers called Nita and Zita (real names: Flora and Pirooska Gellert), who created incredible outfits for themselves after immigrating to New Orleans in the 1920s. Nita and Zita's clothes still survive and can be purchased at select antique stores for hundreds of dollars. "They were among the first people to really start the idea of fashion as a means of expression here in New Orleans," says Heather Sher, the proud owner of a majestically tattered Nita and Zita original that she found in a dumpster outside the sisters' folk art home.

Another major inspiration on younger generations is Antoinette Fox K-Doe. "I learned how to make clothes for myself early," she says. "Since the age of 16, I've made practically all my own clothes. I can go to the department store, look at an item, come home and recreate it exactly from my head."

Antoinette's fashion creations began when she was still a child. "My grandma was a seamstress, so I used her scraps. I started designing when I was eight years old, making clothes for dolls that were actually Coca-Cola bottles with straw hair. After that, I made clothes for stick people I'd make out of wood," she explains, using a melon rind to demonstrate. "My uncle was a rag man who drove a buggy by people's homes, collecting their rags, which would then be used to fix roofs. I could keep anything I wanted and use it for my designs."

These days, Antoinette runs one of New Orleans' most magical nightspots, the Mother-in-Law Lounge, named after 1961's number-one hit by her recently deceased husband, Ernie "Emperor of the World" K-Doe. "When I met Ernie K-Doe, he had taken a dive into alcohol," says Antoinette, who occasionally refers to herself as Her Imperial Highness. "He was a no-show drunk. When I got with him, I started with the heart. Fixing the outer appearance was easy after his heart was healed."

Although they ran the lounge together, it has become a veritable shrine to the "Emperor of the Afterlife" since his death in 2001. There

are photos, posters and memorabilia covering every bit of space in the lounge, including chopping boards and toilet-roll holders with Ernie's face on them. Several varieties of his personal champagne are on display: Ernie's King of the World Krewe Du Vieux and Ernie Y2K-Doe Champagne. Antoinette's red beans and rice wouldn't taste the same without some drops of her homemade condiment, Ernie "Mr. Manauhahyde" K-Doe's Habanero Hot Sauce. Even his incomparable slogans have been immortalized in "Burn K-Doe Burn" T-shirts and "I'm cocky but I'm good" boxer shorts.

The shrine's show-stopping centrepiece is a statue of the Emperor, resplendent in his trademark black Louis XIV wig, multicoloured polyester jumpsuit and rhinestone-encrusted jewellery. His fingers are immaculate: Antoinette takes the hands off to have the nails manicured across the street from the Mother-in-Law. "And to change his clothes," she cautions, "we gotta do it after hours, when the bar is closed. The arms need to be removed to get the suits on, and the fans don't like to see that."

When asked whether she calls it a statue or a mannequin, Antoinette replies, "I call him Mr. K-Doe himself." You almost wouldn't be surprised if the statue started scolding you for not finishing your bowl of Antoinette's special shrimp stew.

"I design when I sleep," says Antoinette about her flamboyant costumes. "I see things in my dreams, then wake up and put them on fabric. Box-top, tail-tuck, long-wing, you name it." Since Ernie's death, she continues to dress his likeness (often taking the statue with her to concerts and functions). "Just because Mr. K-Doe is deceased does not mean that I have shut down my design shop," she says. "I will continue to design for me and Ernie, and we will be making appearances."

Antoinette applies powder to his face as a finishing touch. "Know why I'm so good at this?" she asks. "Cuz I used to work in a funeral home doing makeup and hair. Look at him. He's just sittin' there while we're doin' all the work. Male model, my ass! If I give him a shot of vodka, he might get up."

Although it may appear somewhat morbid, the Mother-in-Law Lounge is far from depressing – it is a place for celebration and pleasure. "I have the statue and the memories," says Antoinette, with a smile. What more could one expect from a shrine preserving the legacy of "the one, the only, the baddest motorscooter and the Greatest Boy-Child ever conceived at Charity Hospital in New Orleans, Louisiana?"

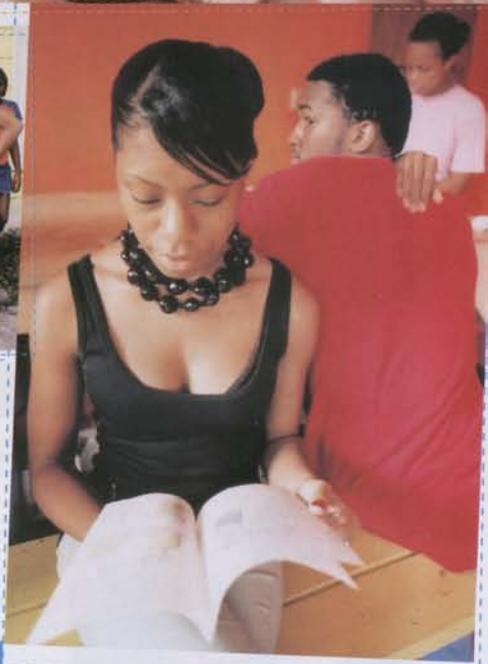
“THE NIGHT COMETH IN WHICH WE TAKE NO NOTE OF TIME... YET WHAT IS MORE ROMANTIC THAN THE NIGHT OF THE MASKED BALL – THE TOO BRIEF HOURS OF LIGHT, MUSIC AND FANTASTIC MERRIMENT WHICH SEEM TO BELONG TO NO CENTURY AND YET TO ALL?”

– LAFCADIO HEARN, "THE DAWN OF THE CARNIVAL," THE NEW ORLEANS ITEM, FEB. 2, 1880

Celebration is an integral part of life in New Orleans. Jazz funerals illustrate the idea that death is an occasion for partying as well as grieving. First, a brass band plays solemn church hymns and traditional dirges as the casket is taken in a procession from the church



YOUNG ASPIRATIONS, YOUNG ARTISTS: THE KIDS AT YAYA GET PREPARED TO SHOW THEIR DESIGNS FOR "THE FINAL FIT." THE LOGO FOR ONE OF THE FASHION LINES THEY HAVE DEVELOPED IS A JUMPING RABBIT WITH A FRUIT THAT LOOKS LIKE A CROSS BETWEEN AN ORANGE AND A BANANA



THE FINAL FIT

Even teenagers in New Orleans are into making their own outfits. A non-profit organization called YAYA (Young Aspirations, Young Artists) is working with a group of 16 fashion designers in their teens to put on a fashion show this year called "The Final Fit."

"It has a connotation of death," explains YAYA co-director Rondell Crier. "The idea is, if this was your final outfit to wear for all of eternity, what would it be?"

The fashions these young artists have created are truly unique. Derroles Jefferson, one of the YAYA artists, is obsessed with ancient Egyptian culture, so he's designed a kind of mummy outfit out of terycloth with hieroglyphic appliques that spell out "Pharaoh God" on the back.

"The Egyptians may have been ancient, but they were more advanced than us in many ways," says Jefferson. "I really like their mysteries."

Another YAYA artist, David Turrell, has taken the sporty-elegant look to a new plateau with a "pinstriped jogging suit." Other innovations include a "tuxedo T-shirt," a cowboy suit with guns sewed into the pockets and a pair of pants with the flags of the United Nations running down the seams.

"YAYA encourages teens to find their thing and go for it," says Crier. "It doesn't matter what anybody else thinks."

to the cemetery. Then, at the burial, the body is cut loose from its ties to this mortal coil. After the body is interred, the band strikes up some party music as the mourners begin dancing frenziedly to honour the life being remembered. This group of dancers, called the "Second Line," accumulates people and momentum as the parade gallivants through the neighbourhoods.

These traditions are the focus of *Always for Pleasure*, Les Blank's 1978 documentary on New Orleans' street celebrations. As one anonymous reveller in the film explains it: "You be here today, gone tomorrow. You don't know what to look for after death, but you can always see what you see in front of you. I like people to have a nice time. I'm livin' now. I'm not gonna wait till I'm in the ground and laid out to have some fun in the street. Mainly our concern is to entertain ourselves, y'understand?"

Fashion is an integral component to the city's traditions of revelry. The Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs that organize the funeral ceremonies – such as Zulu, the Treme Sidewalk Steppers or the Nkrumah – wear uniforms that can cost thousands of dollars. "New Orleans' fashion really is special event clothing," says Panacea Theriac. "There was a man who died a few years ago, I think he might have been a gospel singer, and he wore one outfit to his wake and a different one to his funeral."

While in New Orleans researching the city's fashion sensibilities, this reporter attended a parade on St. Roch Street to mark the passing of a woman named Bernadine "Denie" Lewis. Canadian funerals don't usually involve massive sound systems, drinking and dancing in the streets and "death T-shirts" that commemorate the deceased. There were even people riding around on horses. When you die in New Orleans, not only does everybody get a T-shirt – they also have a great time.

Then again, this is the home of Mardi Gras, the biggest costume party in the world.

"At Mardi Gras, everyone struts their stuff," says Theriac. "Different outfits will take you to another dimension. There are costumes with giant collars that go a few feet over your head, with 50 pounds of ostrich feathers, hundreds of dollars worth of Austrian crystal rhinestones and thousands of tiny little working light bulbs, all in the shape of a snail or whatever the theme is. Some of these collars are so big that they have to be taken to the ball in a U-Haul. Dogs even get costumes and have a Mardi Gras parade called Barkus."

The sheer proliferation of Mardi Gras costumes has a lot to do with New Orleans' unique fashion sense, explains Lorna Leedy. "So many costumes get made for one day and then cast off. There are loads to be found in antique and vintage stores, thrift stores, at garage sales and in the trash. With such a bounty of costumes, they really infiltrate everyday wear."

People devote so much energy to dressing their wildest during Mardi Gras that it just naturally spreads out to the rest of the year. "Everyone has a closet full of old costumes," continues Theriac. "So, of course, you wear parts of them at other times of year. A cape to a party, a bear suit in the winter when you ride your bike and it's cold. They just start blending in."

Perhaps the city's most spectacular outfits are the intricately beaded, plumed and bejewelled suits of the Mardi Gras Indians. To commemorate slaves escaping to the freedom of the Louisiana wilderness and being accepted into Native American societies, Mardi Gras Indian groups like the Wild Magnolias, Creole Wild West and Guardians of the Flame invest thousands of hours and dollars in



LEFT: MISS PUSSYCAT IN HER NINTH WARD DESIGN ATELIER

PANACEA THERIAC

Panacea Theriac (also known as Miss Pussycat) is a puppeteer, singer and fashion designer. She has toured the world with groups like the White Stripes and Stereo Total alongside her partner in crime, Mr. Quintron, an entertainer, inventor and organ player. Her start in fashion came working on incredibly ornate and elaborate costumes for Mardi Gras balls. "I worked for costume designers who taught me how to sew everything," she says. "Now most of the stuff I wear is handmade – it is really fun!"

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE NEW ORLEANS FASHION? "Battered and fried."

DESCRIBE THE CLOTHES YOU MAKE "Cartoons."

INSPIRATIONS "Spelunking, Branson, snowballs and termites, the underwater dance club, the Drum Buddy and all bands in the whole world, squirrels and ranching, airline stewardesses."

SOUNDTRACK "All of my clothes are musical, but it is music that you wear."

EAT "The Southern Candy Makers."

HANGOUT The Mother-in-Law.

IF YOU COULD WEAR ONLY ONE OUTFIT FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE, AND FOR ALL OF ETERNITY, WHAT WOULD IT BE? "A pink party dress, white Minnetonka Moccasins (lady thunderbird loafers) and a pair of Blue Blockers."



ABOVE: MOURNERS ON ST. ROCH STREET WEARING DEATH T-SHIRTS

creating beautiful costumes to be worn for one day only. "It isn't just about sewing a suit; it's about sewing a new suit every year," explains Larry Bannock, president of the New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian Council. "When the sun hits them beads, it looks like heaven opened up."

“IT'S NO OVERSTATEMENT TO SAY THAT THE DEEP SOUTH IS A UNIQUE REGION, AND THE REPORTER RESPONSIBLE FOR WRITING ABOUT IT FOR BOTH LOCAL AND EXTERNAL CONSUMPTION UNDERGOES A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE”

— JOHN HERBERS, UNITED PRESS INT., 1962

You can't escape tradition in New Orleans, even if you want to. It's everywhere — in the fashion, the music, the architecture, the restaurants. It's a culture of prolonged decay. You can feel things being reclaimed by the earth, being taken back by the elements. The city is full of *belle époque* houses sinking into the mire, and lopsided roofs barely hinged on crooked banisters. "Parties feel the same here as they did 100 years ago," says Jay Poggi.

The city's food is so ancient that it doesn't exist anywhere else. Local specialties include boiled crawfish, alligator cheesecake, fried grits and po' boys. Thanksgiving foods include entire deep-fried turkeys and "terduckin" (a chicken stuffed inside a duck, stuffed inside a turkey).

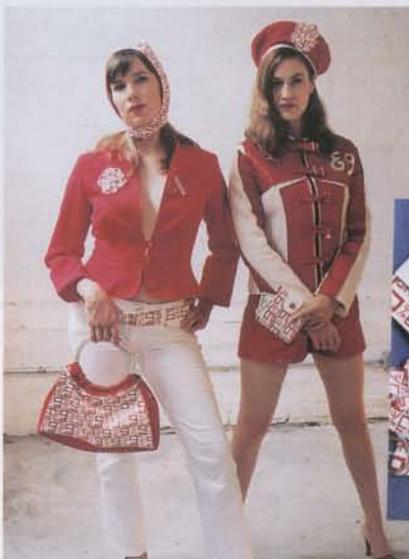
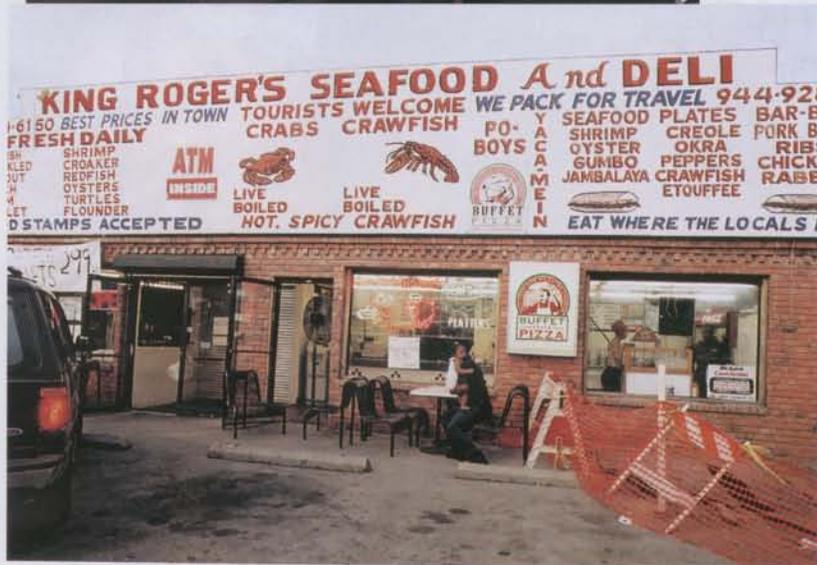
Adding to the insanity is the fact that you can drink openly on the streets 24 hours a day — there's even a drive-thru daiquiri counter near the airport. The streets of the French Quarter teem with college students chugging on hurricanes (a deceptive red fruit punch made with 180 proof Everclear).

People even have their unique way of speaking here. At Liuzza's Restaurant, a cheerful waiter named Byrd greets customers in a singing voice. "I got my sights set on you," he trilled to one young woman. "You are a sight for so-ore eyes! And I got that heeeaaaaa-lin' feelin'. Make me wanna jump up on the ceilin' — or be slippin' on a banana peelin'!"

In the midst of this disintegrating swamp metropolis, a spirit of intense imagination thrives. After all, the term "bling bling" originated in the city's slums, in a song by New Orleans' rap dynasty the Cash Money Millionaires. (This year, "bling bling" was officially added to the Oxford English Dictionary.)

While rhythm and blues, folk heroes like Nita and Zita, funeral celebrations, Mardi Gras, Native Americans and a healthy do-it-yourself attitude are major sources of inspiration in New Orleans' fashion scene, it will always retain a dose of the otherworldly. The city's homegrown style is, in many ways, as mysterious and subterranean as the man-plants that occupied this land first.

"I would describe New Orleans style as dressing however you want," says Antoinette K-Doe at the Mother-In-Law. "That's what I like about myself: I'm here at home in my slippers, wearing a raggedy T-shirt, no powder, no stockings, no high heels during the day, but then at night I can go out and be the Empress." □



TOP: JOURNEY TO THE END OF THE NIGHT;
ABOVE: KING ROGER'S, ONE OF NEW ORLEANS'
MANY SOUL FOOD EMPORIUMS; LEFT: NINTH WARD
DESIGNERS MODEL THEIR CREATIONS

