



HBO's "Treme": Donald Harrison, Jr.

by Ericka Blount Danois
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As *Treme* came to a close with the season finale, the question of whether viewers understand New Orleans culture more than before is still hanging from Mardi Gras floats. It seems a lot of that understanding must come from the viewer's own research, in the way that people outside of Baltimore had to dig to understand some of the nuances of Baltimore's vernacular on *The Wire*. Widespread critical acclaim has garnered the series another season—amid viewer criticism that non-Treme residents get center stage on the show.



Donald Harrison Jr.—a New Orleans native, show consultant, Mardi Gras Indian Chief (Big Chief of the Congo Nation), son of Big Chief Donald Sr., and world-renowned musician—had a cameo in episode six. The character Albert Lambreaux, played by Clarke Peters (Lester Freamon for all you *Wire* fans), is loosely based on Harrison's father. Lambreaux's son, Delmond (Rob Brown), a trumpet player drawn to the New York sound and lifestyle above his roots in New Orleans, is a composite of Harrison and jazz musician Christian Scott. The role mirrors Harrison's life and his commitment to retaining the culture of Mardi Gras Indians while simultaneously achieving worldwide musical acclaim.

Harrison has played with Roy Haynes, Ron Carter, Eddie Palmieri, Terrence Blanchard, Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, Don Pullen, and other jazz greats around the world. He has mentored and taught a host of musicians from Christian Scott to Cyrus Chestnut to the late Notorious B.I.G., who was his neighbor in Brooklyn. Harrison has written and performed as a hip-hop MC and composed and played classical works with major

orchestras. He created the nouveau swing style of jazz, which merges acoustic swing with modern R&B, second line, hip-hop, and reggae rhythms. His latest CD exemplifies his eclectic musical

tastes—three volumes showcasing his commitment to smooth jazz, R&B, classic jazz, and hip-hop.

And he continues the tradition of the Mardi Gras Indians that originated in honor of the Native Americans who harbored runaway enslaved Africans. More recently, they have moved toward celebrating African ancestral heritage more directly. The tribes mask in ornate costumes and perform, sing, and dance on St. Joseph's Night and at Mardi Gras. The ornate costumes, sometimes 10 feet tall and 6 feet wide, are sewn by members of the tribe and can take over a year to make. The chants and drumbeats that accompany the parade draw on bamboula rhythms from Africa and honor enslaved Africans who were only permitted on Sundays to gather and participate in dances, songs, and cultural traditions at Treme, La.'s Congo Square. Sundays are reserved from fall through spring for playing processions around the city, the second lines. Almost every Sunday, there's a parade, but the ones on St. Joseph's Night and Mardi Gras are the most elaborate. They provide a space for tribes to compete for the best costumes and dances.

Harrison says the late writer David Mills, who died from a brain aneurysm on the set of Treme earlier this year, was digging deep to get into the culture of the Indians. It's a catch-22, because writers, producers, and consultants want to give viewers a taste and understanding of the culture, but they don't want it to be corrupted.