



Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club, Inc. Official Press Release



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Black makeup is NOT the same as “blackface”



“Blackface” minstrelsy was a racist and vile form of entertainment popular from the 1820’s through the 1960’s. “Blackface” minstrel shows attempted to mimic enslaved Africans on Southern plantations and depicted black people as lazy, ignorant, and cowardly. In fact, one of the most popular “blackface” minstrelsy characters in America was “Jim Crow” – the inspiration for the harsh and oppressive laws that terrorized Southern blacks decades later. “Blackface” minstrel performances were intended to be funny to white audiences and hurtful to the black community.



Alma Mater: Virginia Military Institute
Interest: Pediatrics
Quote: There are more old drunks than old doctors in this world so I think I'll have another beer.

Unfortunately, some ignorant people continue to costume in “blackface” minstrelsy through today. Shocking photographs periodically come to light exposing the fact that even some of our most respected citizens still engage in this racist behavior. Recent photographs showing certain high-profile individuals dressed as “blackface” minstrels reveal their hateful intent to demean, disrespect, discount, and demoralize African-Americans. The backlash to their conduct has thankfully been severe and the Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club, Inc. joins with countless others in condemning this behavior.



Unfortunately, the offensive conduct of these individuals might cause some to confuse those racist actions with our rich history and traditions – which include wearing black makeup during the Zulu parade. Those who incorrectly compare our use of black makeup to “blackface” minstrelsy can first look to our name to dispel that notion. Unlike minstrelsy, which was designed to ridicule and mock black people, the founders of our Social Aid & Pleasure Club chose the name “Zulu” to honor their African ancestry and the continent’s most fierce warriors. (The South African Zulu tribe, using vastly inferior weapons, defeated the British Army in 1879 in the Battle of Isandlwana handing Britain their worst defeat in history.) Zulu parade costumes bear no resemblance to the

costumes worn by “blackface” minstrel performers at the turn of the century. Zulu parade costumes more closely resemble and are designed to honor garments worn by South African Zulu warriors.

Most importantly, the history of Zulu makes it abundantly clear that nothing about the organization, including the black makeup, was never intended to insult or degrade African-Americans. To the contrary, Zulu has always been about celebrating African and African-American culture, strength, and pride. After the Civil War, formerly enslaved Africans were left financially crippled. Unable to afford the cost of funerals, illness, and other necessitous circumstances, blacks formed their own societies or Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs which held social events to raise money for needy members. Following the lead of Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, a group of African-American workers began to gather near their “uptown backatown” homes around 1901. These men formally organized into a benevolent society they named “The Tramps.” The Tramps held informal parades and parties at Carnival time. In 1909, a traveling black theatrical company brought a very popular comedy show, “Smart Set” to the Pythian Theater. The Smart Set contained musical numbers set in a Zulu village. The visual of strong Zulu warriors, with their grass skirts and spears inspired a member of the Tramps, John L. Metoyer. Metoyer embraced that visual and organized about fifty men to form the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club. These “Zulus” paraded the following Mardi Gras in 1910. “Masking” is a central part of Mardi Gras. The financial and legal constraints on blacks in the Post-Reconstruction South made makeup (and not masks) the only option available to Zulu members at that time.

In conclusion, Loyola University New Orleans Professor C.W. Cannon has offered insightful commentary on and historical context for Zulu and its tradition of masking by using black makeup stating:

“It’s hard to measure the scope of Zulu’s influence on what the Times-Picayune’s Doug MacCash has called the “new” Mardi Gras, and on what I have called the restoration of carnivalesque carnival, after the dark ages of the white supremacist anti-carnival ushered in by the (formerly and currently segregated Krewes). It’s a remarkable testament to the resilience of carnival spirit that, in the midst of the white supremacist era . . . the Zulu king first stepped off a banana boat in the New Basin canal wearing a lard can crown. The date: 1909. That’s why it’s so upsetting — also a bit absurd — when people who have no understanding or appreciation for carnival aesthetics and social analysis chime in from hundreds of miles away with self-righteous finger-wagging. What they’re about is shaming traditions that are far more revolutionary than they are able to comprehend . . . “Zulu blackface”, the style of blackface worn by Zulu riders, is distinct from other forms of blackface viewed as offensive due to their history as a tool of white supremacist ideology . . . It calls into question the extent to which black people should be allowed agency in

representing their own experience; it also places limits on how black people themselves choose to enunciate anti-racist arguments. In the best traditions of carnivalesque practice, Zulu has expropriated racist representations and inverted them as a form of anti-racist resistance. Those who say people shouldn't try to do that kind of thing just don't get what carnival is. Maybe because it's not part of their culture. But it is a part of ours."

- C.W. Cannon, Behind the Zulu blackface flap: liberal guilt, clueless outsiders, The Lens (March 10, 2017).

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