

From the Chicago Tribune

Harrison provides a touch of Mardi Gras

By Howard Reich
Tribune arts critic

February 11, 2002

In one of his more intriguing experiments, saxophonist Donald Harrison in 1991 dared to merge cutting-edge jazz improvisation with the folkloric sounds of the Mardi Gras Indian Tribe of New Orleans.

Because the two musical forms have common roots in African culture, Harrison shrewdly guessed that they might be able to speak a common musical language. Sure enough, his stunning recording "Indian Blues" (on Candid) emerged as a landmark of Crescent City music, reaffirming the influence that jazz has had on various Louisiana musical forms, and vice versa.

But a recording can go only so far in illuminating a culture. The show that Harrison and his Guardians of the Flame ensemble played over the weekend at the Old Town School went the extra step, appealing to the eye, as well as the ear. To see at least one of the musicians garbed in the full plumage of the Mardi Gras Indians -- while the rest swayed, danced and sometimes marched to the music -- was to appreciate anew the elements of ritual and ceremony that stand at the font of black musical culture.

This was a performance in which kinetic backbeats and intricately layered rhythms were the very spine of the music-making. For even when Harrison played his most complex riffs on alto saxophone, it was the rhythms swirling around him that gave the music its primal force and purpose.

Perhaps that's why Harrison spent more time playing a keyboard than blowing into his alto. Intent on adding to the rhythmic surge of this music, Harrison relentlessly telegraphed chords on the keyboard, adding yet another strand of rhythm to a music already pulsing with it.

Even if Harrison had been assisted only by his drummer and percussionist, the ear would have had difficulty absorbing all the rhythmic activity that was crammed into every bar. But with electric bass, tambourine and three chanting voices added to the mix (including Harrison's), one might have believed that the Old Town School had been moved to New Orleans' French Quarter and that a great second-line parade was about to commence.

So perhaps it was inevitable that Harrison and some of his players eventually left the stage to strut through the crowd, the audience enthusiastically clapping along, on the offbeats. No sooner did the musicians return to the proscenium than Harrison began

tossing beads into the crowd.

It was a taste of Mardi Gras brought north to Chicago, as conceived by one of the more innovative bandleaders New Orleans has produced in the past 20 years.

And who could resist that?