

SYNDEY BYRD

BY SUE STRACHAN

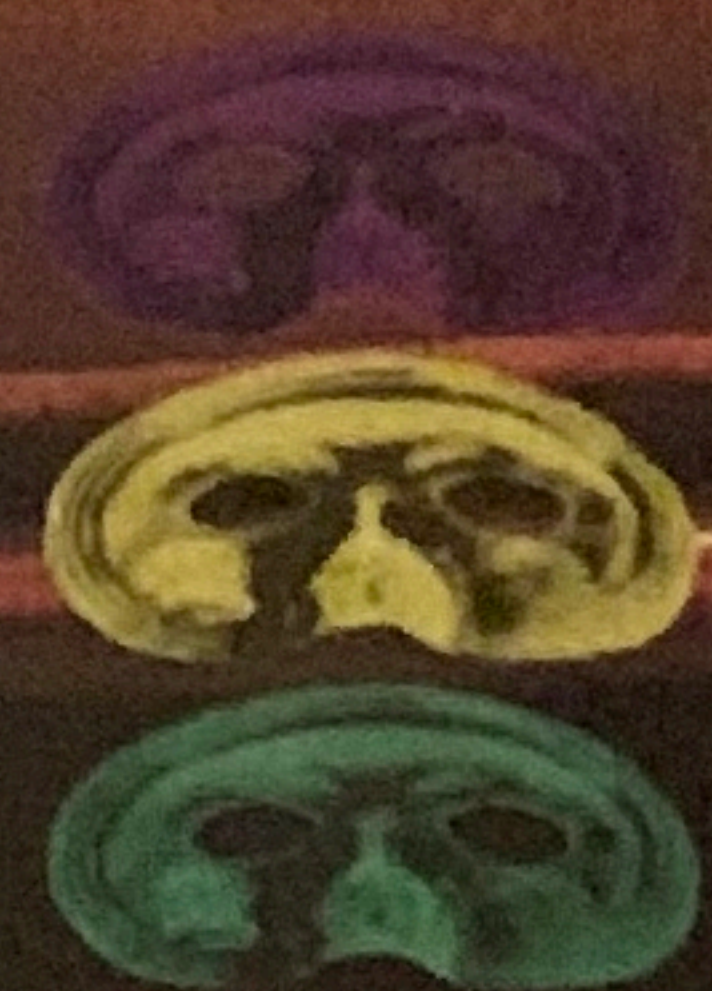
If you've attended a Mardi Gras Indian parade, Carnival parade or ball, you've seen photographer Syndey Byrd. Or, maybe not. Her work taking documentary photography means that she has to blend into the background so people aren't aware she's there — or as she says, "disappear." The irony in that is Byrd, herself, is so colorful. When we sat down for our interview, she was wearing a red ensemble accented by a hot-pink scarf and dangly earrings. Her hair was in two long black braids. I felt drab in khaki and plum. But it's this love for color that's reflected in her work and life. Byrd's home — overseen by her four bichon frises — is decorated in riotous color and is adorned with her many collections, as well as her photos and those by other photographers she admires, such as Hermann Leonard.

This self-described adventuress has had her share of journeys: Byrd is one of the first white women allowed to photograph the Mardi Gras Indians; she's photographed Voodoo ceremonies on a mountaintop in Haiti

— only to run into someone she knew (and she had a close call with Baby Doc's Tonton Macoutes); has been behind the scenes at society Carnival balls photographing the spectacle; and has photographed every traditional jazz funeral in New Orleans for the past 30 years. And that's just a small sampling. Her work is in permanent collections in New Orleans and around the world.

Though Byrd is recovering from tonsil cancer, she's still passionate about her work and her adopted home of New Orleans. Byrd is "pissed off about how America has forgotten New Orleans" — and calls President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and Karl Rove the "Gang of Four." It's not meant to be complimentary.

"New Orleans is the greatest city in the world and no one cares," she says. Her own home in Mid-City narrowly escaped the flooding that followed Hurricane Katrina and her lifetime of photographs — now lining the shelves of her home studio in marked binders — was saved by friends who contributed money for volunteers to



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come in and get them, so as to save them from heat and humidity.

It would have been a true tragedy if her work had been destroyed, as it documents, among other things, New Orleans' culture in a way that is like no other photographer. It's evocative and memorable, with a perspective and use of light that's painterly.

To quote her mentor, photographer Ernst Haas, "I'm a painter in a hurry." And that sums up Byrd's work.

Age: "I like to keep them guessing." **Family:** Four bichon frises: Gus III ("Gussie"), Tigger, Domino and Daizee. "I've had dogs for more than 25 years."

Lives: Mid-City **Favorite book:** *Fabulous New Orleans* by Lyle Saxon **Favorite movie:** *The Queen* by Akira Kurosawa, as well as his *Ran* and *Rashomon* **Favorite TV show:** *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart **Favorite musicians:** Aaron Neville, Vladimir Horowitz and Fats Domino (to whom she gave a bichon frise) **Favorite place for music:** Palm Court Jazz Café **Favorite food:** Shrimp poor-boys. Uglesich's before it closed; now from Parkway Bakery. **Favorite New Orleans restaurant:** Uglesich's before it closed. Mosca's. To get groceries, Dorignac's. **Favorite charities:** The Musician's Clinic and the Backstreet Cultural Museum. "I do a lot of work for the clinic and most of my estate will go to them when I pass away."

When did you move to New Orleans? In 1969, after I got divorced. I lived here for a while, then went to Big Sur in California. I met some people from Canada. Went up there, but decided it was too cold and came back to New Orleans. This all happened within a year.

What did you do before you

became a photographer? I was an interior designer in New York City. I worked for Lord & Taylor and Bloomingdale's. It's where I got my design sense for arranging things for photos.

How did you learn photography? I'm self-taught. I read the Time-Life books about photography. The only photographer given a whole chapter, which was about color, was Ernst Haas. He became my mentor and I received formal training with him.

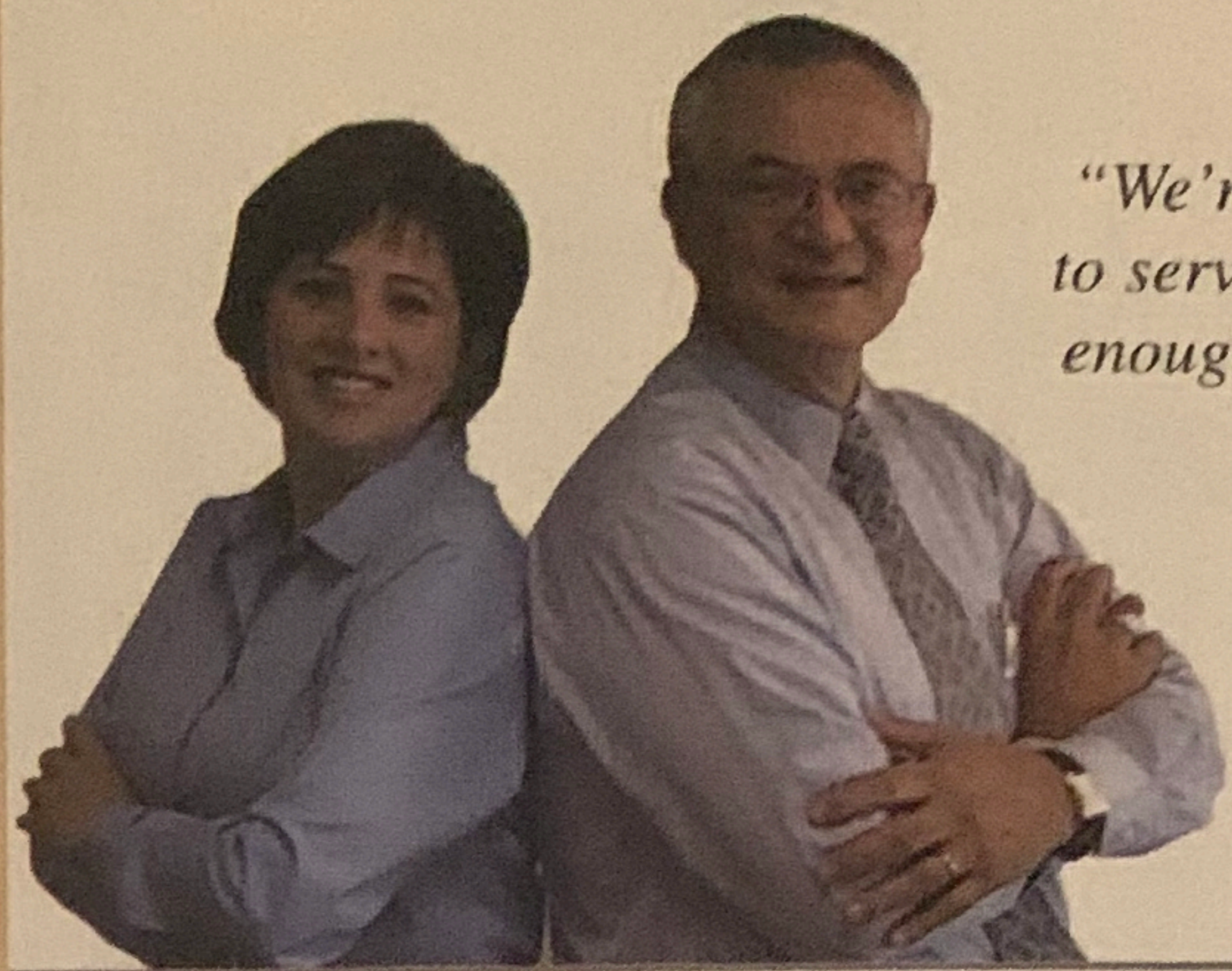
Also, when I first started taking photos I was a cocktail waitress at the Blue Room in the Fairmont Hotel. The second show was always slow, so I took photos. It was great: Ella Fitzgerald, B.B. King and Tony Bennett played there. It was the greatest job - I could drop everything and go sailing in the Cayman Islands, then come home and still have my job.

How did you and Ernst Haas meet? I sold my stereo to get to Aspen, Colo., where he was teaching a workshop. The class showed him their work and after they left he asked me to stay behind. He said, "I'm going to show you how to make a layout." And we were friends ever since. I was his assistant and driver, because he didn't know how to drive.

What did he teach you? Ernst taught me about composition and how to see light. He said, "I shoot light." He also taught me how to disappear.

How does one disappear? Your photography is so intimate - like the subjects have no idea you're there. Draw a line and don't cross it. That's why I get the shots - I have this ability to disappear. Particularly at the

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PERSONA

Mardi Gras Indian parades and jazz funerals, as well as the Voodoo ceremonies in Haiti that I photographed – I was the only white person there. I often refer back to a story in Lyle Saxon's book, *Fabulous New Orleans*, about a boy that's dressed as white or black and is taken to both communities' balls and manages to blend in. I feel like I do the same crossover. The book also brings up wonderful visual imagery.

I also have this aptitude to show up some place and within five minutes find the person in charge or the right person who can show me around. It's a synchronicity.

How did you get in with the Mardi Gras Indians? I went to my first parade with Aaron Neville's uncle, George Landry, who I knew as Uncle Jolly. He was the Big Chief and was in full regalia. He accompanied me to the St. Joseph's Day parade the night before – I was the only white person there.

Many people know you for your photos of Carnival, particularly the ones behind the scenes of the balls, particularly the society balls such as Proteus and Rex. How did you get in? For a while, I was the photographer for *The Times-Picayune's* Social Scene – I worked for Nell Nolan. They got to know me through that.

Have you shot any parades or balls lately? No, just Barkus. I'm probably going to shoot Iris this year.

What are you working on right now? I am busy shooting for four magazines, and I'm working on a book that's coming out this fall. Bethany Bultman is the writer.

Your photos have such a distinctive look. When you told me that your favorite movies were by Akira Kurosawa, whose films are so stunningly visual, and that your favorite art is Japanese. I can definitely see the influences.

His compositions and lighting were so wonderful, just so incredible. I had never seen anything like it before – just so stunning and off the wall. With Japanese art, there is just this sensibility for composition and detail.

Do you use a digital camera? Yes. I just started using one during Mardi Gras 2006. I was going broke with all of the film and processing. I still only have one digital camera and two lenses.

Are there any film rolls that you haven't developed? Absolutely.

What about computers? I am completely right side of the brain, so I'm not a computer person. I have interns to work on the computer, to do Photoshop and other things.

Should someone who wants to become a photographer go to school to study it? The person should study art. Rembrandt. Japanese art. Don't learn about photography, learn about light and composition.

Words for photographers to live by? One of my favorite things that Ernst Haas said was the best lens you can have is the forth and back – meaning walk forward, walk backward.

True Confession: I love to travel. It's one of my favorite things to do in life. I've been to 22 countries. I haven't been to New Zealand or Ireland. And I really want to go to Japan.

(To see Byrd's work in this issue, go to pages 17, 27, 40, 49 & 50.)

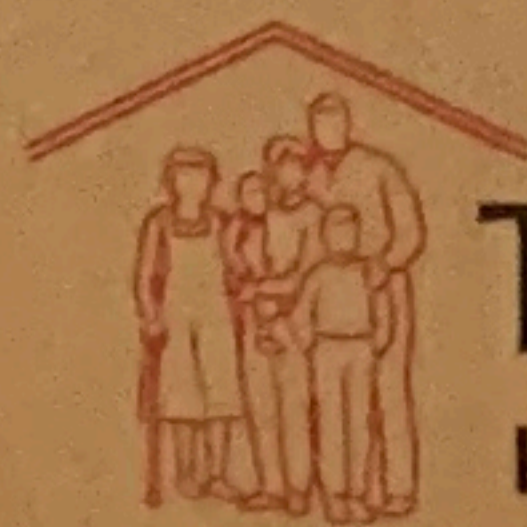


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