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COLLEGE OF VISUAL ARTS, THEATRE AND DANCE

THE 610 STOMPERS OF NEW ORLEANS:
MUSTACHIOED MEN MAKING A DIFFERENCE THROUGH DANCE

By

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A Thesis submitted to the
School of Dance
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Degree Awarded:
Spring Semester, 2014

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Nikki M. Caruso defended this thesis on April 4, 2014.

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For my parents

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| LIST OF FIGURES | v |
| ABSTRACT..... | vi |
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| CHAPTER ONE: | |
| “The Rise of the 610 Stompers: ‘Oh How I Want to Be in That Number’” | 6 |
| CHAPTER TWO: | |
| “Extraordinary Moves: Dance as Continuation and Creation” | 31 |
| CHAPTER THREE: | |
| “The Stompers’ Balls: Dancing for the Greater Good” | 54 |
| CONCLUSION..... | 77 |
| APPENDIX..... | 81 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 82 |
| BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH | 90 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | |
|---|----|
| Figure 1: The 610 Stompers uniform worn in hot weather, including the variation of Team Gleason socks and red sweatbands. | 7 |
| Figure 2: The 610 Stompers uniform with red satin jacket and white sweatband. | 9 |
| Figure 3: The front of the Jefferson City Buzzards’ support truck and their banner. | 34 |
| Figure 4: SLAB asking questions at the 2013 auditions. | 39 |
| Figure 5: 2012 Sweet 610 Debutante Ball attendees take to the dance floor. | 62 |
| Figure 6: Stompers teach 2013 Ball Crawl attendees their choreography. | 64 |
| Figure 7: Raucous dancing (and beer-flinging) at the Kingpin bar. 2012 Ball Crawl. | 66 |
| Figure 8: The 2012 Ball Crawl making its way down St. Charles Ave. to Fat Harry’s. Note the streetcar passing on the left. | 67 |
| Figure 9: The 2013 trophy for the dance-off winner. | 69 |

ABSTRACT

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. Nearly nine years later, the city still fights to recover. Within this landscape, mustachioed men wearing sweat bands, red satin jackets, blue coach shorts, and gold tennis shoes have emerged. These are the 610 Stompers, a group of everyday men with self-proclaimed “extraordinary moves” who have used dance, humor, and their local pop culture celebrity status to continually forge, embody, preserve, and serve the community of post-Katrina New Orleans in a way unparalleled by other organizations. The 610 Stompers are a dance group on one hand, but a representation of the New Orleans citizenry on the other. They emerged in the euphoria of the New Orleans Saints’ first trip to the Superbowl, quickly being adopted as the city’s favorite dance group. Since then, they have appeared in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, danced at local sporting and charity events, and served as poster boys for local safety campaigns and public service announcements. Additionally, they now host two annual charity events. Dance is at the forefront of their existence, including high-energy booty-shaking, the Running Man, “riding the horse,” displays of machismo, and high-fives all around. Their use of popular, nostalgic, uninhibited moves makes dance not only accessible to the community, but a chance to find collective joy and the opportunity to play. The 610 Stompers are a unique symbol of a post-Katrina New Orleans culture that values the past, takes pride in the city, and lives in the moment. The Stompers’ story is one of simple beginnings and unexpected stardom. Through the 610 Stompers, New Orleanians are able to unite over a common cause, see that even underdogs can become extraordinary, preserve local traditions, help others in need, and experience unabashed happiness through dance. Through dance, the Stompers preserve the traditions of the city’s past, embrace the present, and strive for a better future in post-Katrina New Orleans.

INTRODUCTION

In the early hours of August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the city of New Orleans. The city was devastated by flood waters from levee breaks, rain, and the winds of a powerful hurricane. Large portions of the city were engulfed in as much as fourteen feet of water. Though Katrina was only classified as a Category 3 hurricane, it left parts of the city uninhabitable for weeks, if not months.¹ The people of New Orleans were also damaged, and nine years later they are still travelling the long road to recovery. Bob Hirshon, host of *Science Update*, interviewed Ronald Kessler of Harvard Medical School, who stated that “researchers found that anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and mood disorders like depression were twice as high after Katrina as they had been before.”² Added to this was the immense loss of life both directly and indirectly attributed to Hurricane Katrina: of the 1,833 total lives lost, 1,577 of them were in Louisiana alone.³ Perhaps unsurprising in a city that heavily values the celebratory aspects of life, a great sense of combined nostalgia and hometown pride gripped the city after the initial shock of the storm subsided. This manifested in everything from a renewed love for the New Orleans Saints football team to an increased number of groups organizing and taking to the streets to dance or march during Carnival season.

Perhaps the most well-known of the new dance groups is the “610 Stompers,” an organization of men who dance in their signature late 1970s/early 1980s-inspired gold tennis shoes, striped tube socks, powder blue shorts, red satin jackets, and white sweatbands. Founded in 2009, they are the first and only all-male dance group in New Orleans.⁴ The Stompers originated as a handful of friends and relatives with season tickets (in section 610 of the Superdome) for New Orleans Saints football games.⁵ Under the leadership of Chief Dancing

¹ “Katrina’s Statistics Tell Story of Its Wrath,” The Weather Channel, accessed October 23, 2011, <http://www.weather.com/newscenter/topstories/060829katrinastats.html>.

² Ronald Kessler, “Katrina Mental Health,” interview by Bob Hirshon, *ScienceNetLinks*, accessed November 28, 2011, <http://sciencenetlinks/science-news/science-updates/katrina-mental-health/>.

³ “Katrina’s Statistics Tell Story of Its Wrath,” The Weather Channel. These numbers include the greater New Orleans area that share a culture rather than just the city proper.

⁴ “The Dead Rockstars” are a dance group of mostly (but not all) men, and Le Krewe D’Etat has a male dance unit within their parade, but it does not exist as a separate entity.

Officer Brett “SLAB” Patron, they became a group of self-proclaimed “ordinary men” with “extraordinary moves” who use dance to preserve New Orleans traditions, embody post-Katrina cultural trends, and push toward a better future for the city by raising money for charity, unifying the community through movement, and spreading joy in a once-devastated city. The 610 Stompers are a reflection of the community they serve: with a little passion and determination, everyone can overcome obstacles and become extraordinary. Their ambitions were modest to start:

We had one goal with [a] possible secondary goal. Our goal was to march in one Mardi Gras parade – we didn’t know which one yet – and then we thought, we dreamt about performing ... at a Saints game, a halftime show. ... (That was something way far beyond our reach that would never happen.) And we talked about those two goals and set our sights on a Mardi Gras parade. That’s how we started.

SLAB and his fellow Stompers set their sights on the Krewe of Muses parade, as it was the “perfect fit” for their inclusion of “alternative groups” alongside high school marching bands.⁶ To realize this goal, the Stompers choreographed their first moves, began contacting parade organizers, and held auditions to recruit more men.⁷ Since their debut, they have appeared on national television in the 2011 Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, 2013 Superbowl coverage, and CNN’s 2012/2013 New Year’s Eve coverage from the French Quarter. Their numbers have increased from roughly fifteen guys who sat together at Saints games to 115 men who dance through the streets and are a pop culture staple in post-Katrina New Orleans.⁸

The 610 Stompers, like other New Orleans dance and marching groups that emerged post-storm, embrace humor and satire in their dancing while giving to back the community by

⁵ “610” also refers to a bypass of Interstate-10 in New Orleans, the I-610. The logo of the 610 stompers is a combination of an Interstate sign and the Superdome.

⁶ Marching bands, dance groups, marching groups, et cetera, are placed between each float in a parade.

⁷ Brett Patron, “NOLAPod: Brett Patron (Ep. 06),” by Mason Wood, *nolapod.com*, October 28, 2013, <http://nolapod.tumblr.com/post/65395515344/nolapod-brett-patron-ep-06>.

⁸ Neela Banerjee, “Camaraderie, Goofy Moves Fire Up Dance Troupe,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-cl-mardi-gras-610-stompers-20140304-dto,0,7513620.htmlstory#axzz2v93B9wRB>.

raising money for charity.⁹ Part of the Stomper appeal is their “ordinary men” status: they are a group of guys representing a range of professions and ages dancing in an exuberant, physical, often sexy manner. They walk the line of taking what they do seriously while not taking themselves too seriously; dancing and charity work is of the utmost importance, but they know how to make fun of themselves and make their audiences laugh with their performances. While the Stompers do perform their charitable work and their dancing in earnest, the dancing itself is not serious in that the Stompers do not define themselves by virtuosic technique or even synchronicity; as any seasoned Stomper will tell you, being a Stomper is roughly twenty percent dance and eighty percent personality.¹⁰ Though they rehearse and perform throughout the year for charity events and halftime shows, the highlight of their schedule is Carnival. This is the time of year when the Stompers take to the streets in parades, performing for and interacting with all who line the parade routes.¹¹ The Stompers also hold two large events per year to interact with their fans and raise money for charity; people eagerly join these events, evidence of the city’s love for their mustachioed, dancing men.

Because the Stompers have achieved such popularity and are the adopted “everyman” representatives of the city of New Orleans, it is important to explore the significance of the organization from a scholarly perspective with a focus on the importance of dance. Through dance, the 610 Stompers are able to unite New Orleanians over a common cause, prove that even underdogs can become heroes, and actively conserve the city’s ambulatory, social, and cultural traditions. The Stompers’ dance moves also give New Orleanians an opportunity help those in need, and find an outlet to personal acceptance, freedom, and happiness through movement. The Stompers are a group of everyday men who use dance to impact post-Katrina New Orleans in a way unparalleled by other organizations. The 610 Stompers preserve New Orleans traditions, adapt them to fit current trends, and ensure their survival through the dancing body.

⁹ John Pope, “Grassroots Mardi Gras Marching Groups Opt for Spunk and Sparkle Over Pomp and Prestige,” *nola.com*, March 3, 2011, http://blog.nola.com/mardigras/index.ssf/2011/03/grassroots_mardi_gras_marching.html.

¹⁰ Nikki M. Caruso, notes from 610 Stompers 2013 auditions, August 18, 2013.

¹¹ Parades in New Orleans generally adhere to the following format: Law enforcement clears the streets, followed by an alternation between floats (large, decorated wagons) and groups on foot. These groups can be marching bands, dance groups, horseback riding clubs, or marching groups.

Chapter One discusses the importance of the New Orleans Saints to the people of New Orleans post-Katrina and explains the serendipitous origins of the 610 Stompers and their intrinsic ties to the Saints organization and their devoted fans. It was at the height of Saints fever that the Stompers made their debut, appearing in both the Buddy D. parade before the Saints' first Superbowl and the Lombardi Gras parade after their victory. The people of New Orleans immediately embraced the Stompers after these appearances, rocketing the dance group to local pop culture celebrity status. The Stompers' invitation to perform in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade meant the Stompers served as representatives of New Orleans at a nationally televised parade; local fans' support helped the group – a home team of lovable underdogs – achieve this honor. The reasons for the immediate adoption of Stompers into local culture are covered, including the connotations of their reigning local pop culture celebrity status in New Orleans; using dance, the Stompers serve as a reflection of present-day New Orleans, as well as what New Orleanians wish to become.

Chapter Two explores the Stompers' roots in the New Orleans traditions of Carnival, benevolent societies, and marching groups; the Stompers not only preserve and revive these pre-Katrina cultural customs, but instill post-Katrina values of local pride, a need for humor, and a spirit of unity through their costumes and dancing. Included are Barbara Ehrenreich and William McNeill's theories on the effects of collective movement on groups and how the 610 Stompers bond through dance, generating an atmosphere of "collective joy" – the unification of a group through pleasure – in their wake.¹² Part of this collective joy is brought about as the Stompers embody aspects of the camp aesthetic – such as their heightened sense of character while performing – that make their dance more accessible to New Orleanians. Through the Stompers, New Orleanians physically bond in an act of preserving the past while living and coming together to enjoy the present.

Chapter Three covers the Stompers' annual charity events: the Debutante Ball and Ball Crawl. These are both occasions for preserving and building upon New Orleans traditions, but the chapter's primary focus is on how the Stompers' benevolence creates communal bonds while enabling attendees to be a Stomper (and therefore a philanthropist) for the day. These connections are created by putting 610 Stompers and attendees on the same level by the Stompers teaching dances, everyone dressing in 1980s garb, moving as a united group through

¹² Edith Tuner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy*, 3.

local neighborhoods, and using good-natured competitions to make the participants the focus of the day's events. The Stompers' charity work lasts throughout the year, constantly reinforcing connections between the Stompers, their fans, and the members of the community in need of support while also providing a sense of uplift for the community at large through play. In attending the Stompers' Balls, community members participate in a world of nostalgia and throwbacks through music, costumes, and dance moves. The 610 Stompers revive 1980s trends and embrace the local love for New Orleans nostalgia to bolster support for their events, using a collective adoration for the past to raise money and escape into fantasy for a day. Nostalgia is one more way the Stompers connect to the community, and is an important part of resurrecting positive aspects of the city's past to encourage hometown pride.

Finally, the conclusion looks at the Stompers' contributions to the people of New Orleans, specifically the importance of dance as an opportunity to play and create communal ties. It also provides thoughts for future areas of research pertaining to the 610 Stompers and ideas on how the Stompers may evolve as an organization, opening more avenues of exploration. Most importantly, it highlights how the Stompers' dance moves are the best form of embodiment of the present and preservation of the past for the city of New Orleans.

CHAPTER ONE

THE RISE OF THE 610 STOMPERS: “OH HOW I WANT TO BE IN THAT NUMBER”

The 610 Stompers have become local pop culture celebrities in New Orleans, serving as an embodiment of the average New Orleanian achieving greatness and becoming an everyday hero through dance; a feat accomplished within a year of the group's creation, and due in part to their initial association with the New Orleans Saints. When “black and gold fever” swept the city post-Katrina, the 610 Stompers were there to help lead the charge, celebrating two of the team's greatest victories through dance.¹³ It was in an atmosphere of pure elation and camaraderie that the 610 Stompers first shared their moves with the people of New Orleans, and in turn the citizenry immediately embraced the Stompers, raising them to the status of local pop culture celebrities and representatives of the Crescent City's culture. With their signature uniforms and over-the-top dance moves, the 610 Stompers are instantly recognizable as the city's beloved band of ordinary, extraordinary men.

The renowned 610 Stomper look serves as a visual representation of what influences the men who New Orleanians chose to unite the city through dance. Their costumes are, at first glance, a simple nod to the early 1980s with a hint of the late 1970s in the mix. However, this is a significant era for the charter members: it is when they graduated high school and went to college; it was a time when they grew into men, and accordingly their uniform is emblematic of what they perceived as an average man of that day. What the Stompers did was preserve this image of the commonplace, and morph it into a symbol of respecting the past while maturing into an exceptional person.

The outdated style of the uniforms may also be an unconscious nod to what originally inspired SLAB: the long-familiar sight of women's dance teams – like the Gold Dusters and Dance Connection – in parades whose membership consists of (aging) women wearing costumes hardly updated since they made their debuts in the late 1970s/1980s. These female dance teams, who traditionally parade in neighboring Metairie but joined the Uptown parades of New Orleans in 2013, take their dancing and costumes seriously, rather than engaging a satirical approach

¹³ The Saints colors are black and gold.

many dance post-Katrina dance groups adopted. The founding members of the Stompers combined their athletic fashion of the 1970s/1980s with the satirical nature of groups like the “Pussyfooters” and “Camel Toe Lady Steppers”¹⁴ by creating a costume that represents the everyman of days gone by while satirizing other adults dancing in outdated costumes.¹⁵



Fig. 1: The 610 Stompers uniform worn in hot weather, including the variation of Team Gleason socks and red sweatbands. Photo: N. Caruso.

Because New Orleans dance groups (like the Pussyfooters) are primarily women’s organizations, they often embrace city’s acceptance of the bawdy, playing with female sexuality in their names and employing a boudoir-inspired aesthetic; costumes generally include corsets,

¹⁴ These two groups, consisting of adult women, are further explored in chapter two.

¹⁵ Nikki M. Caruso, conversations with the 610 Stompers at 2013 auditions, August 18, 2013.

fishnet stockings, wigs of an unnatural color, and a skirt reminiscent of a deflated bustle or a tutu.¹⁶ The “Muff-A-Lottas” are an overall exception to this trend, as their costumes are a stylized, cute-flirty version of a 1950s waitress that involves a button-up blouse, short poodle skirt with a crinoline, saddle shoes, pillbox hat, and fishnet stockings. The impression of this group’s aesthetic is similar to the Stompers’: a stylized uniform of a particular variety of person in a specific, highly recognizable decade. While the Muff-A-Lottas tap into the “bygone era” feel of the 1950s with their costumes, music choices, and dancing, the 610 Stompers’ look conveniently taps into the current pop culture obsession with the 1980s, making them more trendy than sentimental in nature.¹⁷

The Stompers’ signature look is a truly head-to-toe throwback to the cusp of the late 1970s/early 1980s, with a bit added of shine and nods to their New Orleans roots.¹⁸ Their tennis shoes are spray-painted a uniform shade of gold, and they pull white tube socks with red and blue stripes up nearly to their knees. Powder-blue polyester coach shorts are worn in slightly varied degrees of tightness, and the uniform shirt is either a tank or raglan-style shirt with red sleeves printed with the 610 Stomper logo, worn with or without their red satin jackets. The signature jackets have the 610 Stomper logo embroidered on the back, and once a Stomper earns his pseudonym after the rookie year, the new name is embroidered on the front left side of the jacket. The finishing touches include sweat bands (usually white terrycloth, but occasionally red or an event-appropriate color like green for St. Patrick’s Day) worn on the wrists and head. This all culminates in the *piece de resistance* of the Stomper look: a mustache.

While 610 Stompers are not required to grow a mustache, it is certainly encouraged among members, though some of the mustachioed men will shave them off during the “off-season.” There are a variety of mustache styles: curled with wax at the ends like Snidely Whiplash, flowing into puffed-out mutton chops, mustaches accompanied by goatees or soul patches, the fu manchu, and the ever-popular 1970s Burt Reynolds look, to name a few. Though present during their debut, Stompers decided against faux facial hair after the inaugural season in

¹⁶ These costumes are most prominently seen on the Pussyfooters, Cherry Bombs, Sirens of New Orleans, and the annual thematic changes of the Camel Toe Lady Steppers’ costumes.

¹⁷ The Muff-A-Lottas dance songs including “Iko Iko” by the Dixie Cups, “The Clapping Song” by Shirley Ellis, and “They All Ask’d For You” by the Meters.

¹⁸ MacCash, “Look for the 610 Stompers in Tonight’s New Orleans Saints Parade.”

favor of an “all or nothing” approach to sporting impressive facial hair; some Stompers, like “Mr. Monopoly,” choose to wear a bare upper lip.¹⁹



Fig. 2: The 610 Stompers uniform with red satin jacket and white sweatband. Photo: N. Caruso.

As iconic as the head-to-toe look is for the 610 Stompers, they also have a logo design truly illustrative of the group’s origins and values. All dance groups have individual logos that they place on banners, promotional materials for charity events, and occasionally, costumes. Easily recognizable, the 610 Stomper logo (seen in photos above) is a combination of both New Orleans and era-based symbols. At the center of a blue shield is the number “610,” which refers to both the section of the Superdome where the original Stompers have season tickets for Saints games and the local Interstate route. This blue shield mimics an Interstate sign, but is topped with a gold and white Superdome and is flanked by black wings outlined in gold (akin to the Trans Am emblem’s phoenix). Under the entire winged shield is the word “Stompers.” Their logo often appears with the motto “Ordinary Men. Extraordinary Moves.” below. Fairly simple

¹⁹ Caruso, conversations with the 610 Stompers at 2013 auditions. For the Buddy D. Parade, Mr. Monopoly wore a large, fake mustache reminiscent of Mr. Monopoly, hence his moniker.

and with a limited color palette, the logo looks very much like a tattoo and is easily recognizable. The design also manipulates well-known images – like the Trans Am logo and Interstate shield – and makes them specific to New Orleans with the inclusion of the Superdome and number 610. This show of local pride in their logo no doubt endeared the Stompers to their early audiences, giving the people of New Orleans an even greater motivation to keep the men as the city’s favorite dance group.

Every bit as eye-catching and distinctive as their costumes are the Stompers’ dance moves. Driving the choreographic ideas of the 610 Stompers’ dances is the notion that anyone can dance. The Stompers want all of their moves to, at least in theory, be accessible enough that any person on the street could dance along; they do not require exceptional technical prowess or decades of training. This enthusiasm in embracing their own status as amateur dancers bolsters their overall “ordinary” air, making it easier for audiences to relate to and connect with the Stompers; they are seen as models for having fun and being yourself while dancing, not as a group held up as the nonpareil of dance technique. Another important characteristic of the choreography is that the movements are big, making them more visible to crowds.²⁰ In a February 2010 article on the 610 Stompers, Doug MacCash wrote: “There’s an undeniable ‘Napoleon Dynamite’ aspect to the whole 610 Stompers style. ‘We take our dancing seriously,’ Patron said, ‘and we’re good at it. But not perfect. That makes it fascinating and somewhat funny. When they hear about it, people expect a drunken St. Patrick’s Day marching krewe. What they get is actual choreographed dance moves. Impressive dance moves.’”²¹

Part of what makes the Stompers funny is the movement itself, which involves a great deal of booty-shaking, athletic references like striking the Heisman pose or serving a volleyball, high-kicks that allow for some friendly competition, fist-pumps, and plenty of 1980s pop culture references, such as the *Karate Kid* “wax-on/wax-off” and the Running Man.²² The choice of these athletic and pop culture references adapted into dance moves also make the Stompers’ choreography accessible to audiences through their familiarity, which enables non-Stompers to recognize and learn the dances quickly. Song lyrics or the overall theme of the dance often

²⁰ Caruso, conversations with the 610 Stompers at 2013 auditions.

²¹ MacCash, “Look for the 610 Stompers.”

²² Nikki M. Caruso, field notes, 2012.

correlate to the dance steps; the 2013 audition dance was to a song from the 1986 film *Top Gun*, and many of the movements were inspired by the movie, including the “fly-over” and “tailspin.” Their dances are constructed collaboratively, with SLAB and other Stompers generating concepts and movements, then working with a former Saintsation to choreograph the final product;²³ other Stompers on the choreographic team include “Sir Dancealot” and cousins, “Mr. Sunshine” and “Dalton.”²⁴ They have also worked with SLAB’s cousin, Haley Harris, “a life-long dance enthusiast,” to create dances to “Bust a Move,” “Girls, They Love Me,” and their first claim to dance fame: “Halftime (Stand Up and Get Crunk).”²⁵

This inclusion of family members with the 610 Stompers’ endeavors extends to a group of “strong, beautiful women” called the 610 Splits, who serve as the Stompers’ security force; many of the Splits are wives, girlfriends, and friends of the Stompers. Generally, dance groups have men protecting the female dancers, and the groups of dancers and guardians have corresponding names. For example, the Muff-A-Lottas have the “Bun Warmers,” the Camel Toe Lady Steppers have the “Camelbacks,” the Pussyfooters have “Pussy Handlers,” and a group called the “Cherry Bombs” have the “Bomb Squad.” The mermaid-themed “Sirens of New Orleans” have a mixed-gender group of chaperones who dress as sailors or pirates and are called the “Sailor Corps.”²⁶ In having women serve as their parade route security, the Stompers break with traditional rules of a group’s social structure by reversing the gender roles; the women become the protectors rather than the protected, an unprecedented position of power among marching and dancing groups.²⁷

The Splits’ name comes from the “610 split,” which is where Interstate 10 forks off to Interstate 610 in New Orleans. The ladies’ motto is “Don’t get cocky with the Splits!” and they,

²³ Caruso, notes from the 610 Stompers 2013 auditions. The “Saintsations” are the cheerleaders for the New Orleans Saints.

²⁴ Banerjee, “Camaraderie, Goofy Moves Fire Up Dance Troupe.”

²⁵ Pope, “Mardi Gras 2013: 3 New Marching Groups Take to the Streets, in Style.”

²⁶ “Who Are the Sirens?,” Sirens of New Orleans, <http://new.sirensfneworleans.org/who-are-the-sirens>.

²⁷ The local men’s marching groups do not have any form of security group, but are more the predators than potential prey; members of the Jefferson City Buzzards and the Irish marching groups are known for finding a girl to kiss and/or hug in exchange for a flower. The theme varies. Often the men generally go for someone attractive or who has let other members get handsy, but some groups have been heard to give flowers and kisses to the least attractive women in the crowd.

like the Stompers, have pseudonyms (“Barely Legal,” “Tough Kitties,” et cetera) and a 1980s-inspired uniform. They match the Stompers’ color scheme but have white as the dominant color (visor, embroidered jacket, and skirt) with light blue legwarmers, a white and light blue raglan-sleeved shirt, and red tennis shoes as accents. Also like the Stompers, the Splits are involved year-round volunteering on committees and attending Stomper events as needed. To become a 610 Split, a recommendation from a current Stomper or Split is required, as well as meeting the minimum age requirement of twenty-one and filling out an application.²⁸ The application is a collection of hard-hitting questions like “Do you sing in the shower? If yes, what do you sing?,” “Who are the male dancers that have influenced you throughout your life? Why?,” and “What is your favorite drink? (alcoholic or non).” As with the Stompers, a Split’s personality is an important factor in becoming part of the organization, especially when it comes to crowd interaction. These women were recruited after the Stompers’ first parade to “act as a human barricade on the parade route, fighting back the endless crowds of hot women and wannabe men” who throw themselves at the 610 Stompers; this recruitment of the Splits shows the Stompers were clearly unprepared for their immediate fame.²⁹

The Stompers’ ascent to gold-sneakered stardom began with the impact of a football team in a city destroyed by flood. The Saints – once among the worst teams in the nation – became the lifeblood of post-Katrina New Orleans and laid the foundation for groups like the Stompers to generate a sense of pride and even community among New Orleanians. Christopher Lawrence captures the role of the city’s national football team in recovery in his article “Perspectives on the New Orleans Saints as a Vehicle for the Instillation of Hope, Post Katrina: Therapy on the 30 Yard Line.” In his article, based in counseling theory and practice, Lawrence discusses the use of pop culture as a way to inject hope into a community, and uses the New Orleans Saints as his prime example. Essentially, popular culture (in this case, the Saints) provides people with an opportunity to reflect upon and draw meaning from pop culture while creating an opportunity to live in their own fantasies or memories. Regarding athletics, Lawrence writes that there is often an “underdog” or “Cinderella story” to accompany a team’s season, which then allows a sports fan to see their own journey as a parallel. The theory is if a person’s team can come out a success

²⁸ Nikki M. Caruso, conversation with 610 Splits Tough Kitties and Barely Legal at 610 Stomper 2013 auditions, August 18, 2013.

²⁹ 610 Stompers, 610 Split application form, pdf, 2013.

despite their less-than-promising status at the beginning of a season or despite encountering obstacles, a fan can explore “allegorical common ground” between themselves and the team. Finding the commonalities between themselves and the team is helpful in “potentially diminishing feelings of isolation and introducing the idea of connectedness” in the process.³⁰ The Saints’ post-Katrina success resonated in these ways, and served as inspiration in the aftermath of the storm.

When the news media departed New Orleans after the immediate shock of Hurricane Katrina’s devastation, the people of the city were left to either repair or abandon their city and their homes, deal with survivor’s guilt, and wonder what the future would hold in a place being likened to a third-world country.³¹ This was experienced on many levels: as individuals and collectively through the loss of family, coworkers, neighborhoods, worldly possessions, homes, cultural intuitions, and friends. New Orleanians needed a distraction that gave them a reason to collectively root for something positive in the world around them, and the opportunity to live vicariously through someone perceived as better off than themselves. This hope came in the form of their football team.³²

In what is now known in New Orleans mythology as the “Domecoming,” the Saints and their fans were reunited on their home turf of the Superdome. On September 25, 2006, rock bands U2 and Green Day collaborated to perform a song appropriately called “The Saints are Coming” for the Superdome’s first event after damage sustained during Hurricane Katrina. The performance “elicited cheers and tears from more than 70,000 fans, cranking up the emotion and the volume as a national-television audience got to watch the city actually revel and celebrate for the first time after a year of much bleaker broadcasts.”³³ The Saints added to the elation with a victory over the city’s rivals, the Atlanta Falcons. A key player when it came to the Saints’ victory was Steve Gleason, who blocked a punt return by the Falcons in the first quarter of the game; his block resulted in the first points scored by the Saints during their first home game in

³⁰ Christopher Lawrence, “Perspectives on the New Orleans Saints as a Vehicle for the Installation of Hope, Post Katrina: Therapy on the 30 Yard Line,” *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 2:3 (2007): 90.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

³² *Ibid.*, 92.

³³ Mike Triplett, “Musical Performance Set Tone in New Orleans Saints’ Return to Superdome,” *nola.com*, September 23, 2011, http://www.nola.com/saints/index.ssf/2011/09/the_musical_performance_set_th.html.

twenty-one months.³⁴ His split-second reaction made Gleason a local hero – this play is immortalized with a statue outside of the Superdome – and fueled the fire of Saints fever.

Accounts of what happened that night in the Superdome are prime examples of a renewed sense of togetherness, especially as expressed by former *Times-Picayune* columnist (and unofficial voice of the city after Katrina) Chris Rose. He describes the after-effects of the night as an example of regenerative bonding in New Orleans brought about by the Saints' victory: "... something about waking up in a community that is thinking the same thing, that is feeling – if only for a moment – like we all just accomplished something together – when actually it was a bunch of millionaires whose names we hardly know."³⁵ Rose wrote of his experience in the Superdome that night:

The game. When they blocked the punt and scored the first touchdown, something inside of me that I didn't know was there broke loose. I let out a yell so loud that my throat still hurts today.

I fell into a human scrum that consisted of a tall skinny guy, a short woman, a cop and a beer vendor. Every layer of authority and sociology was stripped away. We literally fell on top of each other. I have never experienced a flashpoint of sudden emotion unloosed so fast.³⁶

His article captures the atmosphere of that particular day in New Orleans history, and the gravity it held for the people of the city. Steve Gleason and his fellow Saints pulled the thousands in the Superdome – as well as the city and surrounding area – into a profound moment of belonging.

What is unique about this incredible moment of togetherness is that a team of "lovable losers" – already a source of local pride despite their historically abysmal record – actually participated in the city's recovery. Saints team members did this by visiting survivors, donating to children in need, helping rebuild homes, and providing 1,000 holiday meals to local families.³⁷ By the Saints directly supporting their fans' recovery from the storm's devastation, providing

³⁴ "New Orleans Saints (Gleason Block)," YouTube video, 1:39, from a Monday Night Football broadcast on September 25, 2006, posted by "SYKESVISION," July 24, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIGgBhNtOP4>.

³⁵ Chris Rose, *I Dead in Attic: After Katrina* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 306.

³⁶ Ibid. To see Steve Gleason reading an excerpt of this article, see "SUPER BOWL XLVII MUST SEE..." at <https://vimeo.com/58731911>.

³⁷ Lawrence, "Perspectives on the New Orleans Saints," 94.

both hope and a diversion through the 2006-2007 football season, and playing out an underdog story, Saints fans (known as Who Dats or the Who Dat Nation) were able to unite and psychologically become part of the team.³⁸ “In effect, the relationship between the people of New Orleans and the Saints gave credence to the research suggesting fandom can serve as a source of personal identity and create a sense of belonging” to a greater whole, writes Lawrence, and “[p]ulling together enables an individual to internalize a team's success as his or her own.”³⁹ Combining the effect of drawing parallels with a feeling of shared success city-wide created a strong relationship among fans; the people of New Orleans were brought together for a common, positive reason and felt a strong personal connection to their home team. The next two football seasons were not as successful in terms of victories and national status, but the Who Dats’ love for their team never wavered.⁴⁰ The Saints’ colors, black and gold, remained as popular as in their time of success, and the players were still viewed as heroes; the Saints had the Midas touch with their fans.

In the 2009 season, this team (once known as “The ‘Aints”) achieved the impossible: they made it to the Super Bowl.⁴¹ Years before, a New Orleans sportscaster and local icon by the name of Buddy Diliberto – known as “Buddy D.” – promised to wear a dress and parade through the streets of New Orleans if the Saints ever made it to the Super Bowl.⁴² (The possibility of the Saints ever making it to the Super Bowl was a running joke in the city akin to “when Hell freezes over.”) Even though Buddy D. passed away before he saw the Saints reach this milestone, his promise was carried out in his stead by legions of loyal fans in what was simply dubbed “the Buddy D. Parade,” held January 31, 2010. As thousands of New Orleans men prepared to take to the streets wearing dresses to celebrate their team’s once impossible feat, parade organizers

³⁸ Ibid., 94.

³⁹ Ibid., 95.

⁴⁰ “2006 New Orleans Saints,” pro-football-reference.com, accessed June 17, 2013, <http://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/nor/2006.htm>. That year the Saints had their most successful season to date, finishing with a 10-6 record, winning their first Divisional Championship, and reaching the NFC Championship for the first time in the team’s history; fans were able to ride the emotional wave associated with success throughout that season.

⁴¹ The Superbowl for the 2009 season was held February 7, 2010.

⁴² Peter Finney, “Parade a Fitting Tribute to Buddy D's Memory,” *nola.com*, February 1, 2012, http://www.nola.com/saints/index.ssf/2010/01/parade_a_fitting_tribute_to_bu.html.

called up the 610 Stompers and asked them to make an appearance.⁴³ Because the Stompers never made a public appearance before the Buddy D. parade, organizers assumed that men who dance must do it while dressed as women, therefore fitting right in with the parade of men in dresses.⁴⁴ Instead, jubilant Saints fans encountered a group of average-looking guys dancing in the now famous powder blue coach shorts, tube socks, gold tennis shoes, and red satin jackets.

As the 610 Stompers and Who Dats lined up for the parade outside of the Superdome, the song that “emerged as the Saints' call-to-arms” began to play: the Ying Yang Twins’ “Halftime (Stand Up and Get Crunk).”⁴⁵ During the song’s intro, Stompers jumped up and down, waved their arms in the air asking for noise, chest-bumped each other, and fed upon the crowd’s excited energy to debut their moves.⁴⁶ Onlookers bounced along to the tune they knew so well from Saints games in the Superdome, whistling, laughing, and cheering unabashedly as soon as the Stompers began to punch the air, throw imaginary lassos, turn in semi-synchronicity, and pretend to ride a horse.⁴⁷ Footage of the 610 Stompers dancing along the parade route shows a crowd of men, women, and children screaming for a group of dancers they had never seen before.⁴⁸ Founder and Chief Dancing Officer SLAB describes their movement as “wholesome, but ... outrageous at the same time,” making them suitable for the broad spectrum of fans encountered along the parade route.⁴⁹ This was the first time the 610 Stompers shared their outlandish dance moves with the city of New Orleans. Because so many New Orleanians showed up for the Buddy

⁴³ Parade organizers learned about the 610 Stompers in a through-the-grapevine fashion.

⁴⁴ Katie Moore, “610 Stompers Are Ready for the Big Time,” WWLTV.com, November 14, 2011, <http://www.wwltv.com/news/610-Stompers-ready-for-the-big-time-133856943.html>.

⁴⁵ Keith Spera, “New Orleans Saints Fans Get Crunk, Just Like the Team's Owners,” *nola.com*, January 23, 2010, http://www.nola.com/saints/index.ssf/2010/01/new_orleans_saints_fans_get_cr.html.

⁴⁶ “610 Stompers Get Crunk,” YouTube video, 1:50, posted by “bayoubelle311,” February 1, 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UaDIM_ukO_0_.

⁴⁷ “610 Stompers at Buddy D Parade,” YouTube video, 1:32, posted by “Maggie Carroll,” February 1, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYQKxiOsBSw>.

⁴⁸ Doug MacCash, “Look for the 610 Stompers in Tonight’s New Orleans Saints Parade,” *nola.com*, February 10, 2010, http://www.nola.com/mardigras/index.ssf/2010/02/look_for_the_610_stompers_in_t.html. Two weeks prior the 610 Stompers performed at the Pussyfooters’ Blush Ball on January 15, 2010 – a charity event which requires tickets for admission therefore not considered “public” for the purposes of this work.

⁴⁹ “Big Easy's 610 Stompers Heading For Big Apple,” YouTube video, 2:35, posted by “wdsutv,” November 11, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdDW0UpeCNk>.

D. parade to express their love for the team who gave them hope, the Stompers had thousands of euphoric people as their very first audience. Local news stations broadcast segments of the parade – including those with the Stompers dancing – in their reports, exposing the Stompers to an even greater audience; the Saints’ Midas touch extended to the Stompers.⁵⁰

Because they were so quickly crowned the city’s new darlings of dance, the 610 Stompers followed their Buddy D. parade debut with a string of high-profile, invited appearances. On February 4, 2010, the Stompers performed at a University of New Orleans basketball game, and less than a week later they danced in the Saints’ Super Bowl victory parade (dubbed “Lombardi Gras”). For the Saints, who entered the Superbowl as complete underdogs against the unstoppable Peyton Manning and the Indianapolis Colts and emerged with a 31-17 victory, this was an unprecedented, seemingly miraculous event. A crowd of 800,000 parade-goers on a 3.7 mile route came to celebrate the Saints’ victory, and saw the 610 Stompers’ dance moves, vibrant personalities, signature mustaches, and iconic shorts.⁵¹ Fortunately for the 610 Stompers, the Super Bowl festivities were nestled into the Carnival season, so less than a week went by before the group made their official Carnival debut in the Krewe of Muses parade.⁵² Had the Saints not made it to the Super Bowl, the Krewe of Muses would have been the Stompers’ first truly public performance. Instead, they were in the perfect position to ride the wave of Who Dat mania sweeping the city. In their fledgling season, the 610 Stompers also performed at New Orleans Hornets games, local roller derby bouts, Harrah’s Casino, and hosted their Inaugural Ball Crawl.⁵³ New Orleanians’ instantaneous acceptance of and love for the 610 Stompers’ outlandish, funny, flirty dance moves and allegiance to their hometown emblazoned on their chests made the group of men an overnight sensation and local heroes; they were the new symbol of the everyman in New Orleans, reflecting the values of the citizenry through dance. The immediate demand for Stomper appearances also meant the group was able to embed themselves

⁵⁰ Brett Patron, “NOLAPod: Brett Patron (Ep. 06),” by Mason Wood.

⁵¹ Carolyn Heneghan, “Saints’ Super Bowl Parade – Lombardi Gras,” *Examiner.com*, February 23, 2010, <http://www.examiner.com/article/saints-super-bowl-parade-lombardi-gras>.

⁵² Muses is a popular all-female Carnival krewe that includes many of the local dance groups in their annual parade. They parade Uptown, primarily on St. Charles Ave., the Thursday night before Mardi Gras.

⁵³ “Videos 2009-2010,” 610 Stompers: Ordinary Men. Extraordinary Moves, <http://www.610stompers.com/videos-2009-2010/>. The Hornets are the city’s NBA franchise, recently renamed the Pelicans.

in the New Orleans consciousness as a welcome, familiar sight outside the Carnival season, setting them apart from other marching and dance groups who are generally only associated with seasonal activity.

The following year, the 610 Stompers not only made additional public appearances for charity – associating themselves with philanthropic work as well as parades and athletics – but increased the number of parades they were in and hosted their first Sweet 610 Debutante Ball. The crowning jewel, however, was an invitation for the Stompers to perform in the 2011 Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City. New Orleanians’ love for the Stompers created such a hullabaloo that the dancing men with silly mustaches would now serve as cultural ambassadors in an annual American tradition.⁵⁴ The Macy’s parade was the engagement that would broadcast their unconventional dance moves and New Orleans quirk to an audience of 65 million and thrust the 610 Stompers of New Orleans into the national spotlight.

Prior to their New York adventure, New Orleans news outlets were abuzz concerning the local dance group’s upcoming performance. In a special report, WDSU’s Randi Rousseau interviewed the Stompers and danced with some of the guys in their secret rehearsal location.⁵⁵ Other reporters, like the *Times-Picayune*’s Doug MacCash, attended a separate Stomper rehearsal leading up to the group’s departure. In the rehearsal, reporters watched old routines danced out on a local school gymnasium floor, but they were all ushered out before the rehearsal of the tailored-for-Macy’s routine.⁵⁶ For those local fans who could not attend the actual Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, the Stompers hosted a send-off party at the popular music venue the Howlin’ Wolf, thanking fans for their support. At the party they performed their new routine for the parade and debuted their new calendar (“12 Months of Masculinity”) for fans’ year-round viewing pleasure.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ The 610 Splits accompanied the Stompers, but were not included in either telecast.

⁵⁵ “Big Easy’s 610 Stompers Heading For Big Apple,” YouTube video, 2:35, posted by “wdsutv,” 11 November 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdDW0UpeCNk>.

⁵⁶ John Simerman, “610 Stompers Take Their Moves, Moustaches and Moxie to the Macy’s Parade,” *nola.com*, November 25, 2011, http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2011/11/610_stompers_take_their_moves.html.

⁵⁷ “610 Stompers Macys & Calendar Party,” YouTube video, 1:44, posted by “welliverpr,” 13 October 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-G6L5THyBpo>. The Stomper calendar is now an annual production with a new theme each year.

An invitation to dance down the parade route and have a television spot at Herald Square in front of Macy's – where they performed their specially-routine – was only part of the Stompers' Big Apple experience.⁵⁸ While in New York, they also appeared on the *Today* show, where co-host and former New Orleans news anchor Hoda Kotb introduced them to a nation-wide audience before showcasing their signature dance moves.⁵⁹ Because the 610 Stompers are comprised of a wide range of guys – some with higher-paying jobs than others – not every Stomper could easily afford the trip to New York City for this once in a lifetime experience. In the spirit of togetherness, the Stompers raised money to ensure every member made the trip for the big day, showing all Stompers are of equal importance in representing the group as well as the city they reflect: New Orleans.⁶⁰

Part of what the Stompers brought to New York was their sense of humor, which is emblematic of the New Orleans tradition of Carnavalesque antics and public performance. When the Stompers bust a move on their home turf, they are in a context where – despite being a one-of-a-kind group – they fit in with the world around them. Home audiences, no matter if at a Saints game or in a parade, are bound to be familiar with the Stompers because of their role in everyday New Orleans culture. Even if the Stompers themselves are new to someone, there are now enough dance groups of a similar, humorous nature parading in New Orleans that a regular parade-goer should be familiar with their performative style, and appreciate their brand of humor. When the 610 Stompers left their home environment, the new crowd's reaction was an unknown factor. When they performed on *Today*, Hoda Kotb appeared to enjoy the performance, laughing and occasionally mimicking their arm movements throughout the dance routine; her reaction was similar to a person seeing the Stompers in New Orleans and immediately “getting it.” Co-host Kathie Lee, on the other hand, clearly did not understand the humor of the dancing

⁵⁸ Doug MacCash, “New Orleans 610 Stompers are Ready to March in Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade,” *nola.com*, November 23, 2011, http://www.nola.com/arts/index.ssf/2011/11/new_orleans_610_stompers_in_ma.html.

⁵⁹ Lauren W. List, “The 610 Stompers Shake it Down on The Today Show,” *nola.com*, November 23, 2011, http://blog.nola.com/interact/2011/11/the_610_stompers_shake_it_down.html.

⁶⁰ Caruso, conversations with the 610 Stompers at 2013 auditions. For events where a limited number of Stompers are needed, men sign up on a first-come-first served basis. This allows each member to work with his own schedule outside of being a Stomper, and prevents any habitual selection of the same Stompers to represent the group.

and costumes and opted for caustic, dismissive commentary and head-shaking during the segment.⁶¹

The next day was a first for Macy's and America: the inclusion of the 610 Stompers in the annual parade. Unlike New Orleans parades (which last hours, often have gaps between floats, and pause *en route*) the Macy's parade is a strictly-organized event that is timed down to the minute for television. Barricades line the entire New York route, while New Orleans only barricades select sections of routes where a crowd may be particularly thick or the parade needs room to turn. Corporate sponsorship, banned in New Orleans Carnival, abounds in the Macy's spectacle of famous balloons, floats, marching bands, and musical performances by pop stars. And, of course, New Orleans paraders throw beads and trinkets from floats, resulting in a screaming, waving crowd; the floats in Macy's simply drive down the streets, leaving no litter or wildly flailing arms in their wake. Macy's regimented approach, combined with an audience unaccustomed to interacting with the parade itself, made for a different performance atmosphere for the 610 Stompers.⁶²

In a journal kept for *OffBeat* magazine, Stomper Mark Laforet described one of the major differences from a home-town parade: "In New Orleans parades, we have a huge sound system mounted on our support truck, which also pulls our trailer equipped with two much-needed portalets. In New York, we got a wooden cutout star on wheels with what sounded like a Fisher-Price boombox. Not good. Those of us in the front row could barely hear it, and those behind us were at the mercy of following our moves, right or wrong. In my case, mostly wrong."⁶³ Laforet describes the silence along the parade route before crowds saw them dancing, and how it was a sharp contrast to New Orleans crowds that cheer at the Stompers' approach. Interestingly, he notes, the 610 Stompers were one of the only groups to perform for the entire two mile parade route instead of saving it all for Herald Square. SLAB was unsure how crowds would react in such a different parade atmosphere (earlier in the day, a quick parade, no tailgating, and importantly no beer); to him it was all about the message of the specially-crafted sixty second

⁶¹ Lauren List, "The 610 Stompers Shake it Down on *The Today Show*," *nola.com*, November 23, 2011, http://blog.nola.com/interact/2011/11/the_610_stompers_shake_it_down.html. Video of the performance in the article.

⁶² Patron, "NOLApodcast."

⁶³ Mark Laforet and Kevin Monahan, "610 Stompers: Stomping to Manhattan," *OffBeat Magazine*, February 1, 2012, <http://www.offbeat.com/2012/02/01/610-stompers-stomping-to-manhattan/>.

dance: “We’re telling a story with this dance. And the story is, all of us can be heroes. ... Every ordinary man around the world, every ordinary person can be a hero.”⁶⁴

Thanks to YouTube, it is possible to see and hear crowd reactions to the Stompers in the Macy’s parade from various points along the route. In one video, the performance to “Halftime (Get Crunk)” is met by laughter, cheers, and applause; one Stomper is giving high-fives to those along the barricade after dancing, as they do with New Orleans crowds.⁶⁵ At another point, the crowd is quiet for the performance, cheering at highlights such as a booty-shake or pony-ride, and begins to cheer for the Stompers only after the parade is moving again and their performance at the location is finished.⁶⁶ This group treats the Stompers’ performance in a more traditional audience-performer manner, keeping interaction to a bare minimum and following the customary standards of when to react to performers. Video from a third location shows a similar reaction to the second video’s crowd, but with a few parade-goers bopping along to the music; it is a hybrid reaction somewhere between interaction and a recognized separation of audience and performers. What this video more clearly shows is Laforet’s description of the music situation: as soon as the cutout Macy’s star (housing a speaker) moves down the parade route, the music drifts away, unheard by the dancers or the audience; its absence is staggering.⁶⁷

In neither circumstance does the audience feel the freedom that New Orleanians feel to physically react to (and interact with) the parade before them, thus missing out on the opportunity to bond with the Stompers, Splits, and fellow parade-goers in a moment of unadulterated fun initiated by dance. As previously mentioned, when the Stompers come down the street in New Orleans, the 610 Splits use bullhorns and outstretched arms to hold back the crowds cheering for their Stompers. Enormous speakers mounted on top of a pickup truck’s cab blare familiar tunes so loudly that you often hear the sounds associated with the Stompers long before seeing them. As the group approaches, people lean into the performance space (the street) to get a better look, photo, or video. Kids and adults alike shout and dance along, screaming at

⁶⁴ MacCash, “New Orleans 610 Stompers.”

⁶⁵ “610 Stompers at 2011 Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade,” YouTube video, 2:02, posted by “Dreamaur,” November 25, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65c9kaUNVgA>.

⁶⁶ “610 Stompers at Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade 2011,” YouTube video, 1:03, posted by “dapoopta,” November 26, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YiCiMbPcBJM>.

⁶⁷ “Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade - 610 Stompers,” YouTube video, 2:03, posted by “bonny8390,” November 25, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0ThM031lho>.

Stompers they may know. After each dance, or when the Stompers switch dance shifts (roughly half of them dance at a time with the rest following behind their support truck), there are high-fives galore as Stompers line up and high-five other Stompers like a team changing from offense to defense, also high-fiving their yelling, applauding fans, as they pass.⁶⁸ If someone in the front of the crowd knows a Stomper, they may try to get that Stomper's attention by waving or shouting for a quick acknowledgement in return. When there is time, Stompers improvise dance moves and invite parade-goers to join in, occasionally turning the entire street into a dance party where everyone sees themselves as a 610 Stomper; the Stompers are as eager to embrace their fans as the people of New Orleans are to embrace the Stompers. This personal interaction and eagerness to blur audience and performance space is part of what exposes the 610 Stompers as the grounded, "ordinary men" they claim to be.⁶⁹

The crowd gathered for the quiet, early-morning Macy's Thanksgiving Parade did not get this level of personal interaction with the Stompers, and their bodies did not vibrate with the blaring music like in New Orleans parades. Even so, the crowd's response to the Stompers' infectious energy and crazy moves appeared positive. Stomper Mr. Monopoly noted the level of reaction the Stompers incited with their audience evolved along the route; the clusters of parade-goers changed to reflect shifts in demographics along the parade route from Central Park to Herald Square. While the Stompers began their trek in near silence by Central Park, they found an increased level of crowds "getting it" – and reacting with noise and movement – as they made their way down the route toward Times Square and eventually the main stage, Herald Square.⁷⁰

For the Herald Square show and in front of all of America, the 610 Stompers performed their specially choreographed sixty second dance. When the cameras returned to the parade from commercial break, the Stompers were already dancing to Bonnie Tyler's "I Need a Hero" from the 1980s dance film *Footloose*. NBC's host Matt Lauer described the Stompers as "the new pride of Mardi Gras," and co-host Al Roker noted their association with the Saints fandom. The dance moves quoted choreography from *Flashdance* and included parts of the Batusi, *chasses*, punches into the air, and a Pete Townshend-style windmill; all choreographic choices that tap

⁶⁸ Caruso, conversations with the 610 Stompers at 2013 auditions.

⁶⁹ Nikki M. Caruso, notes from parades, 2011-2013.

⁷⁰ Caruso, conversations with the 610 Stompers at 2013 auditions.

into national pop culture and nostalgia, making them accessible for all viewers. The number's big finish showed the guys facing Macy's (away from the cameras) and ripping their red satin jackets open to show the cameras the 610 logo embroidered on the back. Immediately following the performance, Matt Lauer suggested that the Stompers are the kind of group who would even take himself and Al Roker. Brett Patron later replied to this assumption, saying: "Tell Matt Lauer he still needs to audition."⁷¹ YouTube comments on the performance include "I am so proud to be from New Orleans. Some folks just don't 'get it.' Have fun people and don't take yourselves so damn seriously!" from user calanthe42, "this is like my dad working out ... hilarious!" from xBloodxFangx, and "Truly the single greatest highlight of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade! Where do I sign up?" by maxstull. Lauer and Roker were unsure of how to react to the Stompers, but the crowd applauded as the dancers hurried out of the famous performance space and their moment in the national spotlight.⁷²

Within an hour of the telecast, the 610 Stompers had 500 new Facebook "likes" and their website crashed from the level of traffic; by the time they arrived home on Friday, they added another 1,500 Facebook "likes."⁷³ The day after the broadcast, the 610 Stompers covered the front page of the *Times-Picayune* with photos and the tagline "610 Stompers make their mark, moustaches and all, on the Macy's parade;" the big Louisiana State University versus Arkansas football game that day was dwarfed to a small square in the corner of the same page.⁷⁴ Kevin Monahan wrote for *OffBeat*: "It's been two months since the trip, and we can't go anywhere without hearing people say they loved us in the Macy's Parade. People from out of state have contacted us via Facebook and said they loved us. The online store has been crazy with sales to all parts of the country. Even sold two calendars to two girls in the Netherlands. How cool is that?"⁷⁵

The Stompers' trip from the Big Easy to the Big Apple generated international publicity for the group and fed New Orleanians' hometown pride. With a little help from the audience-

⁷¹ Simerman, "610 Stompers Take Their Moves, Moustaches and Moxie to the Macy's Parade."

⁷² "Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade 610 Stompers 'I Need A Hero'...", YouTube video, 1:08, posted by "christoz77," November 24, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdZO1gJfXlk>.

⁷³ Laforet and Monahan, "610 Stompers: Stomping to Manhattan."

⁷⁴ *Times-Picayune*, cover page, November 25, 2011.

⁷⁵ Laforet and Monahan, "610 Stompers: Stomping to Manhattan."

encouraging Splits, the Stompers showed the people of New York the New Orleans belief that it is okay to be raucous, cheer, dance, and interact with parade participants. They also proved that even if people do not “get” what you are doing or think you are strange, it’s okay: keep doing what you enjoy, be yourself, and do not let others get you down. This idea of owning one’s quirky actions is clearly seen in other dancing and marching groups in New Orleans during Carnival, but it is the 610 Stompers who served as the ambassadors of this spirit on their trip to New York City.

What the Stompers accomplished that Thanksgiving was not unlike what the Saints did for New Orleans after Katrina. A new part of the city’s culture was put on display in a positive light for all to see, showing that New Orleans is more than food, football, lascivious decisions during Mardi Gras, and the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Through the dance moves of the 610 Stompers, the part of New Orleans that finds humor in the commonplace and allows people to become what they desire flashed across the nation’s screens for all to enjoy. New Orleanians see themselves – average people trying to make the best of a situation and have fun in the process – in the 610 Stompers, and were therefore able to see a reflection of themselves being cheered on by the nation during the Macy’s parade. In taking their wild dance moves, sense of humor, and fearless quest for fun to New York and broadcasting it to the entire country, the Stompers gave New Orleanians another reason to be proud of the underdog “home team” they so quickly welcomed into their day-to-day lives in the Crescent City.

For anyone familiar with the 610 Stompers, “underdog” may seem an unfitting term for these men. To the unfamiliar eye, however, they appear to be just that. Take, for example, the NBC commentators’ feeling that the Stompers would accept any man who wanted to join the group, but Patron pointing out the audition process required to earn a place among the Stompers. Lauer and Roker may fit the “average guy” look embraced by the Stompers, but a spot in the group requires more; the men who make up the Stompers are an extraordinarily average looking group, but they do have standards to meet in terms of personality, dancing ability, and commitment to the community. Though these standards tie the group together, there is no uniformity in the physique of the dancers. An array of body types and sizes can be found among the Stompers, and few appear to make regular trips to the gym to hone a certain physique; these are not the chiseled bodies of professional athletes or dancers. And while their dancing is passionate, humorous, committed, and is accented by their own quirky brand of athleticism (toe-

touch leaps, jumping over another Stomper to dive and roll, a praying mantis-esque high-kick), the Stompers welcome their lack of complete synchronicity and spot-on choreography. In a world that expects peak physical condition and technical precision from every athlete in the public eye (including dancers), the 610 Stompers appear to be physical longshots; it makes them a perfect fit for the city of New Orleans.⁷⁶

Moreover, the Big Easy is a city that prides itself, at times, on being a collection of underdogs. A statue of Andrew Jackson astride his horse sits in the center of Jackson Square in front of the iconic St. Louis Cathedral, serving as a monument to his victory in the Battle of New Orleans, in which Jackson's outnumbered soldiers only suffered thirteen losses and killed over 2,000 British soldiers.⁷⁷ Take, for another example, the long-term love affair with the Saints before they became a respectable football team. New Orleans loves everything New Orleans. "I've known places with civic pride," writes Paul Oswell about New Orleans for *The Daily Mail*, "but never one whose residents so ferociously love, breath [sic] and embrace their city."⁷⁸ When the Stompers made their Macy's parade appearance, it was like a part of the city itself – a different take on the "home team" of underdogs – had marked a victory for the city of New Orleans.

Like the New Orleans Saints, the now nationally-televised Stompers gave locals a shared topic of discussion beyond the scope of their own daily routines, creating feelings of belief and belonging through conversation. Combining this with the "ordinary men" persona of the Stompers provided an opportunity for fans to see themselves in those same gold tennis shoes, and to identify with the Stompers' experience. While Lawrence wrote of the tailgating and football parties as a chance for Saints fans to further bond over a common interest and put aside their troubles, I propose that the 610 Stompers provided an entire city with that same opportunity, even going a step further to physically bring people together through dance.⁷⁹ In walking through the celebrations of Mardi Gras day and going to Stomper-sponsored events, it is

⁷⁶ Their "underdog" appearance is a bit ironic considering many audition for the group and few earn a spot.

⁷⁷ Karl G. Trautman, *The Underdog in American Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 50.

⁷⁸ Paul Oswell, "Five Years After Hurricane Katrina Ripped the City to Shreds, An Open Love Letter to New Orleans," *Mail Online*, August 25, 2010, <http://travelblog.dailymail.co.uk/2010/08/five-years-after-hurricane-katrina-ripped-new-orleans-to-shreds-an-open-love-letter-to-the-city-i-sh.html>.

⁷⁹ Lawrence. "Perspectives on the New Orleans Saints," 94-95.

almost guaranteed there will be a group of people (any age or gender) dressed as and dancing like the mustachioed Stompers.⁸⁰ There have even been groups of elementary and middle-school boys who dress up like the Stompers and dance in school talent shows.⁸¹ Here it is important to note that people in New Orleans do not ask each other what they want to dress up as for Mardi Gras, but rather what they want to “be” for Mardi Gras. New Orleanians have made the 610 Stompers such a beloved fixture in post-Katrina culture that kids and adults alike choose to “be” the Stompers for a day. Through average people taking to the streets dressed as Stompers, they are living a personal fantasy for the day where awkward, silly, uninhibited dancing in public and accepting yourself just as you are is achievable.

The Stompers, with their outrageous dance moves and legions of fans, are a by-product of the cultural renaissance and popularity of dance groups in post-Katrina New Orleans. Had the storm not caused so much damage to the Superdome, there may have never been a “Domecoming,” and Steve Gleason may have never become a local hero. Maybe the Saints never would have made it to the Super Bowl, and the two Saints victory parades that gave the 610 Stompers their big start would never have happened. There is, of course, no way of knowing an alternative storyline, and there will always be the shadow of Hurricane Katrina, but what the Stompers do for New Orleanians is so much more than label them as victims eternally struggling to recover. In the Stompers, New Orleans chose to idolize a group of men who embody a love for life and the city’s unwavering sense of absurdity about and acceptance of itself, expressed through dance. The Stompers constantly interact with their fans, forging connections among the community with high-fives and dance parties in the streets. These dancing underdogs figuratively and literally provide a common ground for New Orleanians, “diminishing feelings of isolation and introducing the idea of connectedness” just as the Saints did in the seasons following Katrina.⁸²

Since their appearance in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, the 610 Stompers have continued to grow in number and remain in such high demand that they constantly add

⁸⁰ Caruso, notes from parades, 2011-2013.

⁸¹ “3rd Grade Stompers,” YouTube video, 2:16, posted by “2331Kelly,” February 16, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHYyXRSfd0s>. “610 Mini Stompers,” YouTube video, 2:10, posted by “whodatbrett,” January 29, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/video/video.php?v=10151301564184118>.

⁸² Lawrence, “Perspectives on the New Orleans Saints,” 90.

appearances to their annual calendar. In the fall of 2012, the Stompers – because they are now highly-recognizable “characters” representative of the city – were the poster boys for pedestrian safety in a city-wide campaign,⁸³ followed by a campaign for bicycle safety in early 2013; they were featured on billboards and bus stop posters, placards atop gas pumps, banners on street light poles, in short PSA videos, and on decals affixed to sidewalks for these campaigns.⁸⁴ CNN’s New Year’s Eve coverage with Anderson Cooper included the 610 Stompers to help ring in the 2013 New Year from Jackson Square,⁸⁵ the Stompers were featured as local talent in the CBS Super Bowl XLVII parade,⁸⁶ and they performed a tribute to *Flashdance* in the lobby of the Mahalia Jackson Theatre prior to the touring production of the musical.⁸⁷ The Stompers continued their association with the Saints and the city’s beloved Steve Gleason by having Team Gleason as their charity of choice for the 2013 Ball Crawl, and they still perform at halftime during pre-season games.⁸⁸

As these performances show, the 610 Stompers are, without a doubt, local pop culture celebrities in New Orleans and use this status (bestowed upon them by the people of New Orleans) to boost their money-raising efforts. They join the roster of other local celebrities like recently retired WWL-TV anchorwoman Angela Hill, legendary meteorologist Nash Roberts, sports broadcaster Buddy D., and former *Times-Picayune* columnist Chris Rose. Known for their eccentric personalities and looks are performer Becky Allen and (the now deceased) Ruthie the Duck Lady, who spent roughly fifty years roller skating around the French Quarter with her

⁸³ Kari Dequine Harden, “Dance Group Focuses on Safety,” *The Advocate* online, September 28, 2012, <http://theadvocate.com/news/neworleans/3997073-148/dance-group-focuseson-safety>.

⁸⁴ Keating Magee Martketing Communications, <http://www.keatingmagee.com/610-stompers-promote-pedestrian-safety/>. A PSA video from the campaign can be seen here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNUdsxuh-fU>.

⁸⁵ Anderson Cooper, “610 Stompers Teach Brooke Dance Moves,” *Anderson Cooper 360* blog, December 31, 2012, <http://ac360.blogs.cnn.com/2012/12/31/610-stompers-teach-brooke-dance-moves/>.

⁸⁶ “610 Stompers CBS Super Bowl Parade,” YouTube video, 3:15, posted by “laura cayouette,” February 4, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVLxj5gxgkE>. Superbowl XLVII was held in New Orleans.

⁸⁷ “610 Stompers Tribute to Flashdance,” YouTube video, 7:01, posted by “The610Stompers,” March 17, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kM7LiCyJmRk>.

⁸⁸ “610 Stompers 'Ball Crawl' set to help Team Gleason,” [wwltv.com](http://www.wwltv.com), June 3, 2013, <http://www.wwltv.com/eyewitness-morning-news/610-Stompers-Ball-Crawl-set-to-help-Team-Gleason-209938341.html>.

duck.⁸⁹ Saints coach Sean Payton and quarterback Drew Brees are certainly known nationally but are venerated by New Orleanians; former Saints player and current advocate for the fight against amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), Steve Gleason literally has a statue immortalizing the moment he became a local hero outside the Superdome; Jerry Romig, who was the voice of the New Orleans Saints in the Superdome for over forty years, is locally famous for his announcing style. These are all people who are not only known in New Orleans beyond simply recognizing them on TV, but they have gained a local fan base or following over the years. With the exception of Payton, Brees, and Gleason, these local celebrities are more famous in New Orleans than they are nationally. These people or groups are used to promote events, advertise products, narrate local documentaries, or attend charity events as the celebrity to draw in more money or publicity. What, for the purposes of this paper, makes a local pop culture celebrity is a quick rise to fame in New Orleans that not only makes the person or group a household name, but gives them the same amount of public exposure (or more) that took other local celebrities a longer period of time to earn. The “pop culture” part is not to imply they will fade in time, as they certainly have potential staying power. The 610 Stompers – like the local celebrities listed – reflect certain cultural values of New Orleans and have woven themselves into the city’s history. Reporters continue to serve as the familiar storytellers of daily lives and tragic events, bizarre personalities embody the acceptance of quirkiness in the city, and the nationally famous Saints players and coach are the underdogs who proved to the nation that New Orleans is not to be brushed off or trampled down. While there are, of course, nationally famous New Orleanians like Ellen DeGeneres, Peyton Manning, Anne Rice, Louis Armstrong, Emeril Lagasse, and Harry Connick, Jr., they are not “only in New Orleans” celebrities like the personalities’ whose fame lies within the greater New Orleans area.

Aside from making almost weekly appearances in the city and using their local pop culture celebrity status to help promote events or causes, the Stompers also have an online presence that constantly keeps them in the public eye. During the “Harlem Shake” trend of early 2013, they created their own video and posted it online for April Fool’s Day.⁹⁰ They created a six

⁸⁹ Eileen Loh Harrist, “Who Speaks for the Duck Lady?,” *Gambit*, March 5, 2002 <http://www.bestofneworleans.com/gambit/who-speaks-for-the-duck-lady/Content?oid=1240030>.

⁹⁰ “610 Stompers do the Harlem Shake,” YouTube video, 0:32, posted by “The610Stompers,” April 1, 2013, <http://youtu.be/yZNjU9Hi0JE>. Spoilers: It’s an April Fool’s Joke.

minute parody video of the movie *A Christmas Story* in 2010 called “The 610 Stomper Christmas Story,” which traces the tale of a “boy” (a grown Stomper) who wants “...one thing and one thing only. This year, all I want for Christmas is to be a 610 Stomper!” because Stompers make him happy; happiness is just what the boy needs after a rough year.⁹¹ Their YouTube channel (The610Stompers) and website (610stompers.com) also have videos of the Stompers teaching children how to dance, bustin’ a move with New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu, their journey to New York City as told through a music video, recordings of their performances not everyone would have access to (ticketed events like halftime shows and the *Flashdance* pre-show), and promotional spots for Stomper events. The Stompers are also on Facebook and Twitter, so everyone with the internet can feel connected to them as well as have access to their dance moves any time, day or night. Importantly, this online presence maintains both their local pop culture celebrity status and their relationship of reciprocated appreciation with their fans throughout the year and beyond geographical boundaries.

The Stompers have bewitched the city – and nation –with their personalities and dance moves. They unify New Orleanians with humor, giving their city an alternative home team to root for, idolize, and in which to see themselves. The men of the Stompers help keep the city from harm through safety campaigns, and they give back to the community through charity. By coincidentally riding the wave of Saints fever in their early days, the mustachioed men in gold shoes became highly recognizable, with locals raising them to the level of pop culture celebrities overnight; the men maintain this status by interacting with fans throughout the year. And through technology, a seemingly endless number of videos featuring the 610 Stompers are available online for the world to see.

By using dance to embody the New Orleans love for satire, humor, and the underdog, the 610 Stompers create a sense of community among the citizens of the Crescent City. Through their charity work and frequent appearances, these local pop culture celebrities maintain the regularity in the lives of locals akin to a news anchor, becoming an entity to trust and follow; the Stompers’ celebrity directs the community’s attention to select charities, bolstering public support for those in need. Local pop culture celebrity status also makes the Stompers into icons and role models for everything from embracing your roots – however commonplace they may be

⁹¹ “The 610 Stomper Christmas Story (2010) *HD*,” YouTube video, 5:58, posted by “The610Stompers,” December 19, 2010, http://youtu.be/la_1LJn4AcM.

– to dancing completely free of inhibition in the presence of strangers. Without their celebrity status, the Stompers could still make these contributions to the city. However, New Orleanians’ decision to dub the Stompers their unofficial, dancing representatives increases the Stompers’ impact on how they affect the public. Their place in local pop culture enables the Stompers to reach a greater audience for an extended period of time, as they transcend the restrictions of Carnival season exposure. And, importantly, the city-wide love for the ever-present dancing men unites the people of New Orleans as a community through humor and hometown pride. Through the Stompers – who are truly everyday people, just like the city they reflect through dance – the average person can imagine themselves accomplishing the extraordinary. The 610 Stompers’ goal is world domination through dance; they have certainly conquered New Orleans.⁹²

⁹² Mark Johanson, “Mardi Gras Icons, 610 Stompers Prepare for ‘World Domination through Dance,’” *International Business Times*, February 17, 2012, http://www.ibtimes.com/mardi-gras-icons-610-stompers-prepare-world-domination-through-dance-412628?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A%20ibtimes/topnews%20%28IBTimes.com%20RSS%20Feed%29.

CHAPTER TWO

EXTRAORDINARY MOVES: DANCE AS CONTINUATION AND CREATION

Mardi Gras is one of the busiest times of the year for the 610 Stompers, and when they most clearly carry on New Orleans parading traditions. In order to appreciate how the Stompers honor and preserve the customs of their predecessors – in both organizational style and how they create community – it is necessary to understand the traditions themselves. Mardi Gras, or Carnival season, is the pre-Lenten time of revelry and indulgence. It begins on Twelfth Night (January 6th, or the Epiphany) and lasts until the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday (which begins Lent). That Tuesday is known as Mardi Gras or “Fat Tuesday.”⁹³ The history of Carnival in the largely Catholic city of New Orleans dates back to the turn of the eighteenth century when French explorer Pierre Le Moyne d’Iberville landed near the present-day New Orleans. He named the location “Point du Mardi Gras” and held a small gala in honor of the holiday.⁹⁴ Pre-Lenten festivities and masked balls celebrated the season in the 1700s, and the “earliest description of an organized street masking group” in New Orleans tells of students recently returned from Paris parading in costume in the year 1827. Ten years later, the first organized street parade took place (it was ignored by the French papers and only reported briefly in *The Picayune*), and the first organized krewe parade occurred in 1857.⁹⁵

That year, on Mardi Gras night, a group of men known as the Mystick Krewe of Comus led a procession of floats through the flambeaux-lit streets: the first parade of its kind for the city. The parade route took them to the Gaiety Theatre, where the krewe “offered four lavish tableaux” to attendees, followed by an evening of dancing.⁹⁶ This gave a new look to Carnival parades in New Orleans, which Comus made even more resplendent the following year, and

⁹³ In New Orleans, the Mardi Gras often redundantly called “Mardi Gras Day” and is the only day some marching groups take to the streets.

⁹⁴ Hodding Carter, *Past as Prelude: New Orleans 1718-1968* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing, 2008), 13.

⁹⁵ Carter, *Past as Prelude*, 347. Krewes are private social clubs or organizations that parade and/or throw a ball during Carnival in New Orleans.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 350-351.

revitalized *bal masques*.⁹⁷ In 1884, Comus selected his first-ever queen, Mildred Lee (daughter of Gen. Robert E. Lee), and her maids of honor (daughters of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, Gen. A. D. Hill, and Gen. Stonewall Jackson). Since then, krewes whose ranks consist of the socially elite have filled the roles of Queens and Maids with the city's debutantes. Each year, a krewe selects a new set of royalty, pairing a young queen with her (much older) king and parading them around the dance floor in regal garments, scepters, and crowns.⁹⁸ "In New Orleans," Catherine Clinton writes, "queens are bred, through regal genealogy, as much as they are crowned. Descriptions of New Orleans deb's in the society pages often focus on ... pedigree – how many of her ancestors were either kings or queens of carnival balls."⁹⁹ While the socially elite use the practice of the Carnival *bals masque* to literally present themselves as royalty and celebrate the season with private events, there are those who celebrate Carnival with a more democratic sense of community.¹⁰⁰

Another facet of Carnival in New Orleans consists of organizations who do not present themselves as royalty, are not a collective of the socially elite, and physically parade on the same level as average parade-goers: marching groups. Founded in 1890, the Jefferson City Buzzards is oldest Carnival marching group currently in existence.¹⁰¹ These men have the longest "continuous tradition of parading in New Orleans' Mardi Gras."¹⁰² Marching groups in New Orleans are social clubs, usually founded by and consisting of men, who walk in parades and engage in social activities throughout the year. Though they are "marching" groups, they do not actually march or maintain a formation as a military unit would. These groups interact with the

⁹⁷ Ibid., 352.

⁹⁸ The Queens are chosen from that year's pool of debutantes, and Kings are honored krewe members; Kings are usually one to two generations older than their Queen.

⁹⁹ Catherine Clinton, "Scepter and Masque: Debutante Rituals in Mardi Gras New Orleans," in *Manners and Southern History*, ed. Ted Ownby (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 84.

¹⁰⁰ Floats are large structures pulled like wagons or trailers pulled by tractors or (if smaller) mules. They are constructed of wood and often papier mache and are decorated to fit a theme

¹⁰¹ Errol Laborde, "Buzzard Bait," *New Orleans Magazine*, January 2005, <http://www.myneworleans.com/New-Orleans-Magazine/January-2005/Buzzard-Bait/>. The Jefferson City Buzzards are not a krewe, but a separate marching entity.

¹⁰² Kate Howard, "Evolving Traditions of the Jefferson City Buzzards Carnival Club," *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany*, vol. 11, 1996, 1.

crowd, usually offering a fake flower or similar token for a kiss or a beer.¹⁰³ Errol Laborde, a New Orleans Carnival historian, points out that these marching groups are able to interact with the crowds and bring their sense of humor to parade-goers better than the krewe members who, riding high on floats, physically separate themselves from the crowds on the ground.¹⁰⁴ A trek down the streets for marching groups is less of a set performance for the multitudes, and looks more like a bar crawl that has stumbled into (or out of) a parade.

The Jefferson City Buzzards is an all-men's, almost (or all) white marching club. The four founding members of the group paraded informally in a wooden wagon as "The Muddy Grawers" in 1889, inspired by the marching groups known as the Phorty Phunny Phellows and the French Market Buzzards. When the French Market Buzzards disbanded, the Muddy Grawers adopted the name "Jefferson Buzzards," then changed it to the "Jefferson City Buzzards" to clarify they were not from Jefferson Parish.¹⁰⁵ Instead, they were named for Jefferson City, a municipality that existed from 1850 until 1870 (when it was absorbed into the city of New Orleans). Twenty years later, four young men decided to name their marching group after the bygone city that was now simply their neighborhood.¹⁰⁶

With a group banner bearing their nostalgic moniker and mascot, the working-class Buzzards initially paraded in "outrageous matching costumes" or blackface, which was in vogue during their formative years (the 1890s).¹⁰⁷ However, they most often dress as women – rather hairy, masculine, bawdy women – with no attempt to portray a convincing illusion of the other sex. One of their hallmark movements is to throw themselves upon their backs in the middle of

¹⁰³ "The Corner Club in the Krewe of Thoth, 2012," Vimeo video, 1:28, posted by "Nikki Caruso," March 18, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/89465008>. This video shows the Irish Chanel Corner Club in a Krewe parade during Carnival. When independent of a krewe parade, the group will often move more slowly and interact more with the crowd.

¹⁰⁴ John Pope, "Mardi Gras 2013: 3 New Marching Groups Take to the Streets, in Style," *nola.com*, January 29, 2013, http://www.nola.com/mardigras/index.ssf/2013/01/mardi_gras_2013_three_new_marc.html.

¹⁰⁵ Howard, "Evolving Traditions," 2.

¹⁰⁶ The original story is that "Buzzards" was taken from the French Market Buzzards. However, in Laborde's "Buzzard Bait" there is a story that "Buzzards" is in reference to the predatory birds who once circled the slaughterhouses and meat markets that filled Jefferson City and supplied the neighboring, more glamorous New Orleans residents with meat products. Jefferson City was historically comprised of working-class whites, making that the demographic of the Jefferson City Buzzards.

¹⁰⁷ Howard, "Evolving Traditions," 2-3. As time progressed the presence of blackface with the Buzzards began to fade and was largely done away with (in 1958).

the street, flailing their arms and legs in the air and yelling “Cockroach!”¹⁰⁸ Three weeks prior to Mardi Gras, the men march through the streets of what was once Jefferson City, dressed in drag and stopping at local bars to “refuel” on the way.¹⁰⁹ Early Mardi Gras morning, however, they wear a more regal (though still mismatched) costume – complete with satin, sequins, and clusters of roses on canes for those willing to give them a kiss – as they wind their way through the streets. When they go through the less-traveled parts of the neighborhood, the Jefferson City Buzzards bring Mardi Gras to those (like the elderly or disabled) who may not otherwise have the ability to leave their homes in order to see the parades. They then make their way to the main thoroughfare of the day, St. Charles Avenue, and walk toward Canal Street.¹¹⁰



Fig. 3: The front of the Jefferson City Buzzards’ support truck and their banner. Photo: N. Caruso.

¹⁰⁸ “Jefferson City Buzzards,” last modified 2008, <http://www.jeffersoncitybuzzards.com/press>.

¹⁰⁹ Laborde, “Buzzard Bait.”

¹¹⁰ Rhines, “Fun Where We Find It.”

Although the current Buzzards maintain the traditions of their forefathers through costuming and marching through their old neighborhood, an element of the Jefferson City Buzzard tradition that has been lost over time is the camaraderie of being a social group.¹¹¹ While a “practice run” that brings the men together before Mardi Gras still takes place, there are no longer monthly meetings, no social dances hosted by the organization, and no fund for a “brother Buzzard” in need.¹¹² In an interview with Kate Howard published in 1996, former Buzzard historian George Luft lamented these losses: “Way back, people came out to meetings. Now, younger people don’t join organizations as much these days. Years ago, everything was in the same basic neighborhood, so everybody knew each other. Now people are spread out all over. When I first joined the Buzzards we had block parties and made lots of money... you had people willing to do the work – but it wouldn’t work today.”¹¹³ Interestingly, the 610 Stompers fill the void left by the Buzzards. Even though they are dispersed throughout the city and metro area, the Stompers attract men who are willing to participate in charity events, attend meetings and rehearsals, and donate their time to help raise money for those in need. In doing so, they create a sense of community among members that defies the geographical boundaries of a neighborhood.

While the Stompers continue the traditions of marching groups by coming together to socialize as well as give back to the community, they take the movement element of the Buzzards’ “Cockroach!” antics a step further: the Stompers have a fully choreographed repertory of dance routines. This is a significant trait that separates the dance groups from the marching groups. Dance groups, unlike marching groups, perform choreographed, rehearsed routines and often stay in a set formation as they dance down the streets for the parade-goers. The all-female, wildly satirical Krewe of Muses played a major role in the proliferation of these contemporary marching and dancing groups – each with their individual sense of humor displayed through dance and costumes – by hosting more in their parade than any other krewe; Muses fills the spaces between its floats with dance and marching groups in addition to the traditional high school marching bands. Enough groups desire a spot in the popular Muses parade that the krewe

¹¹¹ Howard, “Evolving Traditions,” 6. At this time, there are no articles reflecting any possible change in the Buzzards’ organization (namely the strength of the social aspect) post-Katrina.

¹¹² Ibid., 6-7.

¹¹³ Ibid., 7.

had to limit their capacity to ten groups in 2013.¹¹⁴ Some groups, like the (previously-mentioned) dancing Camel Toe Lady Steppers, the marching “Bearded Oysters,” and the scooter-borne “Rolling Elvi,” appear exclusively in the Muses parade during Carnival.¹¹⁵

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the only New Orleans dance groups with a satirical edge were the Pussyfooters and the Camel Toe Lady Steppers.¹¹⁶ For these organizations, socialization among members, dance, and charity work are all essential parts of the group’s mission. The Pussyfooters formed in the fall of 2001, taking their initial inspiration from high school majorettes in Carnival parades.¹¹⁷ This group of women, all above the age of thirty, are “Majorettes from the Mothership sent here to help the party people get their groove on.”¹¹⁸ Parading down the streets in pink corsets accented by fishnet stockings, wigs in pink or orange, white combat or go-go boots, and a less-structured take on a bustle, the Pussyfooters are “less eager to recapture lost youth than to mock the disjunction between their maturity – these women have jobs and children – and their desire to wear ridiculous clothes.”¹¹⁹ Their dance moves are akin to high school cheerleaders or adolescent dance teams while parading: the legs are mostly marching while choreography focuses on crisp, uniform arm movements accented with the occasional hip swivel or kick. Though they are mainly seen during Carnival season, the Pussyfooters are also involved in charity events year-round and began hosting fundraising events in 2004. The Blush Ball – their annual fundraiser for the Metropolitan Center for Women and Children – began in 2009 and has raised over \$40,000 for that cause.¹²⁰ Their charities, costumes, and dance moves (designed to be “burlesque by women for the entertainment of

¹¹⁴ Pope, “Mardi Gras 2013: 3 New Marching Groups Take to the Streets, in Style.”

¹¹⁵ The Camel Toe Lady Steppers are a women’s dance group, while the Bearded Oysters are a women’s marching group that wear beards and all-white costumes featuring faux pearls and oyster shells. The all-male Rolling Elvi dress as various incarnations of The King and ride down the parade route on scooters.

¹¹⁶ Women’s dance groups that emerged post-Katrina include the Muff-A-Lottas, Sirens of New Orleans, NOLA Cherry Bombs, and the Organ Grinders.

¹¹⁷ Kate Moran, “Women’s Marching Groups Step Out in Style,” *nola.com*, October 15, 2007, http://blog.nola.com/mardigras/2007/02/womens_marching_groups_step_ou.html.

¹¹⁸ “Majorettes from the Mothership,” Pussyfooters, accessed February 24, 2014, <http://www.pussyfooters.org/about/herstory>.

¹¹⁹ Moran, “Women’s Marching Groups Step Out in Style.”

¹²⁰ “Our Service Mission,” Pussyfooters, accessed February 24, 2014, <http://www.pussyfooters.org/service/>.

women,”¹²¹ not the pleasure of men) are all ways in which the Pussyfooters seek to empower themselves as women as well as the women who see them.

Two years after the Pussyfooters formed, the Camel Toe Lady Steppers made their unofficial debut on Halloween of 2003.¹²² The original group, mostly comprised of Tulane University students, ordered gold lamé majorette costumes with shorts that were a bit too snug in places, inspiring the “Camel Toe” part of their name. Friends played the drums to accompany the group’s marching and dancing through the French Quarter and Faubourg Marigny neighborhoods that night, and the Camel Toe Lady Steppers were born.¹²³ Since their inception, the Camel Toe Lady Steppers has grown exponentially, and they are currently the only dance group who changes their theme and makes new costumes every year for their march in the Krewe of Muses parade.¹²⁴ These women strut down the street, often shaking their butts or thrusting their pelvises while making large, sweeping arm movements; they are fearlessly sexy without being outright raunchy. Like the Pussyfooters and 610 Stompers, the Camel Toes also raise money for charity and maintain a social connection within the group year-round.

While the Pussyfooters – the most popular of the women’s groups – are admired in their own right, the 610 Stompers have achieved a status in the city that surpasses the popularity of any other dance group. For the 610 Stompers, their rise to local pop culture celebrity status was meteoric and stemmed from a simple concept: men can dance, too. In an interview with *Times-Picayune* columnist Doug MacCash, 610 Stomper SLAB explains that it was always the intent for the Stompers to consist of “regular guys” who loved to dance rather than dancers or “experienced performers.” The very first Stompers were SLAB and male friends and family who had Saints season tickets in section 610 of the Superdome.¹²⁵ “From the beginning,” SLAB told

¹²¹ Moran, “Women’s Marching Groups Step Out in Style.”

¹²² Brian R. Friedman, “Camel Toe Lady Steppers Strut Their Stuff for a Cause,” *nola.com*, January 10, 2012, http://www.nola.com/nolavie/index.ssf/2012/01/camel_toe_lady_steppers_strut.html.

¹²³ John Pope, “Grassroots Mardi Gras Marching Groups Opt for Spunk and Sparkle Over Pomp and Prestige,” *nola.com*, March 3, 2011, http://www.nola.com/mardigras/index.ssf/2011/03/grassroots_mardi_gras_marching.html.

¹²⁴ The Dead Rockstars entered the scene in 2013, dancing as Rick James, and in 2014 they paraded as Michael Jackson. This makes them the second group to change costumes annually, but they stay within the “dead rockstar” theme.

¹²⁵ Doug MacCash, “Look for the 610 Stompers in tonight’s New Orleans Saints Parade,” *nola.com*, February 10, 2010, http://www.nola.com/mardigras/index.ssf/2010/02/look_for_the_610_stompers_in_t.html.

interviewer Mason Wood in 2013, “we said that we weren’t just gonna start another, like, drinkin’ club that danced, we were gonna start a dance club, and then [if] there were some social aspects of it, great, but we wanted the club to take the dancing seriously. So we were gonna be ‘Ordinary men, extraordinary moves.’”¹²⁶

In 2009, the very first auditions for the 610 Stompers took place. Of the forty-five men who danced for three judges, all forty-five were accepted into the group; in 2012, of the two hundred men who auditioned, ten made the final cut.¹²⁷ The Stompers achieved such popularity in so short a time, they must now limit the number of men allowed to audition each year and there are fewer places available in the group.¹²⁸ None the less, hundreds of men turn out to auditions, hoping to join the Stomper lifestyle: rehearsing and performing their moves throughout the year, attending charity events, doing halftime performances at Saints and Pelicans games, throwing two big fundraising events every year, and dancing together in Carnival parades. Through the time spent rehearsing, drinking, and performing together, the Stompers inherently developed the “social aspects” SLAB spoke of, creating their own shared bonds through dance; the Stompers have the sense of community and willingness to work that George Luft lamented the loss of with the Jefferson City Buzzards.

Today, the Buzzards are a similar demographic to the men who founded the marching club: white, working-class men. In a similar spirit, the charter members of the Stompers remain a fair representation of the 610 Stompers five years later: they are men from their twenties to their sixties in a wide variety of professions including teachers, a florist, dads, a local movie critic, doctors, realtors, an electrician, lawyers, medical sales representatives, and videographers.¹²⁹ Most of the men are white, but auditions are open to any male over twenty-one who loves to dance, has personality, and wants to better the community through dance – enjoying beer is a

¹²⁶ Patron, “NOLAPod: Brett Patron.”

¹²⁷ Caruso, conversations with the 610 Stompers at 2013 auditions.

¹²⁸ NOLA Community, “610 Stompers of New Orleans Seeking Men With Dance Skills, Panache and Extra Time to Please Fans,” *nola.com*, July 19, 2013, http://blog.nola.com/new_orleans/2013/07/610_stompers_seeking_men_with.html. In 2013, audition numbers were given on a first-come-first-served basis. Men lined up outside the audition venue (a bar) as early as 6:00am for the 11:00am registration time; only 60 audition slots were available per day, limiting the total number of auditions to 120.

¹²⁹ MacCash, “Look for the 610 Stompers.”

plus. Being a native New Orleanian is not a prerequisite for membership, either, as there are a number of Stompers who joined the New Orleans community and embraced the local culture post-Katrina. During conversations with Stompers at the 2013 auditions, charter members made a point to mention that the standards for dancing have radically increased since their audition, when anyone who showed up was accepted. This need to limit the number of men auditioning, selecting only a handful of new Stompers each year, and setting higher expectations for new members is due largely to the Stompers' overwhelming popularity; their high visibility attracts more fans, and as the Stomper saying goes, "women want us and men want to be us."



Fig. 4: SLAB asking questions at the 2013 auditions. Photo: N. Caruso.

Current Stompers "Erl Schlikk" and "Misdemeanor," who joined in 2010 and 2011 (respectively), knew they needed to become members of the group the first time the Stompers

danced down the street.¹³⁰ The Stompers are not, as Erl Schlikk points out, a counter culture, but rather a group of average guys from “diverse walks of life” doing “one of those ‘only in New Orleans’ things.” Misdemeanor shares the “only in New Orleans” sentiment, for he feels New Orleans awards originality and creative endeavors that may not be accepted in other cities. Even though the Stompers are one of those “only in New Orleans” entities, early members – like Erl Schlikk and fellow Stomper “Mr. Jerome” – did not expect the organization to become as immensely popular as they have. The Stompers starting the same year as the Saints’ march to the Superbowl was a “happy coincidence,” thrusting them into the spotlight when the football team introduced the Stompers to New Orleans with victory parades before and after the big game. The charter members of the Stompers, according to Mr. Jerome, hoped to be appreciated or even “tolerated” by New Orleanians, but how quickly the 610 Stompers became a fixture in local pop culture took the group of dancers by surprise. The men of the Stompers are, Mr. Jerome explains, “guys who are allowed to do what they want to do in a city they give back to.”¹³¹ A willingness – if not need – to give back is a necessary trait for a 610 Stomper, since the time put into community and charity-oriented work is just as important as the rehearsals and performances. In fact, when men audition they are asked about not only their occupation, where they are from, and their spirit animal, but also about any previous experience with volunteer work.¹³² As imperative as this spirit of benevolence is to the organization – and in turn to those people who benefit from their charitable endeavors – their charity work is not always the first side of the Stompers people encounter.

Because it is a free, public event, and a traditional time for the people of New Orleans to gather together, parades are usually the first time people see the 610 Stompers dance in person (as opposed to a YouTube video or commercial). This not only makes parading a publicity opportunity for the Stompers, but a chance to interact with the greatest number of fans at one time. Parades in New Orleans are about more than being a spectator. They are an interactive experience of socializing with the people around you, catching beads and trinkets thrown by riders, and being part of the constant shift created by crowding into the streets for a float and

¹³⁰ “Erl Schlikk” takes his name from the (thick) New Orleans pronunciation of “Oil Slick.” The 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico inspired his pseudonym.

¹³¹ Caruso, conversations with the 610 Stompers at 2013 auditions.

¹³² Nikki M. Caruso, notes from 610 Stompers 2013 auditions, August 18, 2013.

pushing back to the curb for a band or dance group. St. Charles Avenue is at the heart of most New Orleans parades, which usually head from Napoleon Avenue to St. Charles Avenue, then downtown to Canal Street. Crowds fill both sides of the street as the parades “roll,” usually alternating between a float and a group on foot for the duration of the lineup.¹³³ The air is filled with the sounds of the tractor engines that pull floats, high school marching bands, dance groups’ music, people yelling at the floats for beads or trinkets, and a cacophony of discussion along the sidelines. On the mostly oak-lined St. Charles Avenue, a parade means the organic smell of trees coupled with a strange mixture of exhaust fumes, cheap plastic, spilled beer, and the horses generally interspersed in a parade. Underfoot, the possibilities are endless: asphalt, an uneven sidewalk, the grass and dirt of a neutral ground, unwanted beads, and discarded trash to be swept away at the parade’s end.¹³⁴ This is the typical performance space for the 610 Stompers during Carnival season.

When parading, the 610 Stompers adhere to a format much like high school marching bands and other dancing groups in New Orleans.¹³⁵ First, the group’s banner – which is carried horizontally between two or more Splits – comes down the street, letting parade-goers know the group’s name. This banner, as is the case for the Stompers, often includes a motto, insignias, and the group’s hometown. For traditional men’s marching groups, this is usually a smaller banner on an upright pole carried by members or young men who are connected to the group. Between the crowds lining the curbs and the Stompers in the street are the Splits who protect the Stompers from curious hands and physically help push crowds back so the men have room to dance. There are usually a few Splits just behind the banner (but before the dancers) to preemptively clear the way, though sometimes a few Splits will precede the banner as well. Since there are over 100 Stompers (each of whom channels an almost superhuman amount of energy into performing for fans), they cycle in two groups during parades. While the first group dances, they are followed

¹³³ Roll: move down the street.

¹³⁴ The “neutral ground” is what a median is called in New Orleans.

¹³⁵ For video of the Stompers in New Orleans parades, see: “The 610 Stompers in the Krewe of Orpheus, 2013,” Vimeo video, 1:45, posted by “Nikki Caruso,” March 18, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/89467158>. “The 610 Stompers in the Krewe of Thoth, 2012,” Vimeo video, 1:45, posted by “Nikki Caruso,” March 18, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/89465010>. “The 610 Stompers in the Krewe of Orpheus, 2013,” Vimeo video, 0:46, posted by “Nikki Caruso,” March 18, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/89465009>. “The 610 Stompers in the Krewe of Muses, 2012,” Vimeo video, 2:12, posted by “Nikki Caruso,” March 15, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/89199719>.

by the Stompers' "support truck" – a white pickup truck with a giant, hairy mustache on the grill. It carries what the Stompers need to get through the parade: a set of speakers mounted on top, a generator to power the speakers, and a trailer with a port-o-john and plenty of beer.

Following the trailer (close to the beer) is the alternate group of Stompers, who look more like a men's marching club as they make their way down the route, perhaps dancing a bit, socializing with each other, and interacting with the crowds. After the first group has performed a few dances, they line up on the edges of their performance space next to the Splits and high-five the crowd as they head to the spot behind the truck. At the same time the men who have been "resting" put their beers on the trailer, line up, and head up front to the designated dancing spot of their lineup, high-fiving fellow Stompers and the crowd as they go. The high-fives with the crowd are part of what helps generate excitement and makes the public feel involved. Unlike riders up on floats, the Stompers are able to directly interact with people along the route to create a feeling of togetherness rather than separation. These quick, physical interactions are an easy way for the Stompers and their fans to connect, enabling parade-goers to feel like the Stompers allow them to participate in the action.

Often times, a parade in New Orleans will come to a standstill long enough for the boundaries between spectator and those parading to be blurred. If the crowd has a float stop in front of them, the experience turns into a prolonged act of parade-goers looking up, begging for beads or special throws from the riders. With marching and dancing groups, though, those in the parade and the parade-goers are physically on the same level with each other. While many groups socialize amongst themselves and some parade-goers may casually filter into the street from the sidewalks and neutral grounds, the 610 Stompers are known for something else: the Stomper dance party. If given a long enough pause (caused by the broken-down tractor, broken axel or wheel, the king or queen taking a long time to toast the Mayor at Gallier Hall, et cetera), the Stompers will break ranks, turn up the music, and invite people into the street to dance with them.¹³⁶ Everyone is encouraged to join in, from children to the elderly, and for a brief time everybody is as important as a 610 Stomper. One Stomper named "The Longboard" is even known for lying on the street, stomach-down with arms and legs stretched out like Superman,

¹³⁶ Kings and Queens of krewes are honorary monarchs of that year's krewe festivities and ride near the beginning of each parade on their own float, stopping at key points of the route to toast the Mayor or royalty who may not be in the parade. These stops by royalty bring the entire parade to a halt, resulting in a restlessness among crowds for long stops.

and letting other Stompers “surf” on his back; during dance parties, he lets children stand on his back and pretend to surf while parents take photos. These stops are a chance for people attending parades to not only move together as a temporary community in a state of “collective joy,” but it allows the Stompers to show they really are just average, friendly guys who love to dance and thrive upon interaction with the community they represent and serve.¹³⁷ This interaction extends the traditions of the marching groups by inviting non-members to join the club on the route, actively creating community and including non-Stompers in the act of preserving their city’s traditions through dance.

The 610 Stompers create a sense of togetherness for the people of New Orleans, especially through the feelings of collective joy brought on by their dancing, their embodiment of the “everyman,” and their continued presence in the New Orleanians’ lives (notably, the Stompers are a regular topic of discussion, reinforced by their media appearances). Importantly, laughing with the 610 Stompers is a shared experience that creates a bond between the Stompers and their fans. Merriment and humor are also evident in their costumes and imperfect dancing, which allows the Stompers to laugh at themselves, embrace each other’s faults, and encourage onlookers to laugh with rather than at the dancing. This is an important part of the New Orleans mentality, especially post-Katrina: both the recognition of faults and unfortunate circumstances, and the ability to overcome them by poking fun at the situation and themselves. This is also a historical element of Carnival, which “provides an opportunity for self-expression, group identity, and satire” and runs through the fabric of the city.¹³⁸ While satire is most clearly seen on the floats of select Carnival krewes where local and national politicians are skewered via paint and papier mache,¹³⁹ the 610 Stompers embody a Carnavalesque attitude by making fun of themselves through dance, thereby providing audiences an opportunity to find joy year-round.

While parades are a chance for people to interact or dance with the Stompers as they pass through the streets, parades are also a time for the Stompers to be together as a group while moving as a unit. Halftime shows and performances for charity events have either all or a small

¹³⁷ Edith Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 28. “Collective joy” is a feeling of happiness or elation shared by a group in a moment of togetherness.

¹³⁸ Reid Mitchell, “Carnival and Katrina,” in *Through the Eye of Katrina: The Past as Prologue?*, *Journal of American History*, 94 (special issue, December 2007), 789–794.

¹³⁹ One example of this is a 2014 Krewe du Vieux float lampooning New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu for his efforts to make New Orleans more of a squeaky-clean theme park for tourists.

group of Stompers dancing together for a brief period, but the hours spent with all of the Stompers together on a parade route provide the men with the opportunity to dance and walk together in full force. When dancing in (near) unison, the 610 Stompers are evoking an ancient method of forming a stronger group bond. Prehistoric rock art shows us that humans moved together in mass groups to defend themselves against predators, employing large headgear and waving objects in order to appear even bigger to potential killers. “[S]ynchronous movement,” writes Barbara Ehrenreich, “could have augmented the human group’s effectiveness – making it appear to be a single, oversized antagonist” in the fight for life.¹⁴⁰ Even though the Stompers are not fending off wild animals in stadiums or the streets, they do make it a point to include large movements in their choreography to increase their visibility while dancing.¹⁴¹ The Stompers transform the need to appear large from a defensive survival tactic to an offensive one, drawing attention to themselves in order to be seen, remembered, and loved. Their costumes – which allow for very little variation among members – add to the effect of a large, strong, unified mass moving through and occupying space, increasing their visual impact.

This feeling of being larger than life through synchronized movement combined with the ability of a group to look larger while moving in unison taps into more than prehistoric methods for surviving predators. Moving in unison also contributes to pleasure and a spiritual well-being. In *Keeping Together in Time*, historian and author William McNeill attempted to describe his experience doing drills with the United States Army in 1941: “Words are inadequate to describe the emotion aroused by the prolonged movement in unison that drilling involved. A sense of pervasive well-being is what I recall; more specifically, a strange sense of personal enlargement; a sort of swelling out, becoming bigger than life, thanks to participation in collective ritual.”¹⁴² He names this phenomenon “muscular bonding” and describes it as the “euphoric fellow feeling that prolonged and rhythmic muscular movement arouses among nearly all participants in such exercises.” When experienced as a group, movement forges strong bonds of camaraderie that, when used in battle, helps improve the chances of survival when facing the enemy.¹⁴³ Barbara

¹⁴⁰ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2006), 29.

¹⁴¹ Nikki M. Caruso, conversations with the 610 Stompers at 2013 auditions, August 18, 2013.

¹⁴² William McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2.

Ehrenrich also delves into the concept of the “incommunicable thrill” when a group moves in unison, becoming “united in joy and exaltation” through the pleasurable experience of a large group dancing.¹⁴⁴ She proposes that dance can only bring people together when it is “intrinsically pleasurable” and “provides a kind of pleasure not achievable by smaller groups.”¹⁴⁵ While smaller groups and larger groups certainly provide different opportunities in terms of the number of people bonded with, the Stompers prove a smaller group can experience the same *kind* of pleasure as those moving together in a large group, because the Stompers appear to have just as much fun with three men as with one hundred.

There are also the “sexy” and boastful elements to the Stompers’ moves that have a connection to long-held elements of group identity. While group dancing allows an individual to lose themselves in the movement and bond with the dancers around them, it also provides an opportunity for showing off as an individual. Improvisation among the Stompers is usually full of tricks: Longboard letting people “surf” on his back, Stompers leaping through the spread legs of another Stomper doing a headstand, toe-touch jumps, variations on gymnastic moves, or even being so ridiculous with simple movement (one Stomper pulls his waistband nearly to his armpits and shuffles around like an old man) that it draws everyone’s attention. Even since prehistoric times, “there may even have been what evolutionary biologists call sexual selection for the ability to dance well, or at least make a good appearance at the dance... The ability to dance or make music is not confined to a single sex, but we are often attracted to individuals who excel at these activities, and this could have given them a definite reproductive advantage.”¹⁴⁶ And, in some unconventional way, the 610 Stompers are sexy; they don’t say that women want them and men want to be them for no reason! Even the 610 Splits bring up the fact that part of their job is to keep women from smacking the Stompers’ butts while on the parade route.¹⁴⁷ The ways the Stompers show off to audiences and try to outdo each other is certainly a factor, but they consciously put “sexy” moves into their dances. Some are obvious, like making a show of

¹⁴³ Ibid., 2-3.

¹⁴⁴ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets*, 16.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 25.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 27.

¹⁴⁷ Nikki M. Caruso, conversations with the 610 Stompers at 2013 auditions, August 18, 2013.

their polyester-covered behinds, while other moments may include a coyly placed finger on their lips while giving a 1940s-esque pinup girl look over the shoulder. While the dancing is by no means perfectly synchronized or anything like a professional dancer, the Stompers excel at their own brand of movement and performance quality. And the ability to dance well in that manner makes them an even sexier group.

This spirit of coming together as a social group – either to stumble or dance through the streets – is, like Carnival, a New Orleans tradition kept alive by the 610 Stompers. The Stompers’ priority to make charity work a year-round objective for the group and ability to raise funds makes them much like the benevolent societies once so prolific in New Orleans. Benevolent societies were in keeping with a European tradition and formed by a wide variety of people with some choosing to organize their group based on ethnicity and others on profession, class, or gender. By paying their dues, members of benevolent societies were part of a social club that gave them a sense of community, had access to affordable health care, and had expenses paid for a traditional, respectable burial in the society’s tomb in one of the city’s above-ground cemeteries.¹⁴⁸ One example of a benevolent society based on ethnic background was the Hibernian Society, which formed in 1817 for “‘charitable purposes’ to relieve the ‘unfortunate Irishmen.’”¹⁴⁹ According to author Lucy Bregman, “it is estimated that three hundred to six hundred” benevolent societies were founded in New Orleans at this time.

Similar to benevolent societies, the Stompers also share commonalities with the Irish marching groups of New Orleans. These groups were neighborhood-based organizations comprised of men that gathered to socialize throughout the year, throw neighborhood dances, and raise funds to benefit an individual in need or an organization. St. Patrick’s Day is most Irish groups’ main day to take to the streets on foot and hand out flowers for a kiss, with Mardi Gras serving as a secondary opportunity to parade as a club.¹⁵⁰ The St. Michael’s Benevolent and the

¹⁴⁸ Lucy Bregman, *Religion, Death, and Dying*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 94. Part of these funerals included the procession making its way to the cemetery to the beat of a small brass band. Bands were also hired for the funerals, escorting the deceased through the streets with a traditional set of somber tunes. Over time, the music of the accompanying bands became increasingly jazzier by nature, leading to the development of the jazz funeral and second line; these are now signature parading traditions of New Orleans.

¹⁴⁹ Ann Ostendorf, *Sounds American: National Identity and the Music Cultures of the Lower Mississippi River Valley, 1800-1860*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 118.

¹⁵⁰ The Corner Club, for example, will have between 250 and 300 members marching in the St. Patrick’s Day parade, but perhaps a quarter of that amount in the Krewe of Thoth and closer to 20 on Mardi Gras morning.

New Orleans Shamrock Associations paraded through the city streets in 1850, earning praise from the local press “for their charity to the suffering immigrants.”¹⁵¹ New Orleans still has a large St. Patrick’s Day parade filled with marching groups, and an annual Irish Channel Block Party is held at Annunciation Square to raise money for St. Michael Special School. While one of these groups, the Irish Channel Corner Club (“Corner Club” for short), still has the occasional benefit dance or raffle in addition to parade participation, the “neighborhood” aspect fizzled out as more people moved out of the Irish Channel generation by generation.¹⁵² Even though the Irish marching groups did not provide the access to health care or burial services of benevolent societies, they did take their neighborhood pride and make it into an annual event for the entire community. The men may do the marching, but all former residents of the Irish Channel and their families are able to use the parades and block party as a time to return to the neighborhood and celebrate their heritage.

Though there are not nearly as many marching or dancing groups in New Orleans as the old benevolent societies, these new organizations provide their members the same opportunity to create community through similar interests and to put their talents to use. For the Stompers, the organization gives men an outlet to dance and free themselves of inhibitions in public. They then use the popularity gained by showing off their dance moves to attract the community to fundraising events. It is a tradition the Stompers have adapted to fit the needs of a contemporary, post-Katrina New Orleans. Whether consciously or not, the men of the Stompers are allowing a centuries-old spirit of togetherness and generosity to evolve and continue under a new guise that appeals to current local, post-Katrina, pop culture desires. Because people want to see the Stompers’ dancing (or have a chance to dance with the Stompers), they pay to attend charity events, making the average member of the community a philanthropist for the day, and funding community development. The Stompers also involve New Orleanians in keeping the traditions of benevolent societies and Irish marching groups alive by hosting events for the public to attend as a community.

For the Stompers and other contemporary dance groups, annual balls open to the public are an opportunity to show off their new dance moves for the year, raise awareness for a cause,

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Nikki M. Caruso, conversation with Johnny Gallagher, June 17, 2013. Gallagher is a current member of the Irish Channel Corner Club and great-grandson of its founder.

and sometimes reveal updated costumes. These events are a central part of bonding with the community first-hand, offering annual insights into what charitable cause each group supports, and how dance groups display themselves as a unified force. Similarly, benevolent societies once held parades to celebrate “ethnically specific anniversaries,” and they “exposed a group’s nonmembers to the sights and sounds of the groups’ expressions and identities” to better understand each other’s differences.¹⁵³ In 1854, for example, German social and benevolent associations began an annual Volks-und-Schuetzenfest, which featured a parade, to celebrate their heritage: “... a large number of Germans representing a number of social and benevolent organizations, drawn up in parade formation, gathered on Canal Street. Led by banner carriers ... and paced by several bands playing stirring martial music, the marching crowd made its way” to another part of the city for a festival.¹⁵⁴ The festival at the end of the march had food, drinks, dancing, and games; participating organizations divided proceeds from the annual event before disbursing it to those in need, like the German Protestant Orphan Home, the Howard Association, and any other German organizations in financial need.¹⁵⁵ Many benevolent societies or associations held the “ever-popular ball” to raise money for a cause. The Shamrock Benevolent Society held an annual charity ball, while others hosted a ball for an anniversary or when a group of people similar to themselves needed aid.¹⁵⁶

This format of parading to a party or holding an annual event survives in the 610 Stompers’ annual Ball Crawl – which is held every summer – and the Debutante Ball they host during Carnival season.¹⁵⁷ These are the Stompers’ major fundraisers for the year and serve as opportunities for communal bonding through dance. Clearly, the New Orleans traditions of marching groups, benevolent societies, and Irish marching groups share many similarities that survive or are replicated through the 610 Stompers. Because they are of a new era, though, the Stompers add some contemporary elements to the mix. The most obvious is, of course, their dancing. In a recent *LA Times* article, SLAB is quoted as saying that even in contemporary New

¹⁵³ Ostendorf, *Sounds American*, 118.

¹⁵⁴ John Frederick Nau, *The German People of New Orleans, 1650-1900* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1958), 121.

¹⁵⁵ Nau, *The German People of New Orleans, 1650-1900*, 121-122.

¹⁵⁶ Ostendorf, *Sounds American*, 119. For example, the 1850 Hebrew Benevolent Association of New Orleans held an anniversary ball to fuel their philanthropic work.

¹⁵⁷ The Ball Crawl and Debutante Ball are covered extensively in chapter 3.

Orleans, “it became not very cool for a man to put himself out there dancing, to be really free and interesting.”¹⁵⁸ The Stompers have set out to change that by not only dancing, but making what they do perfectly outrageous.

Throughout the year, the Stompers give the people of New Orleans a chance to indulge in laughter by playing up their characters and using camp in their performances. A chapter from *Popular Culture in Counseling, Psychotherapy, and Play-Based Interventions* explores the psychology behind the use of humor in cartoons and comic strips as therapy. To put it simply and succinctly, laughing is a natural part of being human that relieves stress, has health benefits, and is “connective when it is shared.”¹⁵⁹ Anna Tryba of the Imagineers offers this insight: “Without the ability to laugh at one’s errors, and at oneself, it is hard to allow others the luxury of making mistakes.”¹⁶⁰ Whenever the Stompers wiggle their butts, hit a pinup girl pose, scurry to hit a Heisman pose, or pretend they are swimming down the street, they are not only making fun of themselves, but clearly showing others that perfection is not a requirement for finding joy in what you do. The acceptance of their own proclivity to make mistakes is part of the humor of the 610 Stompers; if the dancing were too perfect it would not be funny, but the seriousness with which the men approach their dances lets the audience know the Stompers are embracing rather than brushing off their faults. In post-Katrina New Orleans, this ability to laugh at mistakes is an important part of coming together and accepting what has happened in order to move on with life. Satirical parades during Carnival are one way for people to find this release for humor, but the 610 Stompers are a year-long outlet for finding a way to laugh at imperfections.

In particular, the 610 Stompers, through their dance moves and costumes, embody several performative aspects that build to an aesthetic of camp that makes them more acceptable to audiences. Perhaps the most important Stomper camp tactic is their approach to humor. Esther Newton, in her article “Role Models” (which focuses on camp and drag queens), explains that “Camp is for fun; the aim of Camp is to make an audience laugh. ... Camp humor is a system of laughing at one’s incongruous position instead of crying.”¹⁶¹ As early on as their auditions, a

¹⁵⁸ Banerjee, “Camaraderie, Goofy Moves Fire Up Dance Troupe.”

¹⁵⁹ Laura Sullivan, “The Therapeutic Uses of Comic Strips and Cartoons,” in *Popular Culture in Counseling, Psychotherapy, and Play-Based Interventions*, ed. Lawrence C. Rubin (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2008), 43.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 44.

Stomper must be able to put on a show for the audience by adopting a larger-than-life personality, flaunting how good they are at being a bad dancer, or downright using their physicality as the butt of a joke. For example, a dancer who cannot jump high may flail his arms larger for the added effect of flying through the air, or an older Stomper may play up his age and make a joke of it by acting like a little old man.¹⁶² While the Jefferson City Buzzards once threw themselves onto the ground and acted like dying cockroaches for a laugh, every one of the Stompers' choreographed moves serves the purpose of entertaining an audience, thus bringing people together through humor and absurdity.

In her 1964 essay "Notes on 'Camp'," Susan Sontag approaches the "sensibility" of camp in fifty-eight points or theories, but states that its essence is "its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration," and it is a way of seeing the world as a place full of pretense and hyperbole. Camp loves quirk and things seeming like what they are not; it provides a "comic vision" of life. While the Stompers play up shortcomings and morph them into assets, the dancers are also collectively selling the image that they are a group of great dancers and, in their own way, they absolutely are. By exaggerating the dance and committing to every move, the Stompers create their own definition of extraordinary dancing. They make everything larger than life to pull audiences into their fantasy of being dance heroes. This fantasy not only offers dancers and audience alike an escape, but becomes a taste of experiences to be had by attending the Stompers' annual Ball Crawl and Debutante Ball.

And, as explored earlier in this chapter, the Stompers' own brand of sexy usually bolsters their dance hero personality, allowing them to easily fall into camp's "relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics or mannerisms."¹⁶³ The "sexy elements" of Stomper dances are actually a requirement for their choreography, and help add to the "are they serious or not?" reaction the Stompers wish to elicit from an audience.¹⁶⁴ Dance moves performed by the Stompers always involve a strong or tough feel (tensed muscles, literally stomping the ground, punching the air) mixed with booty-shaking, hip-swishing, and pelvic circles. A signature move called "love

¹⁶¹ Esther Newton, "Role Models," in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, ed. David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 49.

¹⁶² Caruso, notes from 610 Stompers 2013 auditions.

¹⁶³ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Picador, 1966), 279.

¹⁶⁴ Caruso, notes from 610 Stompers 2013 auditions.

yourself” – where the men rub their hands from their chests down to the tops of their thighs while wiggling or writhing their bodies – reads as sexy or sexy parody, depending on the individual Stomper’s choices in how they execute the step. These moves are often so over-the-top that they are a funny kind of sexy or masculine display; they show the viewer what the Stompers define as manly or sexy through their own brand of dance while referencing real ideals through a tongue-in-cheek delivery. It is then up to audience members to embrace or reject the Stompers’ ideals, perhaps even by performing the movement on their own. Performances are played up in a campy manner, transforming each man into their Stomper persona when he puts on his uniform and hits the stage, field, or streets to put on a show. This act of throwing themselves wholeheartedly into a performance full of exaggerated movement ties into the notion that camp, like the Stompers organization as a whole, “proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is ‘too much.’”¹⁶⁵

The 610 Stompers absolutely take their dancing seriously by learning the movement, dedicating their time to practices, and performing with gusto. The dance, in turn, makes way for the Stompers to have a serious, meaningful impact on the community because it enables them to raise money for charity. What the Stompers give community members who attend their events, though, is the opportunity to dance with complete abandon. By the Stompers employing the outlandish exaggeration, self-mockery, and transformative qualities of camp, they enable the community to do the same; the Stompers’ use of camp opens the door to dance for people who would not otherwise move without self-judgment in public. This environment, where it is safe to take a risk by putting the whole body on display, deepens the sense of trust and togetherness among a group, creating an even stronger sense of community through dance.

By their own set of standards, the Stompers are good at entertaining people with dance and using their skills to raise money for charity. Extraordinary at it, even. Their theatricality when dancing, seen in their sometimes melodramatic facial expressions and improvised pre-performance antics – like handstands and diving leaps – is also part of what makes them fit into camp, for camp is also the “glorification of ‘character’.”¹⁶⁶ With the Stompers, characters abound, but part of what takes the Stompers from ordinary men to extraordinary men is the

¹⁶⁵ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 284.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 285.

enthusiasm expressed through dance coupled with their “behind the scenes” work. According to Sontag, camp is the effort of doing something extraordinary. By “extraordinary” she means something glamorous or special; an “extravagant gesture.”¹⁶⁷ While the Stompers may not fit into this glamorous extravagance of camp as, say, a drag queen might, they certainly meet the criteria in their own way. Their motto itself – “Ordinary men. Extraordinary moves.” – is a clue. They are often over-the-top with their dances and antics and absolutely attention-grabbing with their costumes, but they put a spin on the “extravagant gesture” part of Sontag’s theory and make that gesture not a grandiose performance, but the act of giving to those in need. Through their physically extravagant dancing, the Stompers give back to the community by making them laugh, giving everyday people the freedom to dance, creating bonds among New Orleanians through moving collectively, and encouraging philanthropy.

The Stompers’ humor remains an important part of the city’s social attitude, even though New Orleanians are no longer licking the open wounds inflicted Hurricane Katrina. The storm’s repercussions will, of course, be felt for years to come and there will always be a pre-Katrina versus post-Katrina method of dating events. As food writer Sara Roahen puts it: “The New Orleans citizenry, in the city and in the diaspora, has two lives now: before the storm and after the storm. We’re constantly noting, aloud and to ourselves, during which life we did what. Because the storm turned us into such different people, the clarification is compulsory: we need to reconfirm everything we once knew with our new identities.”¹⁶⁸

Part of the pre-Katrina New Orleans identity is preserved by the very existence of the 610 Stompers. Like benevolent societies and marching groups before them, these men united together through a common bond and turned socialization into generosity. The Stompers reached beyond what was lost in the immediate aftermath of the storm, saving traditions that were in a state of decline even before Katrina by infusing them with the spirit of the post-storm cultural renaissance. With the use of satire, self-deprecating humor, hometown pride, and most importantly dance, they breathed new life into the ways of the old benevolent societies and marching groups. The Stompers are, frankly, an

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 284.

¹⁶⁸ Sara Roahen, *Gumbo Tales: Finding my Place at the New Orleans Table* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2008), 58.

embodiment of the city's pre- and post-Katrina identity. Through dance and muscular bonding – both on their own and with the community along parade routes – they unite New Orleanians from all walks of life, inspiring them to continue the city's traditions, slough off inhibition, let loose, and embrace the world around them. The 610 Stompers declare that it does not take technical prowess, wealth, or power to be extraordinary; to be extraordinary in contemporary New Orleans culture is to embrace the present while ensuring the city's past lives on, and doing it while having as much fun with others while you can.

CHAPTER THREE

THE STOMPERS' BALLS: DANCING FOR THE GREATER GOOD

... people in New Orleans work as much as they do elsewhere, but that work is not the whole of their lives, as it too often seems to be to Americans elsewhere. It is a necessity. With work they buy the time and the money for the more pleasurable things of life. Orleanians, in general, have an instinct for the enjoyment of life that is rare in other parts of the country. This is the core, the real secret, that makes the city different from any other in the nation. – Robert Tallant¹⁶⁹

Though being a 610 Stomper may appear to be little more than a hobby of dancing and partying with friends, to be a member of this group is to make a commitment to the city of New Orleans. In addition to dancing in parades and hosting their Debutante Ball and their Ball Crawl, the 610 Stompers fit roughly fifty appearances into their schedules each year, using dance to bring people together and better their community.¹⁷⁰ As a group of workaday men with lives outside of their Stomper identities, this is no small commitment. Factor in rehearsals, weekends of auditions, event planning, and being a Stomper can seem like a job in itself. While there are the perks of socializing with each other, dancing, and often times beer drinking, if asked a Stomper will let you know this second-life is more than fun and games.¹⁷¹ This selfless donation of time and energy is all part of generating money for charities in order to give back to the community through dance. What may look like “play” time for the Stompers has considerable consequences for members of the community.

According to author Diane Ackerman, play is not only a “refuge from ordinary life,” where people are bound to the customs, decrees and methods of life, but it also requires the

¹⁶⁹ Robert Tallant, *Mardi Gras – As it Was* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing, 1989), 8.

¹⁷⁰ Caruso, conversations with the 610 Stompers at 2013 auditions. As mentioned previously, these appearances include cancer walks, weddings, charity events, other dancing groups’ balls, runs, celebrations at local restaurants, et cetera.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

freedom of choice to play; play exists outside of necessity.¹⁷² She writes that play “happens outside ordinary life” and “make-believe” is at its heart.¹⁷³ Similar is Victor Turner’s outlook on work and leisure. Work, for Turner, is an essential action – a “means to ends” – while play or leisure is “divorced from this essentiality.”¹⁷⁴ Like Ackerman, Turner acknowledges the importance of freedom to play: “Leisure is also: (1) *freedom to* enter, even to generate new symbolic worlds to entertainment, sports, games, diversions of all kinds. It is, furthermore, (2) *freedom to* transcend social structural limitations, freedom to *play* . . . with ideas, with fantasies... and with social relationships.”¹⁷⁵ While the benevolent societies once so prominent in New Orleans were essential for members’ well-being and survival, this is not the case with the 610 Stompers. This group of men elects to not only exist, but to use their leisure time to generate money that will ensure others’ well-being and survival. Through the act of playing – engaging in the merrymaking of dance and beer as well as the make-believe of their Stomper personas – the Stompers raise money for charity by engaging others in play. During their Ball Crawl (the Stompers’ take on a bar crawl), for example, over 1,000 non-Stompers come together to be “a Stomper for a day;” participants are free to play in their leisure time through dancing, drinking, and participating in contests. In choosing this form of social engagement, participants also choose to pay a fee to join the Ball Crawl. It should be noted that the ticket price paid to attend the Ball Crawl or Debutante Ball is not paid in order to be with or see the 610 Stompers perform. This happens, of course, but the Stompers charge for events primarily to raise money for charities.

Proceeds of the past two Ball Crawls have gone to The Roots of Music and Team Gleason. Started post-Katrina when many schools lost their music curriculums, The Roots of Music is an after-school program whose mission is to “teach, support and empower New Orleans’ youth through music education, academic support, and mentorship while preserving and promoting New Orleans’ unique musical and cultural heritage. The goal is to give the youth of

¹⁷² Diane Ackerman, *Deep Play* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 6-7.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁷⁴ Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Seriousness of Human Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 34.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

New Orleans the resources to live positive, productive, self-reliant lives.”¹⁷⁶ Like the Stompers, the Roots of Music made their debut in 2009, and its founders help give back to community while keeping a signature tradition (music) alive. The 2012 Ball Crawl benefitted this program, contributing \$15,610 toward the group’s trip to the 2013 Tournament of Roses parade in California. Like the Stompers with the Macy’s parade, it was a chance for the children in the group to bring a New Orleans tradition to the rest of the country and represent the city through a televised parade.¹⁷⁷

The 2013 Ball Crawl was part of an ongoing alliance forged the night Saints player Steve Gleason blocked the Atlanta Falcons’ punt during the Superdome’s reopening post-Katrina. Gleason maintains a large fanbase in the city, and became the face of the fight against amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) after his retirement from the NFL in 2008.¹⁷⁸ Because New Orleanians love the Saints, Steve Gleason, and the Stompers’ support of Gleason’s fight against ALS, the 2013 Ball Crawl drew the largest crowd yet with Team Gleason as the charity of choice. With an increased attendance to roughly 2,000 participants (in comparison to attendance in 2012, which ranged between 1,500 and 1,800), the 2013 Ball Crawl raised \$25,610 for Team Gleason.¹⁷⁹

For those who may not have the money to attend Stomper events, or simply choose not to attend, there are always opportunities to improve one’s well-being by “playing” with the Stompers as a parade-goer during Carnival. In a parade, there are two types of interaction with the Stompers: as pseudo-bystanders, and as participants. The former is the traditional means of attending a parade in New Orleans and involves being an observer, taking in the Stompers as they pass by, stop to perform, or even start a dance party; an individual’s mere presence is a form of participation, albeit passive. The latter is what occurs when a parade stalls for a period of time and – as discussed in Chapter Two – the Stompers begin a dance party in the streets with

¹⁷⁶ “What We Do,” The Roots of Music, accessed February 24, 2014, <http://therootsofmusic.org/>.

¹⁷⁷ “Check Presentation from the 610 Stompers to the Roots of Music,” TripSmarter.com, last modified July 10, 2012, <http://www.tripsmarter.com/travelcommunity/showthread.php/10890-Check-Presentation-from-The-610-Stompers-to-The-Roots-of-Music>.

¹⁷⁸ “About Steve Gleason,” Team Gleason, last modified 2013, <http://www.teamgleason.org/about/>. In January 2011, Gleason announced he was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) and started Team Gleason.

¹⁷⁹ Caruso, conversations with the 610 Stompers at 2013 auditions.

whomever wishes to join. There are also opportunities to interact with the Stompers as the parade passes, like cheering them on or giving high-fives when they switch which group is dancing. These playful opportunities are brief, but nonetheless an important part of the Stomper/public relationship, often resulting in fleeting moments of connectedness or the “unexpected joy” of a shared experience. Through dance, the 610 Stompers create a sense of belonging to a community that defies the bonds of a permanent physical location, just as the groups of men in benevolent societies, Irish marching groups, or the Jefferson City Buzzards did decades ago in many of the same streets.¹⁸⁰ In giving parade-goers a chance to play and a sense of belonging, the Stompers contribute to the well-being of New Orleanians on an annual basis. The potential for an even stronger bond forged through dance, however, happens at the Stompers’ two annual events: the Ball Crawl and the Sweet 610 Debutante Ball held during Carnival.

In *Mardi Gras – As it Was*, Robert Tallant explains “Carnival in New Orleans is the social season, or at least the better part of it” and that no other city in America “has a ‘society’ that takes itself more seriously,” with debutantes carrying on the generations-old tradition of a young woman’s presentation to society.¹⁸¹ Leading up to Mardi Gras, many of the older krewes throw an annual ball complete with *tableaux vivants*, dancing, displays of the hierarchies within a krewe, and the introduction of debutantes to society.¹⁸² Dance and the moving body are at the heart of these performances.

Dance is a long-standing element of the New Orleans Carnival tradition. In *All on a Mardi Gras Day*, Reid Mitchell explains that although “Carnival was the season for dancing” in New Orleans, it was always unofficially the season to dance in the city, whose residents ‘danced, apparently at every chance they had.’”¹⁸³ The first public ballroom in New Orleans opened on October 4, 1792, to accommodate the needs of the city’s favorite pastime. Over the next fifty years, eighty more ballrooms opened, and an undocumented number of spaces were unofficially used to house the city’s passion for dancing.¹⁸⁴ Throughout the nineteenth century, there were

¹⁸⁰ Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy*, 76.

¹⁸¹ Tallant, *Mardi Gras – As It Was*, 9.

¹⁸² For more on tableaux and hierarchies, see Tallant’s *Mardi Gras – As it Was*, chapter 1.

¹⁸³ Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day*, 12.

¹⁸⁴ Carter, *Past as Prelude*, 211-212.

year-round balls open to the public, and newspapers advertised ballrooms that ran the gamut of social standing.¹⁸⁵ For these public balls, where “whatever selectivity existed was determined by the price.” The more select affairs required a subscription that gained access to a series of six to ten balls.¹⁸⁶ Then there were masked balls, or *bals masque*, a feature of Carnival season although they occasionally bled into Lent.¹⁸⁷ Costumes and masks, whether worn to a public or subscription ball, allowed attendees to behave as they wished behind a veil of anonymity; this made masked balls the most popular to attend.¹⁸⁸ This tradition led to the evolution into both street parades and krewe balls. “Semiorganized parades” formed, unsurprisingly, when people already masking for the purpose of a ball grouped together and took to the streets; a trend that began in the 1830s, according to Mitchell.¹⁸⁹ The krewes, though, concocted something far more elaborate after Comus took to the streets in 1857, instilling a mock court, complete with coronations and promenades.

In keeping with adopting New Orleans traditions and adding a twist, the 610 Stompers are an example of a group that borrows this ball format for their own “Debutante Ball.” Rather than a gathering of the city’s socially elite – full of old-fashioned pomp and circumstance – the Sweet 610 Debutante Ball is a mix of costume party, high school dance, and a roast of the old krewe customs.¹⁹⁰ For the Stompers, the Ball serves as one of two major fundraisers for the year, an opportunity to promote upcoming fundraising efforts, a time to show off their new dance moves for the season, and as the official “coming out” of their rookie class.¹⁹¹ For the Stompers’ fans, the Debutante Ball is a time to mingle with their favorite dancers, be entertained, and contribute financially to the welfare of others.

¹⁸⁵ Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day*, 13. Mitchell describes some of the advertised establishments as “genteel and decorous” while others held quadroon balls or allowed drinking and (illegal) gambling.

¹⁸⁶ Carter, *Past as Prelude*, 213.

¹⁸⁷ Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day*, 12-13.

¹⁸⁸ Carter, *Past as Prelude*, 213.

¹⁸⁹ Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day*, 20-21.

¹⁹⁰ It is also a play on the “Sweet 16” party.

¹⁹¹ Nikki M. Caruso, field notes from the 2012 Sweet 610 Ball, February 4, 2011.

The first Sweet 610 Debutante Ball was held in 2011, and proceeds went to The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society of Louisiana/Mississippi. The cost of admission was \$25 in advance and \$30 at the door. The fee covered admittance to a party with an open bar, free food from local restaurants, music from both a DJ and a live band, and the chance to see the Stompers' latest moves. Promotions for the event encouraged attendees to wear their best 80s dance or prom wear.¹⁹²

The second ball, in 2012, had a more specific theme: Electric Boogaloo.¹⁹³ Held two months after their Macy's appearance, the ticket price increased to \$40 in advance and \$50 at the door and benefitted the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation of Louisiana. In addition to a listing of local restaurants providing food, it was touted that "[p]atrons will adore the fog machines, disco ball, Costume Contest and of course performances throughout the evening by the legendary 610 Stompers!"¹⁹⁴ Though not required, nearly all attendees were dressed in either authentic 80s garb or a new collection of garments styled to fit the era; older attendees wore attire from the 80s while younger members of the crowd recreated styling using contemporary clothing.¹⁹⁵ Music from DJ Hammer and the smell of char-grilled oysters from Drago's filled the air as partygoers navigated their way around drink lines and small clusters of people dancing. Uniformed Stompers either mingled freely with the fluffy-haired masses or danced in small groups with other Stompers.

At first, the dance floor was mostly clear, dimly lit, and covered in more reflective sparkles from the mirror ball than dancers. The atmosphere was like a middle school dance, with boys and girls hesitant to mingle with the opposite sex, leaving the Stompers to mill about on the dance floor while non-Stompers skirted around its edges. However, as time passed, the crowd filled in and more people took advantage of the free drinks; the dance floor began to bubble with activity. This awkward tension surrounding the dance floor was broken when the Stompers

¹⁹² "610 Stompers – Sweet 610 Debutante Ball," HumidBeings.com, February 3, 2011, <http://nola.humidbeings.com/posts/detail/195761/610-Stompers-Sweet-610-Debutante-Ball>.

¹⁹³ A nod to the 1984 film, *Breakin' 2: The Electric Boogaloo* and dance by the same name.

¹⁹⁴ "610 Stompers Present Sweet 610 Debutante Ball II, Electric Boogaloo!," NewOrleansLocal.com, January 11, 2012, <http://neworleanslocal.com/610-stompers-present-sweet-610-debutante-ball-ii-electric-boogaloo/>.

¹⁹⁵ Nikki M. Caruso, field notes from the 2012 Sweet 610 Ball, February 4, 2011. Some older attendees wore garments emblazoned with "Gibaud," there were old prom dresses evenly distributed across the ages, and younger attendees wore early 1990s fashions like neon & zebra stripes.

performed a couple of their routines in the dim light, inviting the crowd to participate. Except for a few bold dancers, the crowd initially opted to watch the Stompers from the edges rather than join in on the dancing. It wasn't until the Stompers began improvising their own dance moves (rather than performing a predetermined set of movements) that more people decided to participate; it was as if the Stompers had to show the crowd it was okay to step up and dance in whatever way comfortable.

At one point, the Stompers formed a circle and took turns improvising in the center, showing off their skills of imaginary double-dutching while having the largest, often quickest actions possible. The unspoken rule was to stick with the double-dutch format: non-Stompers were welcome to take the center and dance, but if the movement did not match the already established energy, they were met with a quiet reaction or, in one case, a Stomper actually asking them to abandon the attempt.¹⁹⁶ The crowd especially cheered as one Stomper “jumped rope” while carrying a 610 Split on his back, and for two men dressed as the 1980s band Wham wearing “Choose Life” shirts. This is certainly not the type of dancing or celebration that would be seen at the traditional, formal krewe balls, and in keeping with Stomper spirit they debuted the newest members of their society (as well as their new dance routines for the season) in a quirky style.

To introduce Stompers both old and new, the group chose a man long-associated with the New Orleans Saints. Jerry Romig was the voice that came over the PA system, giving play-by-plays during Saint football games, until his retirement before the 2013 season. His manner of drawing out the phrases “Touchdown!” and “First down!” earned him a special place in the Who Dat nation's hearts, and as an honorary 610 Stomper dubbed “The Voice.” He was a natural choice to introduce the 610 Stompers at their Debutante Ball, and had a few words to offer the crowd beforehand:

Let me tell you, you guys in these red jackets [*gestures to his own*]... You guys are not ordinary. Not by any means. You are special people. I have been with the New Orleans Saints for 43 years. ... And I can tell you, those of you in section 610 – you are not ordinary. You are very special. What you've done here, what

¹⁹⁶ “Double Dutch Improvisation at the 2012 Sweet 610 Debutante Ball,” Vimeo video, 3:36, posted by “Nikki Caruso,” March 15, 2013, <https://vimeo.com/89194504>. In the case of a Stomper asking someone to step aside, it was a woman who decided to do a very, very slow Charleston that made the crowd go quiet. The request to leave was a bit of a *coup de grace*.

you're doing here, and what you continue to do is just simply great. 610 Stompers, you have gained a very special place in New Orleans. You solidified it in New York City in November – believe me. Boy how we loved you then, and we love you even more tonight. Thank you.¹⁹⁷

After his unexpected, heartfelt introduction, Jerry Romig introduced the Stompers as if they were a sports team, including both their real names and Stomper pseudonyms. As each man was announced, the Stomper ran out of backlit fog, through a tunnel formed by 610 Splits (waving pom-poms) and onto the dance floor. Once the Stompers were all introduced and in their places center-stage, Mr. Romig indulged the audience with his iconic “First doooown!” call before the dance performance began. The performance included the “I Need a Hero” dance¹⁹⁸ performed in the Macy’s parade, one to Devo’s “Whip It”¹⁹⁹ (which ended with the men grabbing their butts and looking over their shoulders at the crowd), Ini Kamoze’s “Here Comes the Hotstepper,”²⁰⁰ and finished with Prince’s “Let’s Go Crazy.”²⁰¹ The dances are the first opportunity for the public to see the Stompers’ new moves of the Carnival season and the first “official” performance alongside their newly debuted members.

A full-on dance party followed the performance as Stompers selected people from the crowd to take onto the dance floor. The dancing continued in the now-shared space, people in 1980s garb so close they were often touching as they danced, though still keeping to small clusters or couples. When the live music of Band Camp took over, people remained in small groups unless the occasional song caused the crowd to dance as a whole. The best example of this was a large-scale reenactment of the *Shout* scene/dance from the 1978 movie *Animal House*,

¹⁹⁷ Nikki M. Caruso, field notes from the 2012 Sweet 610 Ball, February 4, 2011.

¹⁹⁸ “2012 Sweet 610 Debutante Ball: Jerry ‘The Voice’ Romig introduction and ‘I Need a Hero’,” Vimeo video, 2:19, posted by “Nikki Caruso,” March 19, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/89472896>.

¹⁹⁹ “2012 Sweet 610 Debutante Ball: ‘Whip It’,” Vimeo video, 1:38, posted by “Nikki Caruso,” March 19, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/89474037>.

²⁰⁰ “2012 Sweet 610 Debutante Ball: ‘Here Comes the Hotstepper’,” Vimeo video, 2:48, posted by “Nikki Caruso,” March 19, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/89474937>.

²⁰¹ “2012 Sweet 610 Debutante Ball: ‘Let’s Go Crazy’,” Vimeo video, 2:38, posted by “Nikki Caruso,” March 19, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/89475061>.

but multiplied, with 1980s costumes, and minus the “alligator” move.²⁰² As the evening came to a close, SLAB announced to the crowded, energized partygoers that there would be an after-party at a local bar, giving the Ball attendees an opportunity to bask in the afterglow of gathering together on the dance floor.



Fig. 5: 2012 Sweet 610 Debutante Ball attendees take to the dance floor. Photo: N. Caruso.

While the Sweet 610 Debutante Ball certainly has its own persona, the influence of New Orleans Carnival traditions are clear. Just as the *bal masques* of old, it brings the people of New Orleans together for an evening of costumed dancing, drinking, and socializing. Like the krewes, the Sweet 610 Debutante Ball serves as an annual Carnival season occurrence. Unlike krewes, however, the Stompers use the Debutante Ball as an opportunity to dance on the same level as

²⁰² “Shout - Otis Day & The Knights (Animal House 1978),” YouTube video, 3:11, posted by “Andrey Awoitauw,” April 11, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MG7KCOO76Wc>.

their fans while generating money for charities rather than to show off status for fellow krewe members. And the “debutantes” of the Sweet 610 Ball – with their spray-painted tennis shoes, mustaches, and sweat bands – are a far cry from young women in lavish white gowns who are paraded around the dance floor. The Sweet 610 Debutante Ball is an (albeit transformed) continuation of the ball tradition in New Orleans, but which puts inclusion before exclusivity and philanthropy before pomp. It is one of two major Stomper events that creates another opportunity for conventional people to simultaneously carry on the old traditions of New Orleans, embrace the post-Katrina approach to embodied satire, share a physical space with the 610 Stompers for an extended period, and be a philanthropist for a day.

The Sweet 610 Debutante Ball is not the only opportunity for New Orleanians to – for a small donation – party with their heroes-elect. Put on by the 610 Stompers to raise money for charity and interact with the community in the Carnival off-season, the Stompers’ annual Ball Crawl takes place in June on the Saturday closest to June 10th (6/10). It is the 610 Stompers’ take on a traditional neighborhood bar crawl, but they call it a “Ball Crawl” so they can make the joke about having two balls and waiting for the second one to drop.²⁰³ Like their Debutante Ball, the Ball Crawl is a 1980s-themed costume event open to participants aged twenty-one and over; admission includes all the free beer you can drink, hence the age restriction. Attendees also get a “swag bag” that contains that year’s official t-shirt, a stick-on mustache, 610 Stomper logo tattoos, and sweat bands to help get the “authentic” Stomper look.

The Ball Crawl, on the whole, is a more interactive event than the Debutante Ball, and hinges upon the participation of attendees. While the Stompers take time to introduce each member and put their dancing in the spotlight for a portion of the Debutante Ball, the Ball Crawl serves as a more ideal, communal interaction with fans. Prior to the “crawl” part of the Ball Crawl, the Stompers set up in a field/playground across the street from a bar, transforming the adjacent intersection into a block party. During this time, attendees who did not pre-register for the event can sign in (this includes a liability waiver for any personal injuries), pay, and pick up their swag. Free beer from Budweiser and food from Drago’s restaurant are available at this time, and the 610 Stompers begin to teach their dances. As the Ball Crawl is about every attendee having the chance to be a Stomper for a day, giving everyone the opportunity to learn

²⁰³ Surprisingly, this joke is as “crude” as the Stompers get. They are mostly family-friendly and stay away from the double-entendres that run rampant in New Orleans humor.

the Stompers' signature moves from the men themselves is part of the communal experience. In place of performing for a clearly delineated audience, the Stompers scatter themselves throughout the crowd and teach their dances to those who want to learn. For women, this is the only chance to learn the Stompers' moves from the group; membership dictates that the annual auditions (the other "public" opportunity to learn dances from the Stompers themselves) are only open to men.²⁰⁴



Fig. 6: Stompers teach 2013 Ball Crawl attendees their choreography. Photo: N. Caruso.

The Stompers' dances are crafted not only to be entertaining and fun, but they are easy to learn. All of their movements happen on the beat of the music in 8-count phrases – usually starting on the right and repeating on the left – with either one or two sets total. Every move has a name, including the Cleopatra, praying mantis, *Karate Kid* fence painting and “wax-on/wax-

²⁰⁴ “610 Stompers Teaching Their Moves at the 2013 Ball Crawl,” Vimeo video, 0:42, posted by “Nikki Caruso,” March 14, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/89155685>. “610 Stompers and Bawl Crawl Attendees Review a Dance at the 2013 Ball Crawl,” Vimeo video, 2:27, posted by “Nikki Caruso,” March 14, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/89158063>.

off,” crane, Heisman, love yourself, Tarzan, and the snake.²⁰⁵ All of the dances choreographed for the Stompers are recorded by writing a list of each move in the order it happens. This compositional list is then posted in a private section of the Stompers’ website for the men to review at their leisure.²⁰⁶ When non-Stompers learn dances at the Ball Crawl by physically running through a literal list of movements, attendees are learning the dances in a way similar to a Stomper learning the dances in rehearsal or whole reviewing on his own.

Once the Stompers teach two or three dances, everyone is called out into the street and the Crawl begins. Like in a parade, the group’s banner is at the front of the crowd and the New Orleans Police Department rides ahead and alongside, closing off streets for the procession. The Stompers themselves are scattered throughout the crowd, leading packs of people in dances, and the Stompers’ support truck rides roughly in the middle of the procession, blaring music. Because the Ball Crawl winds its way through neighborhoods, people emerge from their homes and adjacent streets to watch the horde of 1980s fashion dance past them; it is an act of bringing festivities into the neighborhoods not unlike the Buzzard tradition. In 2012 and 2013, the Ball Crawl began at a bar, stopped at another three locations, and ended at a final bar located on the same block as the first. Before each stop, Stompers would wind their way through the crowd and select participants for individual contests (Best Mustache, Best Costume, Best Dancer) by giving them a pair of beads with a medallion. The stops include time to refill your drink, mingle, dance, watch or compete in a contest, and more mingling/dancing.²⁰⁷

Mini-contests are an important aspect of the Ball Crawl, allowing participants to gain recognition and “street cred” from the Stompers themselves, thus enveloping the community even more by conferring Stomper approval and making attendees the stars of the Ball Crawl. The first stop, the Kingpin bar near Prytania Street, is the location for the Best Mustache contest. A small platform is placed on the neutral ground across from the bar, and each participant takes his turn modelling his mustache for the audience. This contest is open to only real, home-grown facial hair, and the winner is selected by the volume of the audience’s cheers and whistles. Some

²⁰⁵ “Ball Crawl Attendees Learn a Dance from the 610 Stompers,” Vimeo video, 0:50, posted by “Nikki Caruso,” March 15, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/89198948>.

²⁰⁶ Caruso, conversations with the 610 Stompers at 2013 auditions.

²⁰⁷ “Improvisation at the 610 Stompers’ 2012 Ball Crawl,” Vimeo video, 2:34, posted by “Nikki Caruso,” March 14, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/89154258>. This video shows an improvised dance party on the outskirts of the crowd during the 2012 stop at the Kingpin bar; both Stompers and attendees participated.

contestants' mustaches look like Tom Selleck knockoffs, some are curled up at the ends like Snidely Whiplash, and on one occasion a future Stomper shaved "610" into his goatee. Winners are announced to the crowd, their fist held aloft by a Stomper (like a boxer victorious) as they are given a special sash declaring them that year's victor.



Fig. 7: Raucous dancing (and beer-flinging) at the Kingpin bar.
2012 Ball Crawl. Photo: N. Caruso.

From the Kingpin bar, the Ball Crawl makes its way out to the famous St. Charles Avenue. In order to make room for the Crawl, the street is closed to traffic for six blocks and drivers are forced to re-route at seventh and final block when the Crawl arrives at their next stop. St. Charles Avenue also happens to be the main thoroughfare for nearly all Carnival parades held in Orleans Parish, as well as being the street traversed by the Jefferson City Buzzards for part of their morning march and the Irish marching groups during St. Patrick's Day celebrations. This trek allows Ball Crawl participants to occupy the same physical space of krewe members, the 610 Stompers, and other groups who are the focus of Carnival parades. A special feature of this leg of this journey is that the St. Charles Avenue streetcar line runs down the neutral ground, so tourists (and locals) riding the streetcar tend to respond to the Ball Crawl by hanging out of the

windows and taking pictures while Ball Crawl attendees wave and shout greetings in return; it is a moment where the Ball Crawl feels more like the parade experience the Stompers have during Carnival.



Fig. 8: The 2012 Ball Crawl making its way down St. Charles Ave. to Fat Harry's. Note the streetcar passing on the left. Photo: N. Caruso.

For the 2012 Crawl, Fat Harry's (a popular bar) hosted the Stompers' costume contest: best 1980s workout look with separate categories for men and women. In 2013, Fat Harry's co-hosted the Ball Crawl stop with the neighboring restaurant, Superior Seafood and Oyster Bar. Instead of hosting the costume contest, the stop featured something new. Inspired by the Stompers' love of Patrick Swayze and that year's theme ("Streetcar Named Da'Fire"), Superior's balcony was the site of the first-ever Swayze contest.²⁰⁸ Contestants had to turn in an essay on

²⁰⁸ The Stompers spoke of the contest as if it will be included in future Ball Crawls. The contest could also be a nod to the "Stella and Stanley" contest held at the annual Tennessee Williams festival in New Orleans. For this contest, men adopt their best Stanley scream at a balcony for "STELLA!" like in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Swayze prior to the Ball Crawl to be considered, and then yelled “SWAYZE!” in imitation of Stanley’s “STELLA!” yell from *A Streetcar Named Desire* at a cutout of Patrick Swayze and Jennifer Grey set up on the balcony. The time spent at the St. Charles stop tends to be the loudest, thickest, and most energetic; this is the stop in the Crawl where the greatest number of non-participants are exposed to the antics of the Stompers and their fans. The very exposed intersection of St. Charles and Napoleon Avenues, complete with passing streetcars, turns the Ball Crawl into a performance for passers-by, continuing the act of making attendees the stars for the day. Though a less-traversed intersection, the next stop on the crawl is well-known neighborhood bar: Le Bon Temps on Magazine Street.

Winding through neighborhood backstreets before hitting Magazine Street,²⁰⁹ the third stop of the day is Le Bon Temps and features a limbo contest where participants bend backwards to squeeze under a giant mustache. In 2013, this site had live music and hosted the annual costume contest. By this point in the route, the crowd tends to settle down from their raucous high at Fat Harry’s/Superior Grill, and people drift into the party from the surrounding neighborhood. It is almost as if this neighborhood bar serves as the rest area before the final party.

With the attendees becoming progressively less organized (due to beer and exhaustion), the Ball Crawl hits the final leg as it heads back to the F&M Patio Bar on Tchoupitoulas. On Lyons Street, which runs perpendicular to Tchoupitoulas, food trucks line up and wait for the oncoming masses of Ball Crawlers. The Stompers have now had the entire day to scout for the Crawl attendees with the most remarkable moves, and it is the dance-off that rounds out the evening. The dance-off, open to both men and women, happens in rounds of improvisation with contestants slowly being narrowed down to two. When it reaches this point, the Stompers pause the competition to ask the final competitors Stomper-esque questions like what inspired them to dance and what is their “Stomper for a day” pseudonym. In 2012, this dance contest took place in the middle of Lyons Street outside the F&M Bar, with a mass of people circling in around the contestants and the Stompers fighting to keep the crowd pushed back. The contest is a display of abundant energy, strange dance moves, passion, fearlessness, athleticism, and a test of how ridiculous a person is willing to look in the name of Stomper-approved dance moves. There is

²⁰⁹ “Dancing Down Magazine St. at the 2013 Ball Crawl,” Vimeo video, 0:18, posted by “Nikki Caruso,” March 18, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/89464632>.

also the prize of a trophy made by the Stompers and the honor of being crowned the best dancer at the Ball Crawl.



Fig. 9: The 2013 trophy for the dance-off winner. Photo: N. Caruso.

The Ball Crawl is both like and unlike everything and anything in New Orleans. The Stompers are like the Jefferson City Buzzards in that they bar crawl in costume, but the 610 Stompers turn a bar crawl into an event attended by over 1,000 members of the community that generates thousands of dollars for charity. The most important difference, though (and what makes the Ball Crawl unique to the 610 Stompers), is the atmosphere of not just inclusion, but equality. Their “Stomper for a day” mentality and intermingling with the masses during the Crawl makes the event a group activity rather than a show put on by the Stompers. In attending the Crawl, people are also included in the act of philanthropy; the cost of attendance contributes to the amount of money the Stompers are able to give their charities. The day, truly, is about the shared experience. And even though there are competitions in the festivities, everyone is on equal footing: everyone has the opportunity to costume, there is no hierarchy in the

crawling/parading format, and everyone is given the chance to know the same dances that the Stompers themselves know. It is a day filled with communal feelings and contributing to the well-being of others, celebrating the ridiculousness that can be any Saturday in New Orleans, and an opportunity for all to dance.

The Stompers' reach to the community, however, goes far beyond their two annual events and beneficiaries. The group makes appearances throughout the year outside of Carnival in order to raise money for charities or participate in awareness; the Stompers are paid to dance at weddings and social parties, but also volunteer for events like cancer walks. They have donated to a number of charities, including the Magnolia School, Bridge House, Alzheimer Association, Louisiana Organ Procurement Association, and Saint Baldrick's.²¹⁰ They have raised approximately \$200,000 for charity with their extraordinary dance moves and infectious good will.²¹¹

Equally important is their involvement of New Orleanians themselves in the continuation of old New Orleans traditions while adding a new, post-Katrina spin that exemplifies the current values of the city through the dancing body. The Stompers have kept the spirit of the old benevolent societies alive while following in the line of the Irish marching groups and Jefferson City Buzzards; the Stompers are a group that uses dance as a springboard for philanthropy and the creation of community. Their parody of women's dance teams have helped make dance among adults – specifically men – popular, and they have found a way to turn their local pop culture celebrity status into a means of generating more money for charities. This is particularly seen in their annual Debutante Ball and Ball Crawl, which are an amalgamation of the New Orleans traditions of Carnival balls, the post-parade parties of benevolent societies, bar crawls of marching groups like the Jefferson City Buzzards, and neighborhood gatherings of Irish marching clubs. Becoming more popular with each passing year, the Balls expose a united community to local charities, not only raising the awareness of a cause, but also turning the attendance of one of the Stompers' balls into activism.

²¹⁰ "Ordinary Men. Extraordinary Moves.," 610 Stompers, <http://www.610stompers.com/about/>. Caruso, conversations with the 610 Stompers at 2013 auditions.

²¹¹ Banerjee, "Camaraderie, Goofy Moves Fire Up Dance Troupe." The Stompers always round off a donation to "610" - \$610, \$2,610, \$35,610, et cetera.

Essentially, the 610 Stompers are using play (dance, costumes, drinking, socializing) to tend to the more serious acts of creating communal bonds among people who either endured Hurricane Katrina or found their home in the city after the storm, preserving the traditions of a city that could have been lost to time, and bringing not only awareness but activism to charitable organizations by giving them special focus during events. By hosting the Debutante Ball and Ball Crawl, the Stompers are not simply pointing to a cause and telling the community that it exists to increase awareness. Instead, they turn ticket prices into massive donations that contribute to the betterment of others' lives while exposing attendees to the face of the cause; at the 2012 Ball Crawl the Roots of Music performed, a spokeswoman for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation of Louisiana spoke at the 2012 Debutante Ball, the Steve Gleason was featured in the 2013 Ball Crawl promotional videos.²¹² The lives of attendees are also improved, as the Stompers provide an opportunity to play and experience the collective joy brought about by their dance moves. Another means for group bonding at Stomper events is through costuming for the event's theme and hearing the music selections, which allow for a collective sense of nostalgia for the 1980s.

In his 2006 thesis "Here We Go Again (Again): The Eighties Nostalgia Movement in Contemporary Pop Culture," Philip C. Cook, Jr. states: "Music is not the only component of Eighties pop culture that is being feted. Similar trends are occurring everywhere from fashion to cinema to toys to dance. Anyone, potentially, can be involved in reinterpreting 'Eighties' music and participating in the related Eighties revival movement."²¹³ The key to this current fetish with the 1980s – and what makes it work so well for the 610 Stompers – is that a person did not necessarily have to live through the decade in order to be a part of the movement. Some of the Stompers and their fans experienced the decade first-hand, and are able to revisit those times through a 610 Stompers experience, while younger Stompers and fans are taking in (and using) aspects of an era they did not live through.²¹⁴ Cook differentiates these crowds as, respectively,

²¹² While Gleason (now restricted to a wheel chair) did not attend the Ball Crawl in person, representatives of Team Gleason were in attendance.

²¹³ Philip C. Cook, Jr., "Here We Go Again (Again): The Eighties Nostalgia Movement in Contemporary Pop Culture," (master's thesis, University of Arkansas, 2009), 60, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304845782>.

²¹⁴ At the time this is being written (2013), the youngest Stomper fans who can attend an event (21+) were born in 1992 or 1993.

being nostalgic or retro: “Nostalgia is wistful, sentimental, regard toward an idealized past. Retro is often an irreverent appropriation of the past applied to the present.”²¹⁵

Similarly, Altaf Merchant and John Ford’s article in the *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing* (which looks at how nostalgia may be used to establish relationships between donors and non-profit organizations), divides nostalgia into “personal nostalgia” and “vicarious nostalgia.”²¹⁶ For Merchant and Ford, nostalgia as a whole “refers to the remembering of the events of the past and reliving the positive emotions with a sense of loss.”²¹⁷ They further refine the large concept of nostalgia into two parts: “personal nostalgia” as a “longing for the lived past” and remembering things, events, and people from this past as more positive than they actually were; these times may want to be lived by those with personal nostalgia because they are times that are seen as happier.²¹⁸ “Vicarious nostalgia,” on the other hand, is defined as “the grieving for the loss of something that was never directly experienced by the individual,” which consists of an “individualized blend of fantasy and reality.”²¹⁹

From these two outlooks, I have drawn together four types of potential experiences at 610 Stomper events: personal nostalgia, vicarious nostalgia, retro, and (too simply) the “others.” There are individuals who have a nostalgic experience at 610 Stomper events, which may include feelings of sentimentality, a longing for the past, and idealization of that past. People may experience this through personal nostalgia, which enables them to live their personal past through first-hand memories. Examples include the remembrance of when a song was new, the fashions (now worn as costumes) were current, or performing some of the Stompers’ dance moves when they were part of pop culture. At the Debutante Ball and Ball Crawl there are people in their thirties and older who wear apparel from the 1980s; they are wearing their nostalgia through something they have held onto through the years. The attendees who experience vicarious nostalgia will feel as if they are “transported to another era” through

²¹⁵ Cook, “Here We Go Again (Again),” 21.

²¹⁶ Altaf Merchant and John Ford, “Nostalgia and Giving to Charity: A Conceptual Framework for Discussion and Research,” *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing* 13:1 (2008): 15-17.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 26.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 15.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 17.

yearning for the era they long to be a part of, dressing the part, and surrounding themselves by authentic and faux artifacts (music, vintage garments, and newly constructed costumes). The sentimentality of nostalgia is present, but it is not the reliving of a first-hand experience.²²⁰

The next step away from deep, personal nostalgia is attending 610 Stomper events with a retro approach. Attendees who go with a retro attitude appreciate the era, but appropriate the fashion, dance moves, and music for the purpose of having a good time; this is not unlike any other party with a decade or culture for the theme. Then, naturally, there are people who go to 610 Stomper events and have no connection whatsoever to the theme. They have no overt feelings for anything pertaining to the 1980s, do not costume, and do not dance. While few, they are there. Probably for the beer.

To add another layer, the ways attendees and Stompers themselves experience the 1980s through events have the potential to change their relationship with the decade. Someone with an appreciation for the retro may come to have feelings of nostalgia the more they come into contact with people, music, and clothing from the 1980s. At the Debutante Ball or Ball Crawl, an individual may even use the event to form a connection with another person (or deepen an established relationship) who does or wishes to experience the decade as “the good old days.” Personal nostalgia can even create feelings of unification between those reliving a part of their past with the Stompers; communities of those bound together by the decade because of the Stompers’ dance moves and expectation of decade-driven costumes.

While most sources cite the desire for a simpler time and sense of security as major reasons for the current nostalgia trend, these are not overt emotional reactions to the 610 Stompers’ aesthetic. In examining past Stomper events, catching them in parades, and searching YouTube relentlessly for footage, it is easy to see the way the Stompers approach their 1980s persona makes the majority of people happy rather than pine for days gone by. Despite the certainly retro experiences of the Ball Crawl or Debutante Ball, the overall air is that of living for the moment, dancing, and wearing ridiculous costumes because it is fun and what people in New Orleans do. Perhaps, deep down, living a Stomper-induced 1980s throwback – even if only for a

²²⁰ One addition I would make here is that those with vicarious nostalgia may have ties to the 1980s that are emotionally strong, but are not vivid memories. This may include those who were very young children in the late 1980s with relatives who lived their heyday in the 1980s. This enables them to have some memories of the era that they may mix with others’ firsthand accounts in order to create a sentimental connection without having the full-on 1980s experience of a teenager or adult.

few hours – is a way of resurrecting an idealized past to escape contemporary problems, but it is not the motivation behind the Stompers’ events. Among these problems for New Orleanians would, of course, be living in a post-Katrina world. Instead, a 1980s experience with the 610 Stompers is much like a themed costume or Carnival event in New Orleans. The trick of using anything from music to costumes that is not absolutely contemporary and free of a nod to the past is that *someone* is going to have a memory associated with it, evoking feelings of nostalgia for that individual; the more popular the reference, the more popular the transportation to another moment in time.

Whether participants experience all the sentimental, wistful throes of nostalgia while dancing with the 610 Stompers in their authentic 1980s best, are having fun with a retro experience, or just wearing a costume to dance and drink beer, in the end it is an individual experience in a community setting. By this I mean that the type of nostalgia comes down to the individual having their personal experience of the 1980s in a setting provided by the 610 Stompers, and the degree to which nostalgia is felt will vary from person to person. More important are those feelings of togetherness when everyone gets together to dance and play, and how that enables everyone to be a philanthropist contributing to the betterment of their community.

While nostalgia certainly operates on an unselfish level, the 610 Stompers also consciously use nostalgia to their advantage by employing a very specific kind of nostalgia unique to the city. In *Gumbo Tales*, food writer Sara Roahen observes that “Nostalgia is a sixth sense in New Orleans. It works just like the other five. When functioning optimally, nostalgia deepens your experience of the city.”²²¹ She soon follows this statement with the notion that pre-Katrina New Orleans was comfortable living a well-rehearsed story of jazz funerals, corrupt politicians, ghost stories, and culinary habits; anything that happened in New Orleans was so wrapped up in a long and oft-told story that it would not be considered “news” to the outside world. Then, of course, came Katrina and all of that was turned upside-down for the whole world to see. The old stories survived Katrina, though, and the uniqueness of New Orleans culture has become a more prized, popularized possession.²²² The ghosts of New Orleans pop culture past

²²¹ Roahen, *Gumbo Tales*, 232-233.

²²² Post-Katrina New Orleans is in the thick of cultural pride that people can literally wear thanks to stores like Fleurty Girl, Dirty Coast, Fun Rockin’, and Skip n’ Whistle.

are often resurrected and people seem to gleefully wallow in the puddle of accompanying nostalgia.

One example of a resurrection was the 610 Stompers' 2013 Debutante Ball promo.²²³ In 2011, late night talk show host Conan O'Brien discovered a locally made commercial for a New Orleans furniture store named Frankie and Johnny's. He broadcast part of the commercial, complete with the memorable "characters" of Frankie, Johnny, the "Special Man," and their customers.²²⁴ Conan then challenged viewers to make their own parodies of the situation, its characters, and the particularly memorable catchphrases like "Let 'em have it." In a report on Conan's "discovery" and challenge, New Orleans newscaster Scott Walker pointed out that people were "...going crazy about a commercial we've known about and imitated for years." "If you're a New Orleanian you have to love the fact that there's this legendary, iconic commercial on TV that's being played nation-wide," mused Rondey Montz of Frankie and Johnny's in the local news report; the quirkiness of it all was a point of pride rather than embarrassment.²²⁵ Two years later, the 610 Stompers made their own version, tapping into New Orleans nostalgia and hometown pride to drum up attendance for their Debutante Ball.

Just like the original commercial, the Stompers' spin pitches the product (in this case, tickets to the Ball) as available to anyone – "Bad credit? No credit? No problem!" – and does so in low-tech, late-1980s fashion. Chief Dancing Officer Brett "SLAB" Parton poses as the "Special Man," complete with a twist on the iconic catchphrase, changing it to "Let 'em dance." Other Stompers and a couple of Splits fill the remaining roles of Frankie, Johnny, and their customers with financial (or dance) woes. They are selling the chance to attend a 1980s dance party, complete with open bar and food, at the price of \$40 per ticket.²²⁶ They followed this promo with a commercial for the 2013 Ball Crawl, released a few months later, that was a parody of the *Fat Albert* credits and included local icon Steve Gleason; not a New Orleans

²²³ "610 Stompers Debutante Ball 2013," YouTube video, 1:06, posted by "welliverpr," January 1, 2011, <http://youtu.be/F8TFGX5-558>.

²²⁴ "Frankie and Johnny's Furniture: See the Special Man," YouTube video, 1:01, posted by "Scott Hammack," January 17, 2009, <http://youtu.be/XI7jC57GuZM>.

²²⁵ "The 'Special Man' Goes National," YouTube video, 2:28, posted by "ScottWalkerTV," June 1, 2011, <http://youtu.be/mwXIztMhTks>.

²²⁶ "610 Stompers Debutante Ball 2013," by "welliverpr."

throwback, but digging into nostalgia transposed onto a local element.²²⁷ Tapping into this love for a bygone era in New Orleans is a surefire way for the Stompers to pique people's interest in Stomper events while giving a nod to the culture they help preserve. This use of nostalgia generates feelings of unity and hometown pride before event attendees even come together to dance. The Stomper remakes of old local commercials also show a taste of the New Orleans that once was to the newer, post-Katrina residents of the city, cluing them in on the city's brand of humor that the Stompers embody. Through this, Stompers are uniting the old and the new citizenry through carefully-used nostalgia and the opportunity for everyone to come together in order to dance.

While their use of 1980s nostalgia is blatant and offers an escape to a different place and time, their use of New Orleans nostalgia in event promotions is a more subtle nod to the love of local culture. This nostalgia for what was once a part of customary New Orleans life is a form of shared understanding that can only be experienced by those who have a history in the city and marks the Stompers as a truly local entity, tapping into New Orleanians' love for New Orleans. Through this resurrection of the city's past, the Stompers instill a sense of hometown pride into the public consciousness and associate it with fun, togetherness, and dance. They look like the everyday guys, but through dance the 610 Stompers give the people of New Orleans a reason to laugh, a way to give back to the community, an opportunity to preserve local customs, and finding, most importantly, an avenue into their own extraordinary moves.

Though the Stompers create community and uplift the people of New Orleans by hosting these annual events, connecting with the people of the city through dance and friendly competition, the Stompers would be unable to contribute to the greater good without the continual support of the community. Stompers and their fans maintain a relationship of mutual appreciation year-round by the Stompers consciously staying the public eye, receiving invitations to charity events per the request of fans, and interacting with the community through dance performances and their Stomper events. It is a constant collaborative effort, with every side – fans, Stompers, and charities – benefitting from the others' positive presence in post-Katrina New Orleans.

²²⁷ “610 Stompers 4th annual Ball Crawl,” YouTube video, 0:30, posted by “welliverpr,” May 30, 2013, <http://youtu.be/GltdMQRhdwg>.

CONCLUSION

The formation and evolution of the 610 Stompers serves as proof that dance has the power to bring even the most “ordinary” of men together, unify a city, serve as a reflection of a culture, and benefit the community as a whole. What started out as a small group of men who attended Saints games together has become a group of local pop culture celebrities who are dedicated to preserving the traditions of New Orleans, embracing the present, and working toward a better future for the community.

From their first performance, the 610 Stompers were embraced by New Orleanians and now serve as a physical embodiment of the city’s values through dance. They literally wear their hometown pride on their chests while dancing out the ideals of acceptance, living in the moment, and being larger than life; they are the everyman of New Orleans. Through their organizational structure and parading format, the Stompers also preserve the long-standing traditions of the benevolent societies and marching groups once plentiful in the city, while adapting them to fit current, post-Katrina trends in parading and dancing. This melding of the old and new also reflects the demographics of the Stompers and their fans: both pre- and post-Katrina residents of the city come together as a whole to celebrate New Orleans culture through dance and ensure a better future through charity work. The very act of gathering to dance gives back to the community, creating a sense of uplift and togetherness.

Moving as a group allows the Stompers to bond with each other on a physical and emotional level, which William McNeill describes as “euphoric.”²²⁸ Fans of the Stompers are invited to join this experience of moving as a unit during the Stompers’ annual Ball Crawl and Debutante Ball, but they also get a taste of it when they see the Stompers in a parade. At parades, chances to move present themselves as dance parties during a pause in a parade or as the Stompers dance past. These opportunities to move together also provide freedom to dance in an environment where both “silly” and “bad” are positive qualities to have, as they are an inherent part of the Stompers’ camp aesthetic. Moves performed and taught by the Stompers also tap into the “sexy” qualities of camp, which allow participants “being a Stomper for a day” to publicly get in touch with their sexuality in a socially acceptable, non-threatening manner.

²²⁸ McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time*, 2-3.

The shared experience of seeing – and especially dancing with – the Stompers is grounded in a feeling of community devoid of geographical boundaries. Essentially, the more the people of New Orleans interact with the Stompers, the more they interact with other citizens and thus the ties between people across the city are strengthened through the very act of dance. The connectivity brought about by these dance moves also lessens the feelings of depression or isolation, just as the Saints did for the city after Hurricane Katrina. Through dance, the 610 Stompers are a catalyst for a network of communities that expand like rings of a tree or ripples in water, forming layer upon layer as the sense of community increases. This layering begins with the original Stompers and expands as the group itself grows and evolves over time. Adding to that layer are the 610 Splits, followed by the Stompers' regular groupies. With each event the Stompers host, a new layer of community is built upon the previous until – through enough parades, performances, charity events, and safety campaigns – the Stompers bring New Orleanians into one unified community. Add to this the beneficiaries of the Stompers' charity work, and it becomes a community working and dancing together for the greater good of its city.

Their spirit of play allows for an escape from the everyday routine of the Stompers' and their fans' lives, but it is also play with a purpose. Because the Stompers charge to participate in their events, attendees contribute to those in need when they pay to carouse with the Stompers. This adds a serious, altruistic reason to come together under the guise of a dance party. Fans of the Stompers are given an opportunity to dance as big or as badly as they need to in an environment where large, raucous, enthusiastic dance is the norm. The Stompers, however, are not all dance parties and beer drinking. As local pop culture celebrities, the Stompers' visibility increases awareness of their charity work and puts them in greater demand; these men show off their moves at roughly fifty events a year, not including parades. While their status in the community attracts both money and prominence for charities, the members of the 610 Stompers assume responsibility for the charity select and the community at large when they pull on those gold tennis shoes and powder blue shorts.

In addition to their generosity, the 610 Stompers play an important role in the cultural renaissance of post-Katrina New Orleans by maintaining the city's traditions while adding the new, unique twist of embodying a culture through dance. As only the Stompers can, their spin on the Debutante Ball, nod to marching clubs through the Ball Crawl, operating in the spirit of a benevolent society, and use of old local advertising preserves New Orleans culture while

benefitting the greater community. In a post-Katrina world, the Stompers preserve assets of the city that cannot be lost to flooding, but could be lost to time. In joining the post-Katrina trend of organizing a dance group and adding their own alternatives, the Stompers found a way to infuse the enduring traditions of men's social groups with a new, dance-centered life that makes part of the city's history accessible to its contemporary citizenry. They also morphed these traditions to be more inclusive by not limiting their membership by social status, profession, religion, or ethnicity. While they do limit their membership through the audition process, it is for the purpose of maintaining a standard for their performances; being too open to the public could lead to dancing that is actually bad, and the humor of the Stompers' "so bad it's good" style would be lost. This continuation of traditions becomes a form of unification, joining people in the collective effort of cultural preservation through dance while simultaneously connecting with the past and preserving for the future.

One way the Stompers do discriminate their membership is through gender, but this separation of the sexes is also a tradition in New Orleans social and Carnival organizations. This all-male membership does, however open doors for further exploration of the group's identity. Future studies on the 610 Stompers could examine how the Stompers unite men of different races and ages through dance, using familiar movement from pop culture to break down barriers and find overarching commonalities within the group. This could then lead to looking at the Stompers through the lens of masculinity, questioning how they both perform their gender and – through their choreography and performative style – challenge the norms of what contemporary society deems acceptable for male movement. In time, it would be interesting to see if the Stompers become a multi-generational organization like the Irish marching groups of New Orleans.²²⁹ This would provide an opportunity to look at how older Stompers honor their fathers through throwback attire as their sons (or nephews, et cetera) in turn dress and dance like their own fathers (and thus grandfathers). The evolution of Stomper choreography may also reflect this passage of time by gleaning more pop culture references that will eventually work their way into a collective sense of nostalgia.

As the Stompers' demographics evolve, so will the population of the city of New Orleans. Currently, the Stompers are a mix of New Orleans natives and the "young professional"

²²⁹ The 610 Split Tough Kitties is married to a Stomper, and Barely Legal is their daughter; the inclusion of multiple generations within the organization is already beginning to manifest.

crowd that moved to the city post-Katrina; while many older Carnival organizations base their membership on family history, this openness to the city's newcomers echoes the Stompers' spirit of inclusion as well as the fusing of old and new. Interestingly, the Stompers currently serve as a reflection of New Orleans, but they also embody national trends by pulling choreographic inspiration from popular American films of the 1980s. They use the national "dorky is cool" trend – seen in everything from movies (ex: *Napoleon Dynamite*) to Hipster fashion – and combine it with Carnavalesque and camp sensibilities prevalent in New Orleans, creating a dance style that echoes the current meeting of micro and macro cultural tides in post-Katrina New Orleans. It is a style that speaks to people beyond the cultural boundaries, as seen by the Stompers' national – and even international – reception after their appearance in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

Clearly, there are many questions to be answered and avenues to be explored at this point in the Stompers' story. We are, however, witnessing the very beginnings of what could very well become a long-standing tradition in the city's culture, and for now it is important to preserve the organization's roots and their current impact on the city before they are lost to time. Dance allows the Stompers to preserve ambulatory, cultural, and social traditions, embrace the current cultural trends in a post-Katrina New Orleans, and actively work toward a better future for the city in a way no other medium can; the history must be passed on and survive in the body to maintain its vitality and movement's power to unite people through time. Because of the Stompers' dancing, ambulatory traditions are saved in motion instead of only being frozen on a page or in a photograph; as Katrina taught New Orleanians, pages and photographs can be lost in an instant, but memories and traditions survive through the physical body. In the end, it is the dancing bodies of the 610 Stompers that carry on traditions, embrace the present, and move into the future.

APPENDIX

RELEASE FOR USE OF IMAGES

I hereby give my consent to Nikki M. Caruso to photograph, film, videotape and then use, reproduce, and publish said images of the 610 Stompers.

Mont Creamer
(Please print name)

I agree that photographs/negatives, film, or videotapes thereof shall constitute the sole property of Nikki M. Caruso with full right of disposition in her graduate thesis.

I hereby release Nikki M. Caruso her legal representatives and assigns from any and all claims whatsoever in connection with the use, reproduction, publication of the images thereof.


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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Nikki M. Caruso is from New Orleans, Louisiana. In 2007, she graduated magna cum laude with a B.A. in Theatre Arts and Dance Studies from Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. During her Graduate studies in the Florida State University School of Dance, Nikki was selected by the University to represent the Florida State University College of Visual Arts, Theatre and Dance at the 2013 Statewide Graduate Research Symposium at the University of South Florida, where she presented her research-in-progress on the 610 Stompers. She has attended over twenty Mardi Gras seasons in New Orleans, and has followed the 610 Stompers fervently since 2011.