A SIGN OF THE TIMES
Dr. David M. Mulnick

Albert Einstein once said, "The true sign of intelligence is not knowledge but imagination". Now, I am fairly sure that he did not have Carnival parades in mind when he uttered those famous words. However, over the many years that New Orleanians have attended those processions, where amassing throws is the main object of their presence, an imaginative approach to making oneself "stand out in the crowd" is certainly an advantage. And what better way to be noticed than to make a sign?

Through the decades of parade attendance more and more signs have made their way into the crowds lining the routes. Some very clever, some not so well planned, and some that without a doubt push the boundaries of linguistic accuracy and politeness. And so, as a Carnival veteran of almost 40 years, I want to share with you some thoughts on Mardi Gras signs and what they mean to those of us who, from the vantage point of our floats, see them go by on the parade route.

THE PEN (OR PENCIL) MAY BE MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD...BUT, NOT BETTER THAN A MARKS-A-LOT......

What on earth would lead a parade fan to create a sign, obviously meant to be read by a float rider, that is written on dark poster board in pencil or thin pen ink. Nevertheless, there they are, block after block, held up in joyous revelry in the hope of enticing riders to see the name or slogan and throw to that individual. Of course, by the time the riders attempt to discern any writing on those placards in the dim light cast upon the crowd, the float has passed and we simply wonder who the heck that was and what did they wish to tell us?

Let's, therefore, agree that Mardi Gras signs should be short, sweet, to the point, and written on white poster board in thick, black marks-a-lot. In other words, "You can't get throws today if no one can read what you want to say"!

IT'S MY BIRTHDAY......

Hardly a block goes by in any parade route that does not contain a host of signs that read, "Throw Me Something.....It's My Birthday". Now, it is an obvious reaction to want to bring a little joy to anyone on their birthday, but I have done a bit of research into birthdays and found that, in the entire New Orleans area, about 1000 people have their birthday on any given day of the year. Certainly many of those folks have other things planned to celebrate their special day, many more would not think to bring a sign to a parade to advertise their birthday, and a good many more are not particularly parade goers. And so, judging from the proliferation of "Birthday" signs that we see at every parade, it is a good bet that many of those are trumped up for the sake of raking in throws. It is, nevertheless, a clever way to get noticed in a crowd. However, after about the 50th "Birthday" sign in the first several blocks of the parade route, we get suspicious.
JOHN.....LARRY.....MARK.....

Now, I see plenty of signs that bear the first and last name of a rider, and perhaps even the float number. It is a good bet that those folks know someone in the parade. However, when I see signs that simply bear common first names I wonder if they are not there just to entice riders with those well used monikers into throwing on the chance that they could be that "John" that the sign beckons. I guess we will never know one way or the other.

MARDI GRAS VIRGIN......

If I had a nickel for every sign that I have seen over the years that read, "Mardi Gras Virgin" or "My First Mardi Gras", I would certainly be a wealthy man. Now, I am a trusting kind of guy....and would like to believe that all of those "neophytes" who bear the signs in question are really "nubies" to the parade route. Again, however, when one sees a sign like that in the hands of someone wearing a T-shirt that says, "I survived Mardi Gras 2000, 2006, 2013...and all the rest", it can cast a bit of doubt on the pristine nature of that claim.....especially when you see that person "stomp" on a doubloon like a Carnival veteran from the 1960s! I wonder also how a "newcomer" to Carnival parades would know to bring a sign at all?

I HATE "FILL IN THE BLANK"......

This type of sign is especially abundant at the larger parades that, for some reason, many in the crowd feel are in competition with one another. It is not unusual to see an "I Hate Bacchus" sign (or something a bit more profane) at the Endymion Parade to entice members to reward such loyalty to their Canal Street procession. It does not take too much grey matter, however, to realize that, on the back of that sign, are probably the words, "I Hate Endymion", to be used the next night on St. Charles Avenue! I happen to ride in one of those "Super Krewes" and make it a point not to throw to anyone with a negatively worded sign.....and I hope that my fellow riders follow suit. We are all part of the Carnival Community and should support each other and the uniqueness of our parades. In other words, "I hate signs that say....I hate"!

POTPOURRI.....

That pretty much leaves the rest to the resourceful, the odd, and the outlandish. Bullseyes on sticks are always seen.....with the centers cut out to make a target for bead throwers. Also oft seen are the signs in the very back of the crowd that read, "only real men/women can throw this far". Many a sore elbow follows an evening of trying to appease those parade goers. "Doubloons Please" has been around, it seems, forever..... "Stuffed Animal Please" is a sign that has grown popular over the past decade.....and the ever present, "Beads for the Baby" is a staple at most parades. In the "outlandish" category is the jerk with the laser pen that flashes it in your face to tell you he is there and that you should throw him something. You can always recognize him as the guy with no beads when the parade has passed. And, of course, there is the fellow blowing that annoying trumpet to get attention. Attention he certainly gets......throws are another story.
In any case, the signs and the silliness will go on next year, and for many years after that. I suppose that this varied and novel way of getting noticed in the crowd can just be chalked up to "A Sign of the Times".