

# Incredible string bands: The Philadelphia Mummers' Parade and the politics of local identity

Holly Tessler

Institute of Popular Music, University of Liverpool, UK

## Introduction

Across America, there are a number of annual parades that have become national traditions: the Tournament of Roses parade in Pasadena, California; the Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City; the St. Patrick's Day parades in Chicago and Boston. But in the city of Philadelphia, the New Year's Day Mummers' parade, despite its title of being the country's 'oldest folk parade' (Fischer, 2000), has yet to garner the same kind of country-wide attention, public affection and media coverage. In part, this national ambivalence may be attributable to the steadfastly localised traditions and practices adhered to by both the parade's participants and its observers. Indeed, to someone who is not a native Philadelphian, the Mummers' parade must undoubtedly seem a Technicolor incongruity. In an event that spans 12 hours, with both indoor and outdoor components, over 10,000 mummers, comprising a membership that is almost exclusively white, working class and predominantly male, don elaborate makeup and glimmering costumes bejewelled with sequins, rhinestones and feathers and march along Philadelphia's Broad Street to City Hall, without a hint of camp or drag. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of spectators brave the typically biting winter weather to line the roughly 2¼-mile parade route variously cheering on the participants and launching into their own, impromptu sidewalk performances of the festive 'Mummers' Strut' dance.

More than just a one-day event however, preparations for the Mummers' New Year's Day parade are a year-round endeavour – a part of everyday life, bound up with contested notions of local identity, politics and economy. Both historically and more contemporaneously, the mummers have been at the centre of ongoing local discourses concerning race, gender, ethnicity and class. So while the mummers represent to some Philadelphians the quintessential local experience, a celebratory, definitional and emblematic part of the vernacular not unlike the Rocky statue at the Art Museum, the ubiquitous cheesesteak sandwich or the Liberty Bell, to others they symbolise an outmoded, inequitable and implicitly insular tradition that lionises some cultures whilst minimising, or indeed, disparaging others.

It is the intersections between these varying perceptions I wish to examine in this chapter. Even the earliest mummers' celebrations betrayed a self-evident bifurcation in class and race, instantiating a cultural and geographical segregation between the wealthy elites of Center City and the farmers and labourers in South Philadelphia – a division which to some degree still remains today. Linking the evolution of contemporary mummers' organisations and events to successive waves of 18<sup>th</sup>-, 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century immigration affords a means of understanding how varied and distinctive European customs and traditions melded into a new, inherently *American* tradition reflective of the independent spirit of the New World. This kind of historically informed appraisal of more modern, quotidian developments and practices in Philadelphia mummary allows me in turn to interrogate how some notions of local identity have formed through and in response to more general cultural, economic and political changes over time.

In particular, I will be seeking to make connections between the role of music and performance in the Mummers' parade and certain aspects of local identity. By looking at elements like mummers' club names, parade performance themes, costumes and especially the choice of music repertoire, a clear sense of mummers' community and affiliation emerges, bounded by, as Leighton (2009) notes, ongoing renegotiations of history and cultural meaning. Lastly, I will also discuss the role of mummers and the Mummers' parade as part of Philadelphia's local economy. In this section, I will show how issues of corporate sponsorship, local politics, the necessity of year-round performances and various other comparatively recent commercial endeavours have compelled the city and the mummers into an uneasy quasi-formal partnership, each reliant on the support of the other in order to derive economic benefit and cultural legitimisation from the parade's ongoing existence. I conclude the chapter by considering the further implications of some of the key ways in which musical performance(s) in the Philadelphia New Year's Day Mummers' Parade reflects and refracts local politics and identity.

## Origins and the organisation of the contemporary Mummers' parade

As will be argued in more detail later on, contemporary vernacular practices of mummery in Philadelphia have their origins in the blending of a variety of European holiday customs and traditions, transplanted to the New World during successive waves of immigration to America in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, like so many other seasonal festivals and celebrations, the earliest geneses of the contemporary Philadelphia Mummers' parade can be at least obliquely traced to the feasts and carnivals of ancient Greece and Rome (c.f. Castle, 1986). For instance, Momus, the Greek god of satire is traditionally depicted as wearing a mask over his face as he mocks the subjects of his ridicule. Beyond just the Philadelphia New Year's Day parade, thematic allusions to Momus as a mocking and masked figure can be found in a variety of modern-day carnivals, festivals and parades, history, including Rio de Janeiro's Carnival and New Orleans' Mardi Gras festivities. In relation to Philadelphia specifically, it seems likely that the oldest form of mummery in the city, the Comics, who utilise their place in the parade to raucously spoof current events issues or to mock politicians, is derived to some degree from this ancient practice.

Similarly, mummers' historians (c.f. [mummers.com](http://mummers.com), 2009; [phillymummers.com](http://phillymummers.com), 2009; Welch, 1966) indicate it is reasonable to suggest that a number of contemporary parade practices can also be linked to the Roman and Pagan feast of Saturnalia, a weeklong event held on 17 December to commemorate the dedication of the temple of the god Saturn. Elements of the ancient celebration included the wearing of brightly coloured clothing and costumes, public drinking and merriment, and, most interestingly a theatrical reversing of the social order, where slaves would be served by their masters. As will be addressed below, this inversion of the Roman social hierarchy is echoed in 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>- century Philadelphia mummers' celebrations where drunken rabbles of working-class celebrants would maraud through the streets of Center City, in neighbourhoods inhabited by the wealthy. Indeed, one of the Mummers' oldest Comics brigade is called Saturnalian, a clear allusion to the Roman festival.

Other ancient cultures including the Egyptians, Celts and Druids marked the winter solstice and/or the New Year with some kind of masked ritual designed to chase away demons and evil spirits. Many of these early traditions evolved and adapted into more familiar contemporary pan-European customs and celebrations of the Christmas season. In turn, as these peoples emigrated to America, subcultural specificities of more generalised mummers practices blended together to produce a unique vernacular form of Philadelphia mummery. It is generally understood that the Swedish immigrant population were the first people to bring European holiday celebrations to Philadelphia in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (c.f. Jennings, 1966). To mark the New Year, the Swedes would dress in costume – most frequently as clowns, 'shouting at the top of their voices and shooting guns' (Brandt, 1930: 26, in Welch, 1966: 524) in a ritual performance symbolising the killing off the old year and the welcoming of the new. Both of these elements – the clown costumes and the symbolic firing of guns continue in the parade today. In fact, one of the comic brigades in the parade is called Shooters for this reason.

Following on from the Swedes, masking, or mumming, drew other influences primarily from the English/Irish/Scottish and German peoples. A traditional English or Irish mummers' play as performed during the Philadelphia Christmas season would have a collective of working-class performers travelling door-to-door throughout Center City's middle- and upper-class neighbourhoods. As in their homelands, the impromptu recitals would often be a simplified morality play, with the male actors clad in any manner of home-made costumes and masks to play the parts of women, children, beasts and otherworldly demons. Traditionally, the home-owners would reward the performers with cake or ale for their efforts. German-Americans, somewhat differently, practised the art of 'belsnickling' during the holiday season. A predecessor to Father Christmas, a 'belsnickle' in the 17<sup>th</sup> and

18<sup>th</sup> centuries was an adult in costume and mask, who would move from door to door asking neighbourhood children if they were naughty or nice, much like a modern Santa Claus figure does today. The German word for mask is 'mumme' – and it is likely in the blending of these Swedish, British and German traditions that contemporary vernacular mummers' celebrations began to evolve.

In the modern era, there are now four separate 'divisions' or varieties, of mummers in the New Year's Day parade each year: the Comics, the Fancies, the Fancy Brigades and the String Bands. The oldest and most traditional of these troupes, the Comics are most closely descended from the historical origins of mummary and lead off the parade each year. The Comics dress in costume and make-up as clowns or as 'wenches'<sup>1</sup> and still make overt, and sometimes also controversial, political commentary on such contemporary issues as local sports teams, politicians, gender, race and/or religious issues in the news at the time of the parade. Comics will typically don home-made clown or milkmaid outfits, with oversized wigs, hats and the traditional mummers' umbrella, or parasol.



Image of the Holy Rollers New Years Brigade, 2008

The second division in the modern parade is the Fancies. Marching usually to pre-recorded musical soundtracks of patriotic, popular, Vaudeville-era or Broadway show tunes the Fancies are so named because of their elaborate, feathered, sequined glittering backpieces. Often ten feet high or taller, and at times weighing up to 70 or 80 pounds, costumes in this division are crafted as 'frame suits' designed for an individual to either push or pull the display along the parade route. As Fancy costumes are exceedingly expensive to craft and susceptible to the winter weather elements, in recent decades various troupes allied to form the Fancy Brigade Division. Thus, in addition to the traditional march down Broad Street each New Year's Day, the Fancy Brigades will also perform elaborate choreographed musical numbers in an indoor performance after the outdoor portion of the parade concludes, in a climate-controlled venue that better protects and shows off the sparkling and ornate costumes.

The third and most popular division of the Philadelphia New Year's Day Mummers' Parade are the String bands. Wearing the same type of elaborate feathered and sequined backpieces as the Fancies, the string bands also perform live music and dance numbers organised around a general theme or idea. Reflecting their modern origins in the 1910s-1920s, the dominant instruments in string bands are banjos, accordions and saxophones, which all were popular musical instruments of the era. Unlike other types of marching bands, string bands do not have a



brass section or a full woodwind section. The banjos and saxophones are normally accompanied by just light percussion, glockenspiels, upright basses, violins or fiddles as well as occasional vocals. As will be discussed below, string bands' musical performances are built around 'themes', where costumes, choreography, mobile set pieces, props and repertoire are all based around an overall artistic concept. Performance titles and themes are designed to appeal to working-class sensibilities typically celebrating elements of everyday life including the police and fire services, the military, a national heritage or ethnic group, or a visually dynamic motif or pun. For instance, string band performance themes in the 2006 parade included 'Hillbilly Harmonies', 'Roman up Broad', 'Fiesta de España' and 'Bum's the Word'.

Performances are adjudicated by four marshals who wind their way through the string band while they play. A composite score is agreed by evaluating each band's performance using the following criteria: 40% music; 20% production value; 20% overall performance; and 20% costume. Significant cash prizes are awarded to bands that place 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>. While the exact prize amounts are undisclosed and vary year to year, the top three string band finishers in 2007 were estimated to have shared approximately \$395,000 (USD) in winnings (Leighton, 2009: 7).



Image of a member of a Fancy mummers club, 2005



Aqua String Band parade performance, 2007

This section of the chapter was intended to discuss the origins of the contemporary Philadelphia New Year's Mummers' Day parade. Framing the parade in this kind of historical context allowed me to explore how ancient and more recent celebrations of feasts, festivals and holidays evolved and adapted as successive groups of immigrants arrived to the New World and Philadelphia. This commingling of various European holiday traditions and customs gradually established itself as a distinctly vernacular practice, speaking to social and cultural issues prominent in 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. By looking at the organisation of the modern-day mummers' parade, I also demonstrated how 21<sup>st</sup> century mummery still displays traces of its forbearers. Moving on from this foundational discussion, I next turn to how issues of class, race and ethnicity began to become implicated with the parade and also with notions of local identity.

## Class, race and ethnicity

When considering the relationship between the Philadelphia New Years' Day Mummers' parade and notions of local identity, it is necessary to begin with a general overview of the role of class distinction and differentiation. While this paper provides no space for more fulsome discussion of the wider issue of the role of socio-economic status and class in early America, in regards to the parade and Philadelphia more particularly, it must be acknowledged that when emigrants arrived to the New World in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, rather than find a truly egalitarian society, many groups encountered the same kinds of European prejudices, biases and hardships prevalent in their native countries<sup>2</sup>. Particularly as winter descended each year, and the rivers froze and the fields lay fallow, for the emergent working classes, holiday cheer was often mixed with fears of economic hardship. Thus, as Davis (1982) writes, by the 1830s the practice of mumming in Philadelphia began to evolve into a far more contentious affair. Comparatively banal seasonal traditions like mumming and belsnickling gave way to marauding bands of drunken young men, using their free time and the holiday season as convenient excuses for public displays of aggression and dissatisfaction with the class divisions rife in the city. Specifically, Davis (1982) observed that the comparatively compact and grid-plan centre of Philadelphia created distinct social separation between the classes but in such a way that the working and upper classes were still in relatively close geographical proximity to each other. Accordingly, she noted that life in mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Philadelphia was dotted with an interpenetration of work and leisure, an 'incomplete spatial segregation of peoples and activities, and a blending of the informal and the emergent commercial' (Davis, 1982: 186).

By this point in history, mummers were now quasi-formal, seasonal troupes of young white males, dressed in costume and often also in blackface, who would march from their modest homes in South Philadelphia towards Center City's main thoroughfares, banging pots and pans ostensibly in protest of the economic and political chasms keeping the rich and poor so definitively divided. But there was likely also the secondary motivation of simply disrupting the tranquillity of the middle-classes' Christmas festivities. Indignation from the well-heeled was evident. They pressured local politicians and law-makers who eventually outlawed these public displays of rowdiness and drunkenness in the 1850s. Yet marchers flagrantly defied the intent of the law by complying with it in name only. For instance, these early mummers formed troupes of 'callithumpians' and 'fantasticals'<sup>3</sup>. Filled with political outrage, these groups became more organised, as well as more cynical and biting in their performances, with costumes that now ridiculed local political figureheads of the day. In mock-military fashion, these brigades were seen to be complying with the new laws by 'marching' and not simply roaming the Center City streets. They bypassed the anti-noise regulations by 'playing' any number of 'pretend' or homemade instruments and not simply disturbing the peace. This was done not in the spirit of compromise but instead in a burlesque of the formal military marches and tattoos held by the elite in nearby places like Valley Forge and Fort Easton in early January. Parodying traditional Christmas mummers' plays these early mummers adapted stories like St. George and the Dragon, to become new American characters like George Washington and 'Cooney Cracker'<sup>4</sup> (www.fralinger.org 2009), where the self-evident moral of the tale was the triumph of the common soldier, labourer and farm worker.

In this way, the practice of mumming galvanised 19<sup>th</sup>-century Philadelphians into either identifying with the working classes, the callithumpians, or the wealthy and elitist ruling classes. As Leighton (2009: 111) notes, in post-Civil War Philadelphia, the mummers and the eventual arrival of a formal mummers' parade established for the working classes, 'space and a symbolic stake' in the city's economic and cultural development. More significantly still, following the Civil War the demographic change in population shifted discourses of class to discourses of race, another key element in the relationship between mumming and local Philadelphia identity.



Leighton (2009) makes the interesting observation that even through the 1920s and 1930s, beyond just differentiations in social status, class divisions between ethnic groups were so entrenched in American culture, Irish, Italian, Polish and Jewish immigrants were considered apart and subservient to earlier immigrant populations like the English, German and Scandinavian, to the point of being formally classed as 'non-white' by the US Census Bureau. Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that members of these perceived 'lesser' classes of white immigrants in turn sought to subjugate other peoples and races, chiefly the Native American, Chinese and African-American. Welch cites a local newspaper story describing the 1876 mummers' parade:

On New Year's Day the weather was as uncomfortable as usual lately, but it seemed to have little or no effect on the spirits of our citizens ... The Fantasticals or "Shooters" were out in force during the whole day, and caused much boisterous amusement. Indians and squaws, princes and princesses, clowns, columbines and harlequins, negroes of the minstrel- hall type, Chinese and burlesque Dutchmen, bears, apes, and other animals promenaded the streets to the music of calithumpian cow-bells, or the more dignified brass bands, and kept up their racket until late at night. Independence Hall was the grand objective point for them all, and the old building received many a cheer, both burlesque and serious. In the middle of the day several of these parties united in one grand parade and made a striking display (Welch, 1966: 528).

Using these kinds of performance techniques, it becomes clear that 19<sup>th</sup>-century mummers in Philadelphia were seeking to achieve two correlated aims: first, to affirm their 'whiteness' by dressing up and mocking other, non-white cultures; and second, to legitimate, solidify and politically empower their own ethnic minority communities by emphasising their 'sameness' to other white populations in the city (Leighton, 2009; Roediger, 1991).

There is perhaps no more contested strand of race and identity politics as it relates to the Philadelphia mummers' parade than that of its history with African-Americans. A Black musician and composer, James Bland, published in 1879 what was eventually to become the song most iconically associated with the Philadelphia mummers: 'Oh Dem Golden Slippers'. Bland initially composed the song as a parody of more traditional Black gospel spiritual to be performed in travelling minstrel shows throughout America and Europe. Minstrelsy and blackface, a widely accepted form of popular entertainment in the late 1800s and early 1920s, remained a staple of Philadelphia mummers' parade performances through the 1960s, when in 1963 the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) petitioned the Common Pleas Court of Philadelphia to ban the use of blackface in the New Year's Day parade (Welch, 1966: 534). The Court agreed, but in name only. The decision it reached was for the use of blackface in the Mummers' parade to be banned only if used to 'ridicule any ethnic group', but otherwise permitted it in the creation and development of a character performance (Welch, 1966: 533-534).

During a period in American history when Civil Rights were at the fore of national discourse, this decision polarised both black and white Philadelphians. White mummers loudly and publicly opposed the court's ruling, claiming blackface was a part of free speech as well as part of the tradition of mummery in the city. At the same time, black residents believed the tepid language of the court's decision all but implicitly endorsed what many felt was an overtly racist and denigrating practice. The issue came to a climax during the 1964 parade. Members of various Black communities in the city threatened to block the parade route with a sit-in protest; some militant factions even threatened assassination of any mummer in blackface (Welch, 1966). In response, mummers marched silently through black neighbourhoods but on emerging into areas of the parade route dominated by white residents, donned blackface makeup and one club, the Hammond Comics, staged their own, mocking sit-down protest shouting racially charged taunts aimed at local leaders of the NAACP (Welch, 1966). Despite these antagonisms and tensions, there were no acts of physical violence from either the African-Americans or the mummers. From this point forward, the controversy surrounding blackface substantively all but vanished from modern dialogue about the parade.

But that is not to say the contemporary mummers' parades have been free from racial controversy. As Whitlow (2004) documented, in 2004, the Froggy Comic club marched up Broad Street to a theme of 'Jamaican Me Crazy' where members donned Jamaican headwear, dreadlock wigs, blackface makeup<sup>5</sup> and carried props including signs reading, 'My baby's daddy'. More generally, Leighton (2009) argues that while blackface has been outlawed, other racially implicated make-up colours like red and yellow still persist, as do performance themes centring around Native-American and Chinese cultures, amongst others. She also makes a convincing argument that it is not so much in the documentation of race and racial incidents in the parade that makes for fruitful discussion but more in the analysis of the construction and performance of identity and history that is more significant.

Leighton (2009) makes two insightful observations relevant to the research presented here. First, she argues that until the 1960s, minstrelsy and blackface performances actually served as much of a similar, legitimating fun-

ction for African-Americans as they did for white ethnic minority groups. For black minstrels performing in whiteface, mocking their own culture to white audiences could be understood as a necessary first step in becoming more integrated into post-slavery American society and culture (c.f. Hullfish, 1987). More substantially, Leighton (2009) argues black minstrelsy also allowed African-Americans to control and influence white perceptions of Black culture and experience, thus helping to minimise or delimit which aspects were mimicked or mocked.

At the same time, Leighton (2009) argues that over the past century many mummers organisations in Philadelphia have adopted a practice she terms, 'strategic invisibility' in addressing the origins and history of racism in the parade and in mummery more generally. The result has been the ongoing renegotiation of a history of the mummers in the city that is bounded on one side by a staunch adherence and loyalty to parade and performance 'traditions' including the use of blackface and on the other by a more contemporary call for inclusion and equality, citing historical examples of African-American participation in the parade's past<sup>6</sup>. Yet as Leighton (2009) states these defences of inclusion often conceal cultural, political and economic barriers to entry for parade newcomers, which, in effect, have kept the parade all but exclusively white for nearly 75 years.

Closely allied to but still distinct from issues of class and race is the consideration of ethnicity in relation to mumming in Philadelphia. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century forward, city government sought increasing control over the Mummers' New Year's Day celebrations. Welch (1966) indicates in the mid- to late-1880s local politicians sought to litigate the mummers' festivities out of existence or at minimum to restrain their most rowdy behaviours. What ensued over the next several decades was a kind of legal cat-and-mouse practice of lawmakers passing ordinances designed to curb mummer activities like the firing of guns in city streets and public displays of drunkenness and mummers finding ever more creative ways of bypassing the intent and spirit of these laws. The result was an 1890 resolution requiring all 145 mummers' clubs to obtain a permit to participate in the New Year's Day parade. Leighton (2009: 114) states the city's rationale for these permits was to compel the mummers to, 'spend money to celebrate' in the hopes the increased financial and civic controls would effect more understated and elegant celebrating.

Welch (1966) and Leighton (2009) each note that to some degree these hopes were achieved. Mummers in this era began to design elegant and elaborate costumes weeks and months ahead of the New Year. Initially, these mummers' outfits, typically of a regal motif, were intended to poke fun at the city's elite – to hold up a burlesque mirror-image of the ruling classes to themselves. Further, although the expense of obtaining a parade permit was nominal, mummers now demanded of the city a return on their investment: they had paid for the privilege of parading, and they expected to be accorded the respect of tax-paying, law-abiding citizens. From this somewhat implicitly antagonistic beginning, the mummers' parades of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century became more and more accepted by the city, the newspapers and the upper classes but critically also by the merchants along the parade route, who would welcome several thousand hungry and thirsty paraders into their restaurants and pubs after the New Year's Day march was over. Further, as the mummers' costumes became more and more elaborate, area textile merchants and retailers began to offer cash prizes to the clubs with the most elaborate outfits. This was in part a subtle incentive for the mummers to keep to their celebrations more moderate and genteel, but also to entice the clubs into purchasing materials for their costumes and musical performances in neighbourhood shops.

Thus, by the inter-war period, the New Year's Day Mummers' parade had become an accepted part of local culture and an increasingly valuable commercial and promotional event for the city. For their part, ethnic groups like the Italians, Poles and Irish had become more integrated into the fabric of the city, transitioning from employment as farm-labourers and servants into jobs in the police and fire services, as shipyard workers and small business owners. Where in the previous century ethnicity was considered to mark an individual as a member of a lower caste, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at least for white ethnic groups, their heritage became a point of pride – a mark of success and achievement. The names of mummers clubs in this era reflect pride in ethnic identity and ethnic neighbourhoods, indicated by string bands like: Ukrainian-American, Polish-American, Ferko, Greater Overbrook and Greater Kensington.

In terms of identity, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, mummers were struggling between two worlds: the raucous, proudly working-class heritage and their newer, gentler, increasingly middle-class status. Compounding this issue was the so-called 'white flight' in major American cities during the 1950s and 1960s. With improvements to infrastructure and mass transit, area residents were able to purchase new homes and land in city suburbs like northeast Philadelphia, the Main Line and southern New Jersey and stay within easy commuting distance of their jobs in the city. What were once clearly delineated and demarcated geographical and cultural urban spaces were now disappearing. Today, many participants must 'commute' to rehearsals during the year and of course for the New Year's parade itself as most mummers' organisations still maintain clubhouses in South Philadelphia despite having increasing numbers of members living elsewhere in the region. Leighton (2009) suggests mum-

mers' loyalty to South Philadelphia and their working-class roots are in part an attempt to maintain spatial and cultural hegemony in the city – to not cede their neighbourhoods or social status to newer immigrant groups. One such example is the 'Two Street Parade' a second, 'private' New Year's Day Parade following the official parade in Center City. 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, known colloquially as 'Two Street' is in the heart of South Philadelphia, the nominal and spiritual centre of modern-day mummers. One participant has remarked, 'This is our celebration, where we can actually let loose and embrace our community' (in Leighton, 2009: 137).

However, modern-day mummers struggle to maintain their status in the city's evolving cultural economy as Philadelphia's changing economic and demographic profiles are proving a real threat to the mummers' and the parade's existence. As will be addressed in the final section of the chapter, below, the cost of funding the parade for both the mummers and the city are nearing the point of impracticality. At the same time, new waves of immigration, chiefly from Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, Central and South America, coupled with a city population that is over 50% Black have caused interest in and awareness of the mummers to dwindle. In this regard, mummers in Philadelphia are struggling to maintain a sense of ethnicity and identity as defined through the parade. Simultaneously, the mummers are finding it increasingly necessary to implement new and 'user-friendly' means of mitigating the parade's chequered past and promote the mummers as a family-friendly and welcome local tradition.

The intention of this section has been to explore the intersections of class, race and ethnicity in study of the Philadelphia New Year's Day Mummers Parade. By evaluating historical and contemporary practices and issues surrounding the parade I have been able to assess how aspects of local Philadelphia identity have formed through the parade itself and more generally through the role the mummers have played in the ongoing cultural and economic development city. It should be noted that while there is no space to address it here, gender also plays a critical role in the formation and performance of local identity (see Leighton, 2009). Next, I turn to appraisal of the musical performance and repertoire of mummers, specifically that of string bands, to see how they are contributory to further understanding of local identity.

## Music and Mummers

No discussion of mummers in Philadelphia would be complete without some particular consideration of string bands, the sub-grouping of mummers who perform music whilst marching in the New Year's parade. As mentioned above, 'string' bands are essentially troupes of costumed banjo, saxophone and accordion players accented by various supporting musicians on instruments like guitar, clarinet, upright bass and percussion. Mummers are nearly exclusively amateur musicians, if not also self-taught. Contemporary string bands gained prominence and regard in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the practice of arranging popular tunes of the era for the unique instrumentation of the mummers' brigades began. Songs successful in the 1920s and 1930s, including 'In A Shanty in An Old Shanty Town', 'I'm Looking Over a Four Leaf Clover', 'Happy Days Are Here Again', 'Pennsylvania Polka', and 'Alabama Jubilee' which first appeared in the mummer canon nearly a century ago are still being performed by string bands today, along with Broadway show tunes, contemporary rock and popular music, and occasionally adaptations of classical and/or religious music. Any music that is easily recognisable to parade observers, and ideally, music that encourages audience participation is generally the most well-received.

String band repertoire for each New Year's performance is constructed around a set performance theme, devised and planned by leaders of each string band up to 11 months in advance of the parade itself. Costumes, music, dance routines, mobile stage sets and props are devised to fit the given motif. Musical selections are either overtly related to the themed performance, or chosen as a kind of musical 'pun'. For instance, in 2008 the Fralinger string band performed a theme titled, 'Grab Your Partner, Swing Them Round' in homage to the American West. Dressed in sequined, feathered 'Wild West' outfits of cowboys and Old West Pioneers, the mummers performed a medley of songs including: theme tune from the television show 'Bonanza', the 19<sup>th</sup> century American folk song 'Oh Susannah!', Aaron Copland's 'Rodeo', 'Red River Valley' and 'Deep In the Heart of Texas'. Each four-minute routine typically includes musical performances, choreographed dance numbers, changes of costume and sets, as well as other displays of showmanship.

Although mummers performing in the string band division share a common lineage with the other types of mummers, it should be noted that at least in the modern era of the last three or so decades, the string bands have sought to distance themselves both aesthetically and politically from the more contentious elements of mummery in the city. While string band performances involve the same kind of ethnic and cultural influences as Comics and Fancies, the spirit behind string band routines is more celebratory and fantastic, without the same kind of parodic or mocking intent. Typically the last group of mummers to march in the New Year's parade, the string



bands will often perform under powerful street lighting, brought in specifically for the parade. Accordingly, string band routines are often organised to make the most powerful visual and aural impact, with brightly coloured and sparkling outfits designed to catch the light and to dazzle weary parade-goers. Further, themes are designed to appeal to the sensibilities of Philadelphia's blue-collar and working-class peoples, constructed around ideas, professions and events familiar to this core audience. Police and fire departments are often honoured, as are the military. Similarly, themes representing, for instance, the faraway places of South America or the Far East are intended to cheer the Philadelphia residents enduring the cold and dreary winter.

Thus, it is not from the string bands' musical performances that aspects of local identity are derived, but rather in how the string bands themselves serve as a kind of bridging mechanism between the more contentious elements of mummers and the city of Philadelphia. That is to say where mummers divisions like the Comics historically derived both aspects of cultural and ethnic local identity through affiliation with particular neighbourhoods; string bands to some degree have a broader, more inclusive appeal. Similarly, where Comics brigades seek to make controversial political statements in their performances, string bands, by contrast, are more celebratory. While both groups share an interpretation of various cultures and ethnicities in their routines, string bands imply a sense of earnestness and inclusiveness in their music. Not only do string bands seek to draw in parade audiences through participatory means like sing-a-longs, dancing and call-and-response chants, but also through an active recruitment of new musicians extending beyond their immediate geographic and cultural proximity. This kind of 'ambassadorship' role of string bands has become even more critical to the uneasy relationship of the mummers and the city of Philadelphia, as the local and national economies have taken a downward turn and as changing local demographics have placed increasing pressure on local government to withdraw support of the parade. The final section of the paper explores this idea in more detail.

## Mummers and Philadelphia's local creative economy

As discussed above, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century forward, the city of Philadelphia has been both politically and economically involved with the New Year's Day Mummers' parade. The city government controls such issues as the parade route itself, police and fire presence for the parade as well as cleanup and maintenance after the event's end. Additionally, until quite recently, the city still offered a legacy of cash prizes to winning mummers' clubs in each division – the Comics, Fancies, Fancy Brigades and the String Bands. In exchange, the city reaps direct and indirect cultural and economic profit derived from the thousands of fans who come to Philadelphia each New Year's Day for the event. More, cultural and heritage organisations in the city have recently begun promoting the mummers' parade as the nation's oldest folk tradition, perhaps seeking to establish the mummers as a more legitimate part of local arts and culture, whilst simultaneously attempting to mitigate the more controversial aspects of their history. In support of this idea, in 1976, the city and the mummers cooperatively built and continue to operate the Philadelphia Mummers Museum, located in South Philadelphia along 'Two Street'.

For their part, with the city's endorsement and permission, the mummers continue to maintain pride of place in local New Year's Day celebrations. Beyond prize monies awarded by the city, the mummers also earn income from television coverage of the parade. Occasionally, the feed from the local television station will be carried by national cable television stations, thereby generating additional income. Commentary for the parade is done by people from within the mummers' organisations, who use the twelve-hour long broadcast to promote and celebrate the history and tradition of the mummers, with little mention of its historic controversies. Beyond the New Year's Day parade, mummers, in particular string bands, will make year-round appearances at festivities throughout the region: baseball games, grand openings, conventions and fairs. Self-classifying as not-for-profit social clubs, the mummers regularly perform at charity events benefitting organisations like the United Way, the Lions Clubs of America and also seek out donations from individuals and companies in a growing grass roots campaign to 'Save The Mummers' as opposition to the duration, expense and racial legacy of the parade from various city groups gains momentum.

In this way, the mummers are in a significant transitional period, affecting interrelated notions of both local identity and commerce. On one hand, the mummers face an internal struggle to remain 'true' to their historic origins. And on the other, they are increasingly faced with the need to minimise their more contentious and working-class roots in order to sustain both financial profit and broader commercial appeal. Compounding this already conflictual state is the point that not all mummers' organisations are prospering equally. The Fancies and the Fancy Brigades, for instance, earn substantial profit from the indoor portion of the New Year's parade, in which only they and not the Comics or String Bands perform. While tickets are normally free to the public, the

Fancies earn royalties from television coverage as well as through merchandise profits derived from sales at the indoor performance. Yet for the local tradition of mummary to sustain and survive into the future, there is an unshakable, inherent understanding that all mummers' organisations share a common origin, which is a constant source of cultural and historical renegotiation as contemporary contexts continue to shift.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to consider the contested and often conflictual notions of local identity as influenced by the practices of mummers' organisations and clubs in the American city of Philadelphia. A substantially under-studied phenomenon, there are few scholarly works on the subject, leaving much of mummer history and contemporary developments still to be explored. Nevertheless, here my intention has been to position the mummers, specifically their New Year's Day parade, in a context which raises questions about the role of class, race and ethnicity in the formation of local identity/identities. By looking at the historical origins of mumming in Philadelphia, I was able to demonstrate how over time the commingling of a variety of pan-European holiday and celebratory customs melded into one distinctly vernacular practice defined and delineated by both class and ethnicity. I showed how mummary served as a galvanising force, empowering the working classes with a means and a voice to express their discontent with a government and a social order that in practical terms provided little more freedom and independence than the Old World countries they left behind. From these early and noble origins, however, it is undeniable that 19<sup>th</sup> century Philadelphia mummary devolved into something altogether less worthy, regularly intimidating and subjugating other ethnicities and races as well as the ruling and higher classes.

At the centre of these developments has been the role of music in local mummary. The instrumentation and arrangement of songs, performance techniques as well as repertoire selection have all contributed to both how the 'outside world' views the mummers and how mummers have come to view themselves. As city population demographics shift, the mummers have today arrived at a crossroads, both in economic and identity terms. If they are to survive, mummers' clubs must reconcile and attempt to mitigate implications of a racist (and misogynist) past to suit more contemporary cultural and aesthetic sensibilities. In so doing however, they are at risk of moving irretrievably away from an ethnic and cultural vernacular legacy as old as America itself. To cede wholly the negative aspects of mummers' history is in effect to diminish experience of ethnic groups in the city, in particular the Irish, Polish, Italian communities.

An outcome and resolution to this conflict is still to be determined. Leighton (2009: 142) calls this transitional period a time of 'restored behaviour' where, 'the members of the Mummers community unconsciously use previous performances, both aesthetic and everyday, as the basis upon which to behave in the present moment. In doing so, the Mummers restore historical acts over and over through time. This repetition creates a system of knowledge and understanding ... [where] the Mummers use historical repetition to make sense of their community contemporarily'. Thus, in a volume that considers the impact of music in everyday life, this study has aimed to generate new understanding of the role of music-making in the formation and evolving notion of local identity within the unique and contested historical context of the Philadelphia mummers. Future studies could include the role of mummers and the mummers' parade in studies concerning areas like tourism, festivals, dance and performing arts and historiography. Whatever the wider frame of study however, it is undeniable that the mummers are a unique element of Philadelphia's local history and culture.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> 'Wenches' in the parade are men costumed as female clowns. One website dedicated exclusively to the parade's 'Wench brigades' posts a flyer describing a mummers wench as, '...the most traditional, outrageous and politically incorrect of all Mummers. Basically, it's a guy in a dress. The hairier the legs, the longer the braids, the colder the beer, the better. About 1,000 men and boys – never a female – will parade with Comic Division wench clubs such as the O'Malley Brigade, Riverfront, Bryson, and the infamous, humongous Froggy Carr NYA.' ([home.comcast.net/~wench/](http://home.comcast.net/~wench/), 2009).

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Holt, 2006 for a discussion of how the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Irish-American population of Appalachia came to personify the American 'hillbilly' stereotype created by the typically more wealthy and educated English immigrants who carried notions of anti-Irish bias with them to the New World.

<sup>3</sup> The name Callithumpians is derived from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century term 'callithump', a noisy and boisterous parade. As the Merriam-Webster dictionary also notes, callithumpian is etymologically derived from the 18<sup>th</sup>-century British term 'gallithumpian', or a person who disrupted the peace during elections ([www.m-w.com](http://www.m-w.com) 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Cooney Cracker was an 18-century American clown figure, often portrayed in blackface, and presumed by his stars-and-stripes costume to be a predecessor to the more familiar Uncle Sam character of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (c.f. McGee, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Whitlow (2004) indicates parade officials requested members of Froggy Carr to remove their blackface makeup before they reached the judging area of the parade route – a request that was only half-heartedly obliged.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, the Octavius V. Cato black string band in the 1920s and the Goodtimers black Comics club founded in the 1980s.

## References

- 'Anatomy of A Mummies: Yo! Wench!' <<http://home.comcast.net/~wench/>> (Accessed 4 September 2009).
- 'Fralinger String Band: The Ultimate in Mummies Entertainment'. <<http://www.fralinger.org/>> (Accessed 4 September 2009).
- 'Mummies.com - The Philadelphia Mummies Parade'. <<http://www.mummies.com/>> (Accessed 4 September 2009).
- 'Philly Mummies.com Home of the Philadelphia Mummies Parade'. <<http://www.phillymummies.com>> (Accessed 4 September 2009).
- Brandt, F. B. 'Local Affairs'. In *Evening Public Ledger (Philadelphia)*, 26, 20 November, 1930.
- Castle, T. *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1986.
- Davis, S. G. *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth Century Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986.
- Fischer, J. '2000 Philadelphia Mummies Parade'. <<http://philadelphia.about.com/library/weekly/aa010300.htm>> (Accessed 4 September 2009).
- Hullfish, W. R. 'James A. Bland: Pioneer Black Songwriter'. In *Black Music Research Journal*. 7, 1-33, 1987.
- Jennings, G. *Parades!* Philadelphia: Lippincott. 1966.
- Leighton, C. E. *Strutting it up through histories: A performance genealogy of the Philadelphia Mummies Parade*. Thesis (PhD). Louisiana State University. 2009.
- Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 'Callithump'. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/callithumpian>> (Accessed 7 September 2009).
- Roediger, D. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Welch, C. E., Jr. '“Oh Dem Golden Slippers”: The Philadelphia Mummies Parade'. In *The Journal of American Folklore*. 79: 314 (Oct-Dec), 523-536, 1966.
- Whitlow, A. *The Racial Politics of Urban Celebrations: A Comparative Study of Philadelphia's Mummies Parade and Odunde Festival*. Thesis (Master in City Planning). Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001.
- n.b. Photos reproduced under the GNU Free Documentation License. For further information see: <[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/GNU\\_Free\\_Documentation\\_License](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/GNU_Free_Documentation_License)>

### Please mention the bibliographic information when referring to this book:

*Sounds of the Underground: Selected papers from a postgraduate colloquium on ubiquitous music and music in everyday life*. Edited by Nedim Hassan and Holly Tessler. Turku, Finland: International Institute for Popular Culture, 2010. (Available as an e-Book at <http://iipc.utu.fi/publications.html>).