

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Big Shot and Big Stuff

People in the United States began using the term “Big Shot” for a celebrity or for an important or influential person around 1926–1927. Within a year it had blossomed into a popular slang term with examples springing up everywhere, even to describe the bosses of criminal gangs (such as Al Capone, the “Big Shot” of that era).

The creation of the appellation “Big Shot”, however, began centuries earlier. Beginning around 1400, newly developed firepower was divided into two types: *small guns* that could be carried by soldiers (such as muskets) and *big guns* or *great guns* (which were the heavy wheeled pieces like cannon). Around the 1830s in this country, “Big Gun” began to reference men whose power and influence metaphorically rivaled the power of big weapons. An Ohio newspaper in 1837 referred to the “big guns” of New York’s Tammany Hall, and the usage of “Big Gun” or “Big Shot” survived, especially for a pre-eminent person in some field, very often in sports.

Sometime in the 1920s, “Big Shot” began to be used for the sporting contest of boxing. One example, from a Texas newspaper in 1926: “The first ‘big shot’ — as the boys call ‘em — in Gene Tunney’s ring life was his battle with Georges Carpentier, the Frenchman.” Also that year, the *Appleton Post Crescent* described star pugilist Jack Dempsey as “a big shot in the knuckling industry”. The term’s move from sports to everyday life came soon after, and in the early 1930s it came to New Orleans.

In 1909, an organized club of laborers named “The Tramps”, attended a comedy skit about a Zulu king and his tribe at the Pythian Theater on the corner of Gravier and Saratoga streets. The skit was called “There Never Was and Never Will Be a King Like Me,” and it inspired them to put on a parade and organize the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club. Their first appearance as Zulus came that year, with William Story as King. His “lard can” crown and “banana stalk” scepter were impressive, and he was a “big deal” — but not the “Big Shot”.

The "Big Shot" of Africa was a position in the Zulu organization created by Zulu member Paul E. Johnson back in the early 1930s. According to the Zulu organization's history, "The 'Big Shot' outshines the King," a term "used in the earlier days which meant to look better than someone else in competition".

And no (although these impressive Zulus below display a powerful presence), neither one is the "Big Shot".



The "Big Shot" of 2012, as in past years, is the man behind the Zulu throne. His name is Terry Williams, and he is truly worthy of the title. Earlier he appeared on the streets of New Orleans dressed in a fine red suit and hat, and riding in the Batmobile! Terry explained to me the role of the "Big Shot": "No one gets to see the King without seeing the 'Big Shot' first."

"I know that your office is much older and created earlier, but what about Mr. Big Stuff?" I asked. "He has an important role in the Zulu organization, too, doesn't he?" "Yes," said Terry, "but he's more of a Ladies' Man." Michael Alexander is "Mr. Big Stuff" for 2012.

Terry also wields a beautifully crafted Crescent City Zulu version of the *iwisa*, also known as a *knobkierrrie*, a long wooden club used as a long-range weapon of Shaka Zulu (early 19th century Zulu warrior king) and other Zulu warriors. The *iwisa* ends with a thick orb-like knob on the top end. Sometimes, the knob or head is ornately carved with

faces or shapes that have symbolic meanings. Terry's has Zulu headquarters placed right on top of the moon, which rests on the end of his long staff. "Zulu Big Shot" is carved in red letters just below the lunar orb. When Terry was decked out all in red, his *iwisa* was also red. After all, it's the job of the "Big Shot" to dress flamboyantly and stand out from the rest, usually with a large cigar, glass doorknob for a diamond ring and derby hat.

Below is a photo of Terry Williams, "Zulu Big Shot" of 2012, with the author. Notice the details of his *iwisa*, as "Zulu Blasts to the Moon".



Before explaining the origins of "Mr. Big Stuff", a few more observations about the name "Big Shot" should be made.

It was also back in the 1930s that another "Big Shot" came to the New Orleans metropolitan area. In 1935, Maurice, Samuel and Irbin Paillet,

along with H. J. Wallick and D. S. Punekey, owned the Jefferson Bottling Co. They created a brand name and logo for their line of bottled soft drinks. This "Big Shot" persona wore a ruffled derby hat, starched collar and necktie, while puffing on an upwardly tilted cigar.

The derby hat is the American name for the British bowler, a hard felt hat with a rounded crown originally created in 1849 for the British soldier and politician Edward Coke, younger brother of the 2nd Earl of Leicester. It came to be part of the official work uniform of bankers, and was quite popular in the American West, favored by lawmen and outlaws alike (think Bat Masterson and Butch Cassidy). They must have all considered themselves "big shots" in those hats. A haughty derby-donning "Big Shot" character was an ideal counter-image for the local bottling company during the depression years.

The company was eventually taken over by numerous family members until the late 1980s when Robert Corey acquired "Big Shot". He personified the logo, going around town smoking a cigar while sporting a derby hat.

But in the early 1990s, National Beverage Corp. of Fort Lauderdale acquired the brand, which they view as a regional, multi-flavored soft drink line. "Big Shot" still offers such New Orleans favorite flavors as orange, pineapple, fruit punch, black cherry, strawberry and cream soda (most locals say red drink for the last two). "Big Shot" soft drinks are enjoyed by parade goers and float riders alike, even Zulu and his wonderful cast of characters.

The Zulu characters have been an integral part of the Zulu parade since its inception, beginning with the king (Elroy A. James in 2012). Besides the King, the "Big Shot" of Africa and Mr. Big Stuff, the other characters are the Ambassador, the Mayor, the Province Prince and the Governor. The Witch Doctor's role is to ask for safety, good health and pleasant weather on Carnival Day. "Mr. Big Stuff", to impress the ladies, dresses with style and class. His position was created in 1972 and named after a hit record by New Orleans soul singer Jean Knight:

"Mr. Big Stuff,
Who do you think you are?
Mr. Big Stuff,
You're never gonna get my love.

Now because you wear all those fancy clothes (oh yeah)□
And have a big fine car, oh yes you do now.□
Do you think I can afford to give you my love? (oh yeah)
You think you're higher than every star above.

"Mr. Big Stuff,

Who do you think you are?"

Jean Knight (born Jean Caliste, June 26, 1943, New Orleans, Louisiana) was discovered in early 1970 by songwriter Ralph Williams, who wanted her to record some of his compositions. Williams (along with Joseph Broussard and Carol Washington) composed "Mr. Big Stuff", and the late Wardell Quezergue (known among New Orleans musicians as the "Creole Beethoven") was the song's masterful producer.

When major recording labels initially rejected "Mr. Big Stuff", Stax Records of Memphis, Tennessee, eventually released the record in May, 1971. It became Stax's most successful hit (with sales currently over 3 million copies), outselling Sam & Dave, Otis Redding and other Stax artists. Spending five weeks at #1 on Billboard's Best Selling Soul Singles, "Mr. Big Stuff" peaked at #2 on Billboard's Hot 100 Singles chart.

"Mr. Big Stuff" and the "Zulu Big Shot" are both larger-than-life characters of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club. "Big Shot" Terry Williams sent out words of welcome in a special greeting for Mardi Gras 2012:

"Good people are good people and good people can ride with us anytime." A great message, indeed, with the theme of Zulu for 2012 being "From Zulu With Love".

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