

24/Seven

POT VS. PTSD 40 // AN HOUR WITH ... FAYROUZ SAAD 43 // REFUGE FOR REFUGEES 44

A Date With the Devil

Detroit's eccentric past and present make for a hell of a party at the Marche du Nain Rouge

BY JEFF WARANIAK //

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CYBELLE CODISH





Everyone hates the Nain Rouge. Everyone. The masqueraders tossing Mardi Gras beads off the roof of Traffic Jam & Snug. The costumed revelers hovering around the Nain's cockroach float. The unicyclists, the fire dancers, the marching bands, the sidewalk spectators — even the toddlers in their red devil-face paint — boo the Nain as he parades down the Cass Corridor.

Why?

Because the Nain is pure evil. He's the fiend who's been spotted at the scene of every Detroit disaster throughout history. He exists only to cause chaos and destruction and to see Detroit fail in its unceasing effort to rise from the ashes.

Even a toddler can say boo to that.

The Nain Rouge (French for "Red Dwarf") is a Detroit legend — one that dates back to the arrival of the city's founder, Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, in 1701. According to the tale, Cadillac caught a glimpse of the mythical Nain and chased him from the city, freeing its residents from his torment ... at least temporarily.

Thus, each year, on the Sunday after the vernal equinox, Detroiters drive the Nain from the city with a parade — the Marche du Nain Rouge — to commemorate Cadillac's courage and to celebrate our hopes for the city's future. This year the parade

takes place on March 20.

For 300-plus years, the legend was celebrated by Detroiters past, but today's parade is relatively new. The now annual event was first held in March 2010, when Detroit residents Francis Grunow and Joe Uhl co-founded the parade as a celebration of springtime, Detroit, and the Mardi Gras season.

"Our basic question was, 'Why doesn't Detroit have Mardi Gras and what could that look like here in Detroit?'" Grunow says. "Why can't we have a parade culture here that celebrates the authenticity of the city and the cultures of the city and the stories of the city?"

And so Detroit's version of the Mardi Gras masquerade was born, complete with a ceremonial banishment of the Nain on the steps of The Masonic Temple and, in recent years, an after-party at the venue's Fountain Ballroom.

In keeping with the event's theme, revelers are encouraged to disguise themselves from the Nain so as to remain anonymous. Traditional Mardi Gras costumes are involved, but the dress code is more "anything goes" — masquerade masks, witch hats, sombreros, French Jesuit priest robes ... It is a French thing, after all, but with Detroit style.

As such, hipsters sip from 40s wrapped in paper bags, puffs of marijuana linger on the sidewalk, and the Nain, as he's booed by the parade of Detroit citizens wielding signs of "Nain Be Gone!," growls back in a series of topical taunts:

THIS PAGE:

Fire is a natural addition to the Nain's entourage.

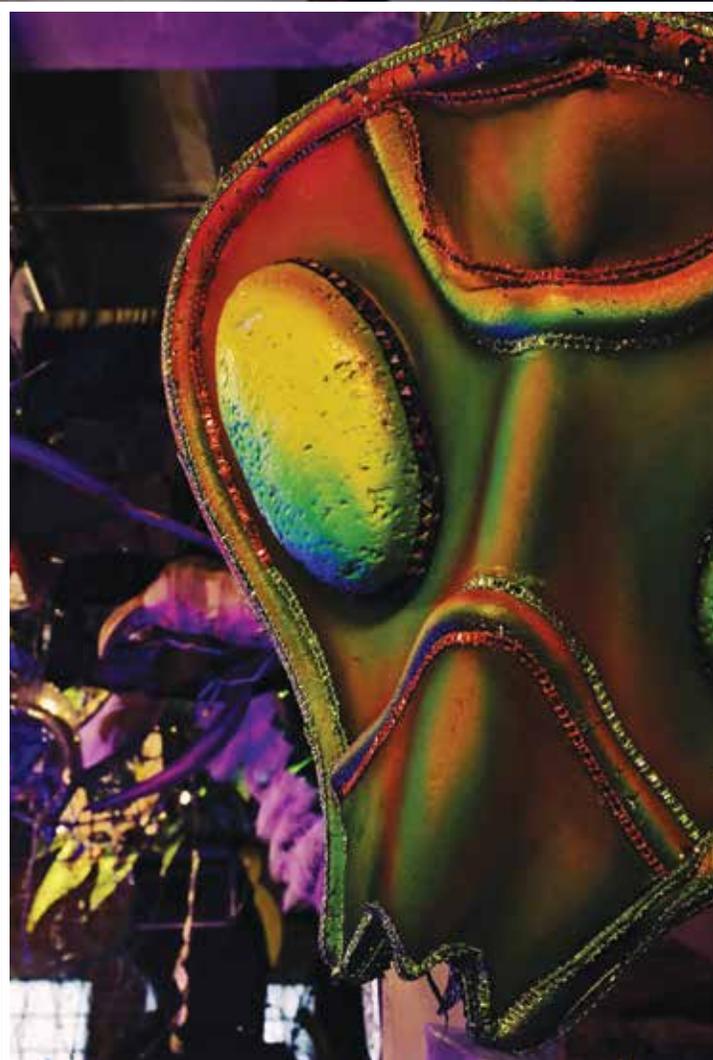
OPPOSITE PAGE:

Giant Mardi Gras-style costumes designed by Ralph Taylor can weigh over 20 pounds. Nain Rouge costumes run the gamut from the light and playful to the dark and menacing ... or whatever's left over from Halloween. The parade culminates in a ceremonial banishment of the Nain on the steps of the Masonic Temple.









"I can't decide what's more pathetic. Downtown or the neighborhoods."

"I'm betting against the Red Wings this year."

All of this spewed from the evil Nain atop his slow-moving cockroach, or fire-breathing dragon, or whatever float has been conjured up for that year's parade.

As the parade's attendance has climbed from a few hundred to around 5,000 in 2015, the floats, banners, costumes, and general artistry of the event have become increasingly ornate.

Designs for the event are the work of Ralph Taylor, a Trinidadian native who's been designing carnival-style parade floats, and costumes for over 40 years with his Detroit-based company, Caribbean Mardi Gras Productions.

This year, the nonprofit Marche du Nain Rouge pledged \$1,000 grants to seven Detroit neighborhoods to build floats or costumes and coordinated a neighborhood float competition with the city.

As the Marche du Nain Rouge expands, additional events, parties, and changes are in the works, but according to Grunow, the one thing that revelers can always count on is the unpredictability of the Nain himself.

"It'll be a surprise to see how the Nain Rouge comes out this year." h

For more information, go to marchedunainrouge.com.

THIS PAGE:

A member of The Nain's entourage clears the way as the Nain enters the parade on West Canfield Street.

OPPOSITE PAGE:

The Nain jeers at the crowd as paradegoers drive him down Second Avenue. "Two Detroit's are not enough" according to the Nain's parade banner. Longtime parade float and costume designer Ralph Taylor adds to one of his pieces.