

# **THE CITY COULD BURN DOWN WE JAMMIN' STILL!**

## **The history and tradition of cultural resistance in the art, music, masquerade and politics of the Caribbean Carnival**

**Michael La Rose**

Greetings from London and the Notting Hill Carnival!

For over 40 years in London. I have been a Caribbean Carnival spectator, mas' player, on the road DJ and sound system operator, Carnival administrator, mas' band leader and designer, author and a Carnival educational and cultural events promoter.

I have had the privilege of working and meeting exceptional people from the Caribbean Carnival movement and its diaspora. They are totally committed to the art we produce. From Mas and Steel pan, to Kaiso and Soca. They have pride, energy and relentless commitment to the aim of establishing Caribbean Carnival arts in its rightful place in the world. This also includes you attendees of this conference over the last two days.

I have also been lucky to be present at key moments in the history of the struggle for the Notting Hill Carnival in 1973, 1975, 1976, 1988 and 1989, 1991 and 1992. The Caribbean Carnival's art and culture is something people have fought and struggled for. That has been my experience and it is likely that this is a global experience looking at Caribbean Carnivals all over the world.

Before I start my presentation, I want to bring you good news and bad news.

First, the BAD news. The leadership of Notting Hill Carnival the London Notting Hill Carnival Enterprise Trust (LNHCET), is about to capitulate to pressure from the authorities in London to appoint "a professional" to run the Carnival. That appointed person is likely to have no Caribbean Carnival expertise or experience and will be imposed on the Carnival as the authorities will pay their wages. Those that pay the piper call the tune. Secondly LNHCET and the mas bands are about to allow the authorities to charge and collect £10 or, according to the Evening Standard newspaper, up to £50 to enter the Notting Hill Carnival. LNHCET hope that these same authorities who have been aggressively anti-Carnival for many, many years will give the Carnival some of the money they have collected. Incredible! My presentation today will look at how we got here and will record the real history of the struggle for the Notting Hill Carnival.

Now, the GOOD news. We are gathered here today to celebrate 50 years of Leeds Caribbean Carnival. Like London it has had to face tremendous opposition and interference and has survived for 50 years. It is the first outdoor Caribbean Carnival in Britain. But most importantly it has taken Caribbean Carnival festival Arts seriously by holding this fantastic 3-day international conference. Please show your appreciation for 50 years of Leeds Caribbean Carnival and the Leeds Beckett University partners in this fine venture.

This presentation will trace the radical tradition in the Caribbean Carnival and how that manifests itself in cultural resistance to powerful authorities to establish its existence. It will span the period from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century slave system in the Caribbean and the Americas, to the Metropolitan Police and Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea in London today. I will also touch on Caribbean Carnivals from Notting Hill and Leeds to Paris and Rotterdam. I will also be referring you to books, literature, film and visual art inspired by the Caribbean Carnival.

Because the Caribbean Carnival is a musical and visual art, at the end of this presentation I have put together a Powerpoint presentation with images of people and Caribbean Carnival festival art

mentioned in my presentation. I have adapted the term “**Caribbean Carnival festival art**” from the title of **John Nunley’s fantastic book “Carnival Festival Arts** “ which records the powerful art and festivals we produce in the Caribbean, all over the Americas (North, Central and South), Europe and parts of Asia such as Japan.

I want to frame this culture of resistance reflected in the music, masquerade, song and movements of struggle for the Caribbean Carnival.

## **AFRICA, EMANCIPATION, CANBOULAY AND MARDI GRAS**

The Caribbean Carnival culture recognisable today has developed over hundreds of years; initially, during the crucible of slavery, and the ferment of colonialism. This new exciting Carnival culture, calls mainly upon the religious, masquerade and music traditions of the mainly West African homeland from which Africans were brought against their will and forced into unpaid slave labour on the plantations of the Caribbean and the Americas. These New World Africans attempted to preserve and remake their African past through masquerade, music and song in the Americas, but these retentions were also mixed, merged and fused with the European and other traditions that have been forced together in their New World reality. Interestingly in Trinidad, the meeting of the great African cultures and East Indian cultures of the former slaves and indentured slaves have produced new and exciting fusions. These influences move between the Carnival and Hosay festivals.

Cultural resistance from those at the bottom of society, the rebellious urban poor, collectively called **Jamettes** in Trinidad (*Kweyol* – “the underclass” the other side of society or Diametre), was expressed in the masquerade of the new Caribbean Carnival. Many of the rich masquerade and musical traditions from West Africa can be clearly seen to be retained in the masquerade of the Caribbean Carnival. Examples are the Egungun masquerade of Nigeria, Dogon stilt masqueraders of Mali, the Djale masks of Ivory Coast, Gelede masquerade of southern Nigeria and Owi masquerade of Ikole Ekiti, Nigeria. The parallels with masquerade found all over the Caribbean is striking especially mas like Moko Jumbie stilt dancers, Pierrot Grenade (Trinidad) or Shaggy Bear (Barbados), Dame Lorraine (Trinidad) or Mother Sally (Barbados), Shortney (Grenada), Junkanoo mas of Bahamas and the Sensay mas (Dominica).

Let us look at the history of the struggle for Carnival in the Caribbean by using the example of the Trinidad Carnival.

The European **Mardi Gras Carnival** celebrations were brought to Trinidad by French Catholic plantation slave owners. When they abandoned their Mardi Gras Carnival straight after emancipation the ex-slaves immediately claimed this new creative festival space. The Mardi Gras festival had consisted of exclusive balls and private parties with the white masqueraders riding through the streets on top of moving floats. The planters also masqueraded as slaves or **Negue Jardin** and blackened their skin and mimicked and ridiculed the behaviour of a slave.

The descendants of Africans in Trinidad culturally drew on their West African rituals, music, song and masquerade traditions along with a syncretic Creole festival developed during slavery called **Canboulay** (*Kweyol* – “burning canes” *cannes brûlées*). This was a night procession with call and response singing, drumming, dancing, Kalenda stick fighters, and the carrying of lighted torches or flambo (*Kweyol* – “burning torches” *flambeaux*). The Canboulay Carnival took over and forever transformed the Mardi Gras carnival of the planters and laid the foundations for the Caribbean Carnival that exists today. The Caribbean Carnival was a symbolic commentary and celebration of survival, freedom and therefore victory over the slave system imposed by the white planter class. The development of this new Caribbean Carnival culture is examined in John Cowley’s book “**Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso; traditions in the making**” and in the brilliant “**Rituals of Power and Rebellion: The Carnival Tradition in Trinidad and Tobago , 1763-1962**” by Hollis “Chalkdust” Liverpool.

By the 1850s, Trinidad's now British colonial authorities attempted to ban and then to control the festival. There were constant plans by the British colonial authorities to interfere or stop the Canboulay Carnival. They also were preoccupied with keeping the African Canboulay Carnival from joining with the Indian Hosay festival with its Tassa drummers, parading Tadjah's and dancing half moons. By 1881, the opposition to the Carnival came to a head in Trinidad. Special paramilitary police were drafted in from England to crush the Carnival and take it off the streets of the capital Port-of-Spain. The Jamettes with their carnival bandleaders, drummers and warrior stick fighters unified and organised themselves in insurrectionary resistance to the plans to destroy their carnival. A raging battle exploded on the day of Carnival between the British police led by Captain Baker "Bekwey" and the Carnival bands' members and Kalenda stick fighters around Duke street. The Jamettes routed the colonial police during the "**Canboulay Riots**". After the defeat, the British governor called in the Carnival bandleaders and promised that no more attempts would be made to ban the Carnival if peace was restored and certain regulations on the Carnival were conceded. This included no stick fighters, no carrying of lighted torches (flambo) and finally, Canboulay should have a start time and finish time. They restricted the Canboulay element to the breaking darkness at the beginning of the Carnival. The Canboulay became **J'Ouvert** (*Kweyol* – pronounced "Jouvay" meaning "start of the day"). The J'Ouvert is still today the ritual opening event of the Carnival in Trinidad and other Caribbean Carnivals all over the world. The spirit of Canboulay resides in J'Ouvert.

This deal established Carnival in Trinidad forever. Today in Trinidad at Carnival time the streets of Port of Spain near the scene of the original Canboulay Riots there is an annual celebration, The **Canboulay re-enactment**. This is a dramatised re-enactment which takes place at 4 am to increasingly huge audiences commemorating the victory of the Jamette through song, drumming, drama and dance.

The Hosay organisers also defied threats from the colonial government not to bring the Hosay parade from their sugar estates into the towns South of the island. In 1884 British colonial troops shot and killed unarmed Hosay festival participants in San Fernando . The "Hosay riots" or "Jahaji Massacre" resulted in 9 dead and 100 wounded. Despite this murderous attack, the Hosay festival survived and still takes place in Trinidad today. In the St James district of Port of Spain the Hosay is carried out by Tassa drummers of African and Indian descent. A great account of this turbulent period of Trinidad's history is by **Anthony De Vertueil "40 Years of Revolt; Trinidad 1881 to 1888"**.

## **THE MAS**

Masquerade was used as a weapon of ridicule, satire, subversion and theatre in the Canboulay Carnival. The carnival incorporated the irreverent, comical and political "ole mas" or "traditional mas". Masquerade like **Moko Jumbie (stilt walkers), Dragon, Midnight Robber, Negue Jardin, Baby Doll, Dame Lorraine, Bookman, Juju Warriors and Pierrot Grenade**. Interestingly some of this mas used words as weapons. These mas depictions exposed and ridiculed the former slave owners, threatened reprisal and gave a public commitment that slavery could not happen again. There was also the aggressive chaotic "dutty mas" with the devil masquerade and rhythms of the "**Jab Molassie**" "**Blue devils**" and "**Jab Jab**" who covered their skin in paint or molasses and recounted the hell of slavery through masquerade and dance. Many of these masquerade depictions are still present in Caribbean Carnivals and festivals globally today. The great novel "**The Dragon Can't Dance**" by **Earl Lovelace** explores all the issues of mas and society.

Politically and psychologically these oppressed peoples or Jamette used their Carnival art for change, transformation and role reversal.

They used Carnival;

\*To escape oppression and have unbridled freedom for a day, including cross-dressing, open defiance and comedic mime.

\*To entertain.

\*To take over the streets in a show of strength.

\*To challenge and resist their oppression through mocking masquerade, songs, dance, mimicry and intimidating drum rhythm sections (including later the steel band).

As Carnival developed, the masquerade became more elaborate with historical themes chosen by bandleaders in mas bands. After the Second World War the mas bands attached to steelbands became huge with sometimes 3000 masqueraders chipping behind the bands in white sailor or military mas.

The mid 1950s to 1990s began a golden age of masquerade in Trinidad. Some mas band leaders started to look to Africa and their own island history and fauna for masquerade themes for their bands. This can be regarded as a form of self-validation and black pride, and is related to the anti-colonial, independence struggles and “black power revolution” of the period. Themes selected included the “Feast of Mansa Musa” a sultan from the ancient kingdom of Mali, and “Back to Africa” “Relics of Egypt” and “Tears of the Indies” by influential mas designer and band leader George Bailey. Band leader Irvin McWilliams designed mas bands “Wonders of Bucco Reef”, “Our Anancy Stories”, “Know your Country” and “Somewhere in the Caribbean”.

At the same time J’Ouvert mas ranged from political and social commentary “ole mas”, to mud or oil “dutty mas”, Jabs and creative one-off individual mas spontaneously made on the day. Mas functioned as an educator and commentator on history and everyday life in Trinidad.

Later mas designers like Peter Minshall and Wayne Berkley produced and designed fantastic mas bands and vied for mas supremacy in the Trinidad Carnival. Minshall made it clear that his mas bands were designed to use theatre and tell stories and were based on updating the rich legacy of traditional mas developed in Trinidad’s past. His famous mas bands were “Paradise Lost” and the trilogy “The River” “Callaloo” and “Golden Calabash”. Wayne Berkley, equally talented, took another route he moved away from historical mas and developed imaginative fantasy mas with a Las Vegas influence. His mas themes included “Secrets of the Sky” “Kaleidoscope” and “Mirage”.

Both designers had strong contacts with the UK and Notting Hill Carnival especially with the Metronomes and Cocoyea mas bands.

There were talented mas designers like Lawrence Noel who produced traditional wild Indian mas, along with band leaders and designers also developed in Notting Hill Carnival. There was Larry Forde, Clary Salandy, Vernon “Fellows” Williams, Arthur Peters, Nikki Lyons, Ray Mahabir, Rocky Byron, Lincoln Rahamut, Michael “Speedy” Ramdeen, Martha Fevrier, Bertie Delandro, Ali Pretty to name but a few. They produced a wide variety of diverse mas at Notting Hill Carnival telling historical and fantasy stories.

In 1977 Larry Forde’s Sukuya mas band produced “Mansa Musa’s guest at Regina’s feast “during the Queen’s Jubilee. There is also traditional mas in the form of “Shortney” from Grenada, “Sensay” from Dominica and individual J’Ouvert mas makers like the famous “Shadow” in the tradition of Trinidad’s great still-life mas man Wilfred Strasser. Mas bands like Lion Youth, Peoples War Carnival Band, Yaa Asantewa mas band, Kuumba and Mahogany Arts made mas which told stories or were in tribute to historical figures and events like Peoples War theme “Victory at Cuito Cuanavale; Free South Africa” and Mahogany’s “Tribute to Wayne Berkeley”. A lot of this diverse

masquerade art was captured in two publications “**Masquerading; The art of the Notting Hill Carnival by the Arts Council**” and “**Midnight Robbers; The Artists of Notting Hill Carnival**” edited by Ruth Thompsett.

The radical Notting Hill carnival has had many women leaders and mas band leaders who include Leslee Wills, Clary Salandy, Gloria Cummings, Nikki Lyons, Martha Fevrier, Rachel Henderson, Cheryl Tudor, Rubena Waldrop, Jean Bernard and Avion Mookram. In the 1970s, Notting Hill Carnival mas bands took action to demand Arts Council funding. They believed they were producing art in the UK just as worthy of funding as the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, except that the Opera was heavily funded. There were pickets by mas bands and their supporters outside the Arts Council offices in Piccadilly to demand proper funding for Carnival arts. Later the bands complained about the Arts Council’s interference and playing-off of bands against each other. You must be careful what you wish for! Funding strategy, or more accurately the lack of it is still a hot issue within the Carnival.

In the last decades many mas bands in Notting Hill are following the Trinidad commercial model for mas. The lack of funding has granted the opportunity for a more business and commercial approach to be dominant amongst the mas bands. Mainly fantasy mas themes are produced which are unconnected to generically designed decorated bikini style mas. Themes, theatre and commentary are increasingly being neglected in the mas at Notting Hill Carnival. Interestingly, there is a resurgence in J’Ouvert type mas and traditional mas. There is a strong presence of Jab Molassie, masks and dutty mas at J’Ouvert . The Pure Lime UK band invented “Chocolate Mas” at Notting Hill Carnival. This Chocolate dutty mas has produced at least two huge bands in Notting Hill and imitators across the Caribbean Carnival diaspora. But no one can deny that mas is at a crossroads in Notting Hill Carnival.

## **THE KAISO /CALYPSO**

The lead singer or **Chantwelle** and the call and response chorus singers or **Lawway** were prominent in the Canboulay. The Chantwelle was the forerunner of the calypsonian and provided song and music for other events, rituals, celebrations and entertainment. They provided the singing and drumming at funerals, wakes, christening and births, these events included folk dances like the **Bongo, Bamboula, Limbo** and **Belaire**. Calypso is also known as **Kaiso**. This is an African exclamation word originally meaning “go ahead”, and which in Trinidad came to mean “well done” or “encore”. It is a tradition in Trinidad to applaud a good Calypso by shouting *Kais-oh!* and to give the artist a rhythmical slow hand clap for more. The word Kaiso still survives in the Caribbean. In London we produce a monthly calypso show called the “Kaiso Lime” at the Carnival Village, Tabernacle with Tobago Crusoe, Alexander D great and D Alberto.

In Trinidad early Calypso was sung in Kweyol or Patwa the language of the island. The calypso’s secular melodies, rhythms and drumming used accomplished musicians from the African based religions that had developed in Trinidad, especially the **Orisha (or Shango)** and the **Spiritual Baptists** religions. The calypsonian played the role of messenger of the people. In West Africa they are called **griots** .The Kaisos use metaphor humour and double-entendre to secretly get over to the listener, news, and messages of injustice, political commentary and sexual scandal. The Calypsonian speaks to the concerns of the ordinary people and those suffering at the bottom of society. The Kaiso or Calypso song is a cultural record of events as seen from the perspective of ordinary people. The Kaiso singers were originally connected to Carnival bands but later broke away and formed commercial spaces where Kaisos were performed to paying audiences called Calypso tents. These were mainly based in the Jamette neighbourhoods of East Port of Spain in the rebellious and creative barrack yard communities described in **James Cummings book “Barrack Yard Dwellers.”** and in the novels of **CLR James “Minty Alley”** and **Alfred Mendes “Black Fauns”**.

The politician and cultural activist Albert Gomes made this important point in 1950. **“Long after most of us are forgotten, certain calypsos will survive as the only reminders to some later generation of how we lived, loved and sinned”**.

The Kaiso songs over time have established a remarkable body of work that can stand alone as poetry. They include political analyses and radical thought which are both critical and resistant to ruling class aesthetic and propaganda. Kaiso uses biting satire, double entendre and **Picong** as their viciously sharp **word weapon**. There are many examples too numerous to list. Here are some examples.

Growling Tiger “Gold In Africa”  
Pretender “God made Us All”,  
Mighty Sparrow “Dan is the Man”, “Education”, “Capitalism Gone Mad” and “Slave”,  
Lord Kitchener “Ghana”, “Rain-O-Rama”  
Chalkdust “Dey Aint See Africa”,  
Singing Sandra “Die With My Dignity” and “Voices From the Ghetto”,  
Gypsy “Sinking Ship”, “Little Black Boy”,  
Brother Valentino “Stay Up Zimbabwe”,  
Shadow “Poverty Is Hell”,  
Mighty Duke “Black is Beautiful”,  
Singing Francine “Runaway”.

This list is far from complete. You will have your own favourites and examples. To discover this history of cultural resistance in Kaiso, I recommend **Hollis “Chalkdust” Liverpool’s “From The Horse's Mouth: Stories of the history and development of the Calypso”**.

Although today’s Soca music has a bad reputation for a lack of social commentary. There are still these examples

Merchant “Pan in Danger” and “Pain”,  
Penguin “Look De Devil Dey”,  
Black Stalin “Caribbean Man”, “Burn Dem” and “Wait Dorothy”,  
Ras Shorty I “Watch out my Children”,  
Bally “Shaka Shaka”,  
David Rudder “Madman’s Rant” “Ole time band” “Haiti” and “Panama”,  
Silky Slim and Wayne T “Doye Doye”,  
Brother Resistance “Tonight Is De Nite”.  
From Barbados Mighty Gabby “Boots” “Jack - Da Beach is mine” and “Massa day Done along with Adonijah “Move”,  
and from Monserrat Arrow with “Bills”.

Modern artistes like 3 Canal, Karen Asche, and Mistah Shak faithfully carry on this artistic stance today. This also includes the Trinidad Carnival 2017 road march “Full Extreme” by Ultimate Rejects featuring MX Prime from which I took the title for this talk.

The authorities always saw the danger of Kaiso. Through the years they have attempted to stop or ban influential songs that would encourage the population to rise up, mock, or ridicule the authorities and their plans. The suspicious British colonial government were always monitoring the Calypsonians. In 1920 the *Seditious Publications Ordinance* allowed for the banning of lyrics that were “unfit for public ear”. Later the *Dance Hall Ordinance of 1934* gave the police powers to censor calypsos and ban any records. The Mighty Sparrow’s irreverent and double entendre - full kaiso **“Phillip My Dear”** was banned by a nervous Jamaican government during the visit by the Queen and Prince Phillip to the island. Calypsonians were always too clever for the authorities and used their Anancy skills of double entendre to deny the real meaning of their songs and avoid censorship.

In the London part of the Caribbean Carnival diaspora the late Ashton “Mighty Tiger” Moore established the Association of British Calypsonians (ABC) and the London Calypso Tent in 1991. Over the years it has produced calypsonians and Kaisos about the UK within the radical and social commentary thread. Examples are:

Mighty Tiger “Yaa Asantewa”,  
Lord Cloak “Tribute To Boots” and “Cloak Is King”,  
Alexander D Great “Copycat Crime: UKIP calypso reprise” “Russell Henderson” and “They came upon the Windrush”,  
Rev B “Mr Prime Minister” and “We not taking that “,  
Sheldon Skeete “Voices”, “Sightless Nation” and “Are you proud”.

The reigning calypso monarch is G String with “Calypso Referendum”. Outside the ABC stable there is:

Keety General “Carnival Story”,  
Skunky “Shadow of Apartheid” ,  
Tobago Crusoe “The name is Kaiso “, “Bolt” and “Recorded in Kaiso”,  
D Alberto “Bernie Grant”, “Pan woman” and Walk Alone”.

## THE STEEL PAN

In Trinidad the beating of African drums was banned from the Carnival by the colonial authorities in 1884. There was fierce resistance to this up to 1891 with the **Arouca riots**. Undaunted Carnival musicians resisted and formed **Tambo** **Bamboo** percussion bands (Tambour Bamboo means bamboo drums). Many musicians in Tambo Bamboo bands were drummers from Orisha (Shango) and other African influenced religions. In Trinidad’s capital city Port of Spain, the Tambo Bamboo bands were organised around fiercely territorial groups of young men in the poor districts to the west and east of the city, an area known collectively **as Behind-the-bridge or East Dry River**. During the Second World War, Carnival was banned between 1942 and 1945. It was an unpopular decision and people ignored the British governor’s instructions and continued to play and experiment with Carnival percussion music Behind-the-bridge. **A popular saying was “The governor say no mas d governor mudder arsel!”** The percussion bands experimented with metal and steel making music from discarded paint pans, biscuit tins, hubcaps and dustbin lids.

A new musical form swept the Tambo Bamboo bands in this period – the beating of metal receptacles alone. On J’Ouvert morning Carnival 1937 **Calvary Tambo Bamboo** band from Newtown, West Port-of-Spain was beating dustbin covers, hubcaps, biscuit tins and anything they could lay their hands on to provide the powerful metal percussion rhythm for their excited revellers and followers. The band was called **Alexander’s Ragtime Band**, after a popular movie. The Tambo Bamboo bands now used all metal percussion instruments after the success of Alexander’s Ragtime Band. The now all steel percussion bands used paint pans, large Bermudez biscuit tins, hubcaps, dustbin lids, caustic soda pans and later the cut down 55-gallon oil drums some from the US naval base.

**Hell’s Yard Tambo Bamboo Band** became **Trinidad All Stars Steelband** another from Laventille **Dead End Kids** became **Desperadoes Steelband**. These creative unemployed and partly employed youths started to magically develop musical notes from the discarded steel receptacles. When **VE Day** (Victory in Europe) was declared in 1945, the population came out on to the streets to celebrate. The revelling crowds jumped up and danced to the sweet musical notes of the newest musical instrument of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the **Steel pan**. The Steelbands now replaced the Tambo Bamboo bands as the percussive and melodic music of the Carnival.

Like the drum, the colonial authorities tried to suppress and ban the steel pan but in the tradition of cultural resistance, creativity and invention, the steel orchestra like a beautiful rare flower has

survived or as David Rudder eloquently sings in his song "Dedication" "***Out of a muddy pond ten thousand flowers bloom***".

## **ARTISTS, CARNIVAL & SOCIETY**

The Caribbean Carnival has been at the forefront of multi ethnic welcoming, exchange and understanding, social justice and harmony throughout its practice and existence. I have already mentioned the contact between the Carnival and the Hosay. The Indian influence on the modern Caribbean Carnival can be seen in the colour combinations and float type masquerades produced. In the steelband. Indian steelband musical arrangers have come to prominence like Jit Samaroo of Renegades Steel Orchestra and Lennox Bobby Mohammed of Guinness Cavaliers steel band. **Chutney** music, a mixture of Soca and raunchy Indian traditional pre-wedding songs has been integrated in to the Trinidad Carnival and can be just as popular as Soca in Carnival fetes.

Artists have always been inspired by and attracted to Carnival from visual artists like the UK's Tam Joseph and his "Spirit of Carnival" which you will see in the Powerpoint presentation to photographer/sculptors like Zack Ove and his modern Moko Jumbie creations recently permanently installed in the British Museum. Caribbean artists who have been inspired to use the Caribbean culture in their work or even become designers themselves include Carlisle Chang, MP Alladin (Mahmoud Pharouk), Alfred Codallo, Boscoe Holder, Wilson Bigaud, Sybil Atteck, Winston Sundiata Stewart, Nazim Baksh along with Paul Goodnight and Nick Cave from the USA.

There are not many feature films on the history and culture of Carnival. The best film I argue is **Black Orpheus or Orfeu Negro** from Brazil . The brilliance of Black Orpheus is that it sets the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice into the excitement and magic of the Rio Carnival and the favela that produces the Unidada Babylonia Samba School mas band. It beautifully examines the issues which seem to be universal for all New world African Carnival culture and its struggle for existence and expression.

Artists like UK filmmakers have added to our understanding of the Caribbean Carnival's radical history. There is Optiks Hamilton who produced "**Carnival Ah We Ting**", Nia Reynolds "**Looking for Claudia Jones**" Stephen Rudder "**Sequins , Soca and Sweat ; The hidden heart of Notting Hill Carnival**", Keith Morton "**Panamundo**" and Wyn Baptiste "**The story of Selwyn Baptiste**". There is also the iconic and culturally powerful "**King Carnival**" by Horace Ove and the many films of Dalton Narine including the award winning "**Mas Man**" DVD not forgetting the essential "**Calypso Dreams**".

The late Geraldine Connor produced the musical theatre epic "**Carnival Messiah**" in Port of Spain and Harewood House in Leeds spectacularly fusing the rich Caribbean Carnival arts with Handel's Messiah.

## **THE STRUGGLE FOR THE CARIBBEAN CARNIVAL IN LONDON**

Let us now examine these threads of cultural resistance in London. The first Caribbean Carnival event in Britain was organised as a response to the 1958 **Notting Hill Race Riots** and later in support of the Antiguan carpenter, **Kelso Cochrane** murdered by white racists in North Kensington, West London in 1959. The West Indian (Caribbean) community in the area had been systematically violently attacked by racist **Teddy boy** gangs in September 1958. These racists were encouraged and supported by locally based Fascist groups like Oswald Mosley's black shirts and the White Defence League. The gangs attacked black men, black women and white women in mixed race relationships. But a few days later the racists were soundly beaten by the new black unity of people from all the Caribbean islands and Africa who swarmed in to the area with cutlasses, bricks and Molotov cocktails.



**Claudia Jones**, a political activist and newspaper editor of the *West Indian Gazette and Afro Asian News*, got together a committee of people to organise the first Caribbean Carnival. Their stated aim was to show the British population the creativity that Caribbean people possessed and could contribute to Britain. They also wanted to show they had no intention of being intimidated by racists. Here is defiance identity and racial pride.

The first Caribbean Carnival event in Britain was the **West Indian Gazette Caribbean Carnival** at St Pancras Town Hall in January 1959. The carnival was filmed by the BBC and attended by high profile entertainers and high commissioners. Claudia Jones famously wrote in the souvenir brochure for the event “*A people’s art is the genesis of their freedom*”. The first ever Caribbean Carnival was an indoor Carnival because it was too cold in Britain during the Carnival season, which is usually January, February or March.

The **West Indian Carnival** was a great success and moved from hall to hall throughout West London. The well-supported Carnivals continued for 6 years until Claudia Jones’ death of chronic heart disease in 1964.

In the 1960s the North Kensington area of West London was a rundown slum.. The area had a very diverse population with Caribbean, Spanish, Portuguese and Irish residents. North Kensington was also at the centre of the cultural and social revolution in Britain known as the “swinging sixties” or the 60s revolution and was home for musicians like **Jimi Hendrix** and radical groups, communes and political campaigns. This era was beautifully captured in novels by Samuel Selvon “**The Lonely Londoners**” and “**Absolute Beginners**” by Colin MacInnes. North Kensington was also going to be the outdoor home of the Carnival. Historically the area held peoples festivals and processions like Wormwood Scrubs Fair, Princess Louise Hospital Carnival and Portobello Buskers Fair which had been suppressed like other people’s festivals in Britain.

In 1965 another woman leader **Rhaune Lasletts** (Miss Las), a white social worker, with local radicals like Andre Shervington and John “Hoppy” Hopkins of the London Free School and Notting Hill Peoples Association, organised the first Notting Hill Carnival. It was also called at one time the “Peoples Free Carnival”. The great success in the first Notting Hill carnival was Russell Henderson’s steel pan combo which electrified the Carnival and won the allegiance of local Caribbean residents who dropped everything to “jump up” behind the band and dance in the streets Carnival style.

Later, a black leadership of “Grove” people took over the organising of Notting Hill Carnival amongst whom were Merle Major, Selwyn Baptiste, Pansy Jeffrey, Granville Pryce, and Junior Telfer. In 1973 Leslie “Teacher” Palmer took over and made Notting Hill Carnival into the modern Caribbean Carnival we know today and introduced Reggae sound systems and live bands in the bays under the flyover motorway stretching over the area. Palmer convinced mas designers to bring out regular mas bands. “Mas” or masquerade bands had now properly arrived at Notting Hill Carnival with fabulous costume themes like ‘**Head Hunters**’ and ‘**To Hell with You**’.

All Caribbean Carnivals in whatever country they land, reflect the history and social culture of the environment and communities in which they exist. The Notting Hill Carnival was now a new festival of masquerade, Kaiso/Calypto, Soca, Steelbands and sound systems. An estimated 150,000 people now flocked to Carnival. Notting Hill Carnival had truly become a great festival of black popular culture in Britain.

In this period The Grove was also the base of Black Power political organisations like the Black Panther Movement, Black Liberation Front (BLF) and Black Peoples Information Centre (BPIC). The black population, especially the rebellious youth, constantly suffered racist policing at the hands of police from Notting Hill Police station who regularly went “**Nigger Hunting**” and used the widely practiced “**Sus**” fit-ups. The start of a successfully organised political resistance to racist policing in Britain occurred in 1970 during the “**Mangrove 9 campaign**” based in the Grove area. **John La Rose and Franco Rosso** produced the documentary film “**Mangrove 9**” on this campaign

This political and cultural activity produced a confident and capable London population which supported and assisted the resistance and cohesion of the people who organised the Carnival in Notting Hill.

In 1975 with the growing success of Notting Hill Carnival came the attacks on its existence from the British media, local residents associations, the Metropolitan Police and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC). Before Carnival 1975 the residents' associations were threatening a high court injunction to cancel the Notting Hill Carnival. Commander Patterson of the Metropolitan police flourished a huge residents' petition and alleged that there were high levels of crime at Carnival and supported the ban. The CDC successfully countered the false accusations used against the Carnival. The black community rallied in defence of the Carnival. The 1975 Notting Hill Carnival went on without incident. But the whirlwind was about to hit. The calculated swamping of the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival by police saw rioting break out. Notting Hill Carnival saw blue banks of policemen invade the Carnival street corners like an occupying army. 3000 had turned up whereas in previous years there had been only 300. The police were behaving aggressively and with calculated provocation. **"This was a significant invasion of a black institution, The Notting Hill Carnival, by the daily tormentors of the black community the Metropolitan Police"**.

**The Clash** made the punk record **"White Riot"** in celebration of the punk presence at the Carnival and their role in the insurrection. Local Reggae band **Aswad** made the song **"Three Babylon"**. The Metropolitan Police never forgave the public defeat at Notting Hill Carnival. The heavy Metropolitan Police presence has been constant ever since, over 30 years later!

There were calls for Notting Hill Carnival to be banned by the Home Secretary and clamouring from the mainstream press. The Carnival leadership, a new organisation called the **Carnival Development Committee CDC**, made up of carnival band leaders, elected Selwyn Baptiste as director, Darcus Howe chair and Larry Forde secretary, and produced the publication **"The Road Make to Walk on Carnival Day; The struggle for the West Indian Carnival in Britain"**, a powerful mandate for the existence of the Notting Hill Carnival. The CDC was successful in keeping Notting Hill Carnival on the streets through political mobilisation.

Notting Hill Carnival was still financially independent in this period. Its income came from stall holders' fees, regular Sunday fetes at the **Tabernacle** in Powis Square with music by steelbands on rotation and sounds systems like Lord Sam, Shadow Hi Fi, China Funk, Black Patch and Peoples War Sound System. The majority of the income for the Carnival came from the annual **Carnival Gala** at the Commonwealth Institute on Kensington High Street. But this financial independence was taken away from the CDC by a lock-out at the Tabernacle and refusal to allow the CDC to make annual bookings at the Commonwealth Institute. At the same time the Home Office formed and funded a rival committee the **Carnival Arts Committee CAC** which undermined unity and forever divided the carnival community. It was divide-and-conquer tactics. The CDC was starved of funds and folded in the early 1980s.

In the late 1980s the Metropolitan Police demanded a seat on the Carnival organising committee. The CAC leadership under Alex Pascal refused. 1988 saw a vitriolic smear campaign in the mainstream press unleashed on the non-compliant CAC. Almost simultaneously, there was a massive armed police drug raid on the **Mangrove Association** on All Saints Road, a significant location. They arrested Frank Critchlow, the leading Grove community activist. The CAC's records and documents were taken away in a police raid of their offices. The City accountants Coopers and Lybrand wrote a scathing report on the CAC's competence. Not a single charge was ever proved. But the damage had been done.

Claire Holder took over from the now disgraced CAC leadership and disbanded the organisation and formed the **Carnival Enterprise Committee CEC** which was more pro-business and pro-police. The 1989 Carnival saw the emboldened police try to interfere with the parade of the Carnival

bands. The Carnival community responded strongly and formed the **APC Association for a Peoples Carnival** to resist the plans of the CEC, the local councils and police. The APC also had an educational remit and published a newsletter. The APC also published "**Police Carnival 1989**" as a record of that Notting Hill Carnival and campaigned against the attempt to introduce a payment to enter Carnival. The historical APC newsletters and publication are available at this conference. Another source of information about the struggles for carnival in 1989 is found in "**Mas in Notting Hill; Documents in the struggle for a representative and democratic Carnival 1989/90**" edited by **Michael La Rose**.

The authorities have continued their aggressive model of tightly controlling and then keeping Notting Hill Carnival underdeveloped. There is police swamping, a critical media looking for crime figures and uncooperative obstructive local councils along with underfunding of the Carnival bands. This has shaped the Notting Hill Carnival we have today.

The blueprint for the style of Carnival leadership established by Claire Holder has since continued to this day. There have been many Carnival organisers and organising committees. I want to describe this style of carnival leadership. Typically there would be:

- a) Constant demands for new controls or regulations from the authorities to the Carnival organisers every year,
- b) Demands for earlier Carnival finishing times or sterile areas or road closures or change of routes.
- c) Demands for changes in procedures or health and safety regulations or laws engineered to apply to Notting Hill Carnival, given that the authorities still view Notting Hill Carnival as a **public order** situation.
- d) Secret agreements between the Carnival organisers and the authorities to these demands without going back to consult the Carnival community or bands they are supposed to represent. Therefore relegating the Carnival organisers to just a "rubber stamp" to legitimise the oppressive plans of the authorities. The Carnival organisers are no longer accountable transparent or democratic.
- e) A public announcement by the authorities that there will be new arrangements at Notting Hill Carnival this year. The Carnival leadership silently endorse the arrangement and keep quiet about it. They legitimise the authorities' plans.

The mas bands in Carnival today are held to ransom by requiring the most precious commodity for Carnival mas bands at Notting Hill Carnival - a pass to allow the bands and their vehicles to enter the Carnival past the police road blocks at entry points. As a result, there can be no spontaneous last minute mas or new mas and music bands formed. New mas bands have to join up with an existing band that has a pass for 3 years before they can apply for a pass for their own pass to enter Notting Hill Carnival. Without a pass you are lost. The authorities decide how many passes are issued. The mas bands dare not question arrangements for fear of vindictive loss of passes. Control and regulation by the authorities is paramount at Notting Hill Carnival.

The greatest con perpetuated by the authorities on the Carnival at present is the same one we faced in 1975. Crime figures issued by the Metropolitan Police are all over the mainstream media in the days before and after the Notting Hill Carnival every year since 1975. The message is clear there is a "terrible crime wave" at Notting Hill Carnival every year. This is the reason they say it has to be controlled.

LNH CET leadership have totally accepted this police line. With regular police public statements about crime every year they destroy any chance of sponsorship for Notting Hill Carnival and keep us begging and desperate.

These are my arguments.

There are murders and other crimes committed in London every day, why should the 2 days of Notting Hill Carnival with 1.5 million people present be the only place in London with no crime?

Journalists and LNH CET should research and compare how much crime per head is committed in similar summer festivals in the UK like Reading, Leeds or Glastonbury? I know there was a murder at a festival last year. Were they threatened with state intervention? Why is it that Notting Hill Carnival is treated differently?

Lastly for years, since 1988 at least, the Metropolitan Police has bypassed the few Carnival stewards and have been in total control of the streets and crime at Notting Hill Carnival. They have thousands of police, barriers, horses, dogs, helicopters. Pre-Carnival dawn raids, hundreds of surveillance and face-recognition cameras all over the Carnival and an underground bunker control room. Wow! If there is crime within the Notting Hill Carnival area, it is a failure of the Metropolitan Police not the Carnival organisers or the Notting Hill Carnival. Do not be conned.

When the Carnival leadership goes along with these lying tactics, progressive people who care about the development and future of the art and culture of the Caribbean Carnival must decide what action they should take.

One suggestion I would make is to work out a clear economic plan for getting the finances of Notting Hill Carnival back in the hands of those who want to develop and improve Notting Hill Carnival. We need to get money to the creators of the art, mas and music of the Notting Hill Carnival. We urgently need a plan for any independently financed Notting Hill Carnival. Large and small businesses, TFL (buses, tubes and trains), hotels and London itself make millions of pounds because of Notting Hill Carnival. The old data quotes £93 million. How can those who financially benefit, contribute financially to Carnival in return? Some of you here today may assist the process of finding a way. LNH CET need to open up the debate to find a solution. We have the expertise and experts in the Caribbean Carnival Diaspora. Some of them are here today. Let us seriously and scientifically search for the financial solutions.

I have been encouraged by the quality and clarity of the contributions in this conference. My resistance batteries have been recharged. I am sure yours have!!

Notting Hill Carnival is in cultural and financial crisis. It has a history of resistance and cultural struggle. The values of the Mardi Gras Carnival are reconquering our Carnival cultural space globally in the internal struggle between the Mardi Gras Carnival and Canboulay Carnival.

I stand with the spirit, art, creativity and resistance of Canboulay Carnival.

Where do you stand?

Thank you.

**Michael La Rose 21 May 2017**

**Author and researcher, Director of Savannah View, designer and band leader Peoples War Carnival Band (1982-1998), vice chair CDC (1978-1980) founder APC (1989), Chair George Padmore Institute educational archive (2006-2016).**