

# Carnival Glossary



Carnival focuses around three terms; Music, Movement and Mas. However there are hundreds of words and phrases used in Carnival to describe its rich heritage of sounds, costumes, styles and people. If there are any phrases or terms missing please email us at [info@carnivalarts.org.uk](mailto:info@carnivalarts.org.uk) and we'll make sure they're included here.

## A

### **ASHWEDNESDAY**

The first day of lent.

## B

### **BAND**

A collective of people who come together and take to the streets for Carnival

### **BELAIRE OF BELE**

A drum dance invented by slaves and performed by white planters at Carnival time.

### **BHAMBOULAS**

A drum based dance.

### **BHANGRA**

An Indian farmers dance used in celebration of Harvest.

### **BLOCO**

A bloco is a costumed group of players in Brazilian carnival, more informal than the big schools of samba. The costuming contributes to the group's theme which is usually satirical or political or both. The bloco moves to a sound system on a truck or plays live percussive music on drums, shac shacs and metal on metal.

### **BASHMENT**

A Jamaican Patois term derived from the word "bash" - a party, concert or major social event.

### **BATUCADA**

This term designates the "battery" of drums that performs the samba (see entry on samba) rhythms in Brazilian carnival bands. The sound and rhythm of the batucada permeates much of the BPM (Brazilian Popular Music) scene.

## C

### **CALINDA**

A stick dance of West Africa traditionally performed by male dancers who would have originally been slaves.

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## C

### **CARNIVAL**

Coming from the Latin 'Carne Vale' farewell to meat before the fast of lent.

### **CALYPSO**

Is said to derive from the West African Hausa word Kaiso, a word similar to 'bravo', which is shouted in Calypso tents.

### **CALYPSO MONARCH**

In competition, the calypsonian whose songs are rated highest by a panel of expert judges becomes calypso monarch for that year. Male and female calypsonians compete for the crown.

### **CANBUOLAY**

French for burning of the sugar canes, canes brulees, an act traditionally carried out at Carnival time.

## D

### **DAME LORRAINE**

A well-known character of Carnival. The Dame is parody of a large French planter woman with exaggerated breast and backside who would wander through the crowd eyeing up potential husbands.

### **DEVIL BANDS**

Appearing on J'ouvert morning these characters allowed the slaves an opportunity to become that which they had been deemed to be by their masters. Sometimes appearing with chains and padlocks round their legs these characters mocked polite society after years of oppression.

### **DIMANCHE GRAS**

The major show on Carnival Sunday night when eight King and eight Queen of the bands costumes (some 30 feet tall) compete on stage to be named King and Queen of Carnival. The eight top singers compete to be crowned the Calypso Monarch.

## E

### **ENREDO**

The theme of each Samba School during the parade at the Sambodrome at Rio Carnival

### **ESCOLAS DE SAMBA**

Samba Schools that are found in local neighborhoods all over Rio de Janeiro. The focus of the annual parade in the Sambodrome, these schools rehearse for months, creating floats, themes songs, movements, and costume for the event.

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## F

### FLOAT

A decorated vehicle that takes part in the procession.

### FETES

Derived from the Caribbean originally a Soca or Calypso oriented dance or party around Carnival time.

## G

### G.R.E.S.

Gremio Recreativo Escola de Samba - this title indicates a traditional samba school.

### GUIRO

The guiro/guira is a percussion instrument traditionally made from a hollow gourd or large cutting of bamboo. Notches are carved on one side of the hollow piece. These notches are played by vertically scraping a stick in various syncopations. The resulting sound is very prevalent throughout the Caribbean and Latin America.

### GOOMBAY

Goombay is a rhythm played on a goat-skinned drum in the Bahamas, but it is also the name of a style of Bahamian music that is very calypso-like. Early goombay recordings often employ a clave pattern, a sound that illustrates how much popular sounds from nearby Cuba influenced local Bahamian music in the 1950s and 60s.

## H

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## I

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## J

### JAB JABS

Devils akin to court jesters who playfully crack their whips on the floor as part of their Mas.

### JAB MOLASSI

Devil workers who coated themselves in molasses and threatened to rub against anybody who did not give them money. Their costumes had pointed tails and in true devil-like fashion they carried three pronged spears.

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## J

### **JONKONOU**

Scared and secular celebration held during Christmas in Jamaica, St Kitts, Nevis and Bahamas.

### **JOUVAY**

(also spelt 'joovay', 'j'ouvert' and 'jouvert'):

This term comes from the French Jour ouvert - opening of the day - and is the first act when Carnival takes to the Streets. Jouvay is the beginning carnival itself. In Trinidad in the earliest hours of Monday morning, groups gather at appointed street corners and parks, to set off down the street in darkness to the driving beat of tin cans, bottle and spoon and similar improvised instruments or a small section from a steel band. Costuming is usually minimal, often satirical, lewd, and bizarre. Mud and paint mas are also popular, with players covering themselves, and anyone they meet and hug, with mud, paint, grease or flour. Jouvay revelers occupy the street till dawn comes and the sun begins to warm the day. The word 'jouvay' comes from the French 'jour ouvert', meaning 'daybreak'. The jouvay celebration in carnival is believed to have developed in the 1880s, when police banned the earlier torch lit processions of canboulay. It continues in parts of the Caribbean and in some of the carnivals of the diaspora.

### **JUMP UP & FETE**

(pronounced 'fett'):

In the run up to carnival everyone holds parties, known as jump up or fetes with lots of music and opportunities to display the latest moves and with good things to eat and drink.

### **JUDGING POINT**

This is the point where all the carnival bands will get judged on their carnival costume. Marking will include use of colour, creativeness and historic background.

## K

### **KAISO**

The original term for Calypso.

### **KING**

The King of Carnival - There is always a prize given to the best costume and its wearer who then becomes the King of Carnival.

## L

### **LENT**

The Catholic holiday of which the Trinidadian Carnival was celebrated for.

### **LIME**

To lime is to spend time relaxing and talking with friends and acquaintances, on the street, in the park or round somebody's home. It's informal, light-hearted and often includes drinking.

# Carnival Glossary



## M

### **MARDI GRAS**

Mardi Gras is Shrove Tuesday in the Christian calendar, the day when traditionally Christians ate and drank as much as they could before the beginning of Lent and forty days of fasting. The term comes from the French, literally meaning 'Fat Tuesday'. The Tuesday before Lent came to be celebrated with carnivals in Europe and in time 'Mardi Gras' became an alternative term for 'carnival' in some places, such as New Orleans.

### **MAS**

Coming from the French word 'masquerade' a word used for all traditions surrounding costume making and wearing. A dominant carnival art form.

### **MAS CAMP**

A Mas camp is the place where a band carries out its work. In the Caribbean, where a mas band is often a year round business, it may have permanent base in factory-type premises or take over a house. In Britain a few bands operate year-round and have a permanent base, but most mas camps will be set up, for the months before carnival, in a community centre, a church or school hall, unlet shop premises or in someone's own back yard. Here the costumes are made, meals cooked for the makers and the general business of preparation for carnival takes place. (see also Mas)

### **MIDNIGHT ROBBER**

A storyteller who wanders the streets in a caped costume delivering bombastic speeches and attempting to relive the audience of their spare change.

### **MINSHALL**

The most widely acclaimed carnival designer today is Peter Minshall. He has been innovative in techniques of costume design and tells epic stories through bands of over two thousand costumed players on the streets of Port of Spain, Trinidad. He is loved and revered for recognizing and respecting the traditions of carnival and the essential nature of playing mas, as well as for his remarkable artistic achievements. He describes his work as kinetic art.

### **MOCO JUMBIE**

Stilt dancers, an African tradition carried over to Trini carnival their costumes represent jumbies, or spirits, of African mythology.

## N

### **NEGRO JARDIN**

The garden boy who worked on the home of the plantation owners became a Mas character

## O

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## P

### **PLAY MAS**

This is what many people all over the world come to the Caribbean to do. You dress up in your beautiful costume and play mass down the road. Dance, sing, drink, socialise etc down the carnival route.

### **PASSISTA**

One of the fast-stepping samba dancers in a Samba School.

### **PAN, PANYARD AND PANORAMA**

Pan bands, more usually known as steel bands, developed in Trinidad in the 1930s and 1940s. Trinidad has a great resource of offshore oil and in the 1930s the Americans held the franchise for extracting it. It was discarded steel oil drums that Trinidadians picked up and developed into the instrument known today as pan. Previously the large steel drums from which biscuits were sold had been used as improvised percussion instruments with some rudimentary notes, but it was from the oil drum that today's sophisticated pan developed. In the 1930s it was discovered by players using the oil drums percussively that the top of the drum produced different tones from differently shaped and beaten areas of its surface. This led to experimentation and through processes of heating and beating the surface, in time, notes were created. Today a steel band is made up of a full range of specific pans to cover all the notes on the chromatic scale. It is equal to playing the music any orchestra plays, from classical to pop. Pan is the only fully-accredited new musical instrument of the twentieth century and it is used, for example, in commercial music recording and jazz ensembles as well as remaining an essential part of carnival. The place where a pan band practices is known as a panyard. Every year before carnival, pan bands practice intensively on selected arrangements for panorama, the hotly contested steel band competition.

## Q

### **QUEEN OF CARNIVAL**

Traditionally there is always a prize given to the best costume and its wearer who then becomes the Queen of Carnival.

### **QUELBE**

This is the national music of the Virgin Islands. It is a calypso-like popular music and is most commonly performed by Scratch Bands (see entry on scratch bands). The lyrics are very similar in content to those of the traditional calypso in Trinidad covering social, political, and humorous topics.

## R

### **RAMAJAY**

A Caribbean word meaning to 'show off'

### **RAINHA DA BATERIA (QUEEN OF THE BATERIA)**

The Queen of the Bateria in Samba assumes a prominent position with the Bateria. The title of Queen of the Bateria is traditionally awarded after a competition, but sometimes is simply awarded.

## S

### **SAMBA**

An Afro-Brazilian rhythm originating in Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of the 20th century.

### **SOCA**

An offspring of traditional calypso; it is a fusion of calypso and Indian music rhythms. It means 'soul of calypso'.

### **SALSA**

This incredibly popular style of music mixes Cuban musical forms and rhythms (especially son/montuno) with Puerto Rican rhythms (like bomba and plena), adds Nuyorican barrio lyrics and a touch of North American popular music trends (such as R&B) to create a new sound. All of this happened during the 1970s and in large part because of the creation of Fania Records. Fania's sound also included the development of a larger conjunto sound (usually more trombones/saxes, timbales, drum kit). Today, salsa is huge throughout the Americas and there are even (very good) Japanese salsa bands.

### **SOUND SYSTEM**

A big stack of speakers that you take on the road.

### **STEELPAN**

One of the most unique and beautifully sounding instruments given birth in Trinidad and believed to be the only percussion instrument introduced the 20th century. (Also see Pan)

### **SCRATCH BANDS**

Scratch bands are popular throughout the U.S. and British Virgin Islands. They usually include a banjo, a bass, some percussion, and a few brass instruments. One of the most characteristic styles they play is called quelbe (see entry on quelbe).

## T

### **TAMBOO BAMBOO**

When skin drums were banned from carnival by the British in Trinidad in the 1880s African Trinidadians created new instruments from hollow bamboo stems. These new music bands were originally known as 'tambour bamboo', 'tambour' meaning 'drum' in French. The bamboo band's structure followed that of the earlier drum bands, for example the largest length of bamboo, the 'boom' provided the basic rhythm; it was played by vertically striking the ground or by lifting and dropping it. Shorter stems were played against each other. The different lengths created music that was not only percussive but also tonal. Traditionally the tamboo bamboo band also included bottle and spoon and shac shac. The ways in which music was developed in the tamboo bamboo bands contributed to the development of steel band in the late 1930s in Trinidad. (see also drums)

### **TASSA DRUMS**

Tassa drums were introduced to the West Indies by Asian Indians. The colonial British brought Indians to the Caribbean as indentured labour to work in the plantations after Emancipation. Tassa drumming accompanies the street celebration of the Muslim festival of Hosay, in Trinidad. It has also been introduced to other festivals, including carnivals, in Britain and elsewhere. (see also drums)

## U

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## V

### **VELHA GUARDA**

The veterans of the school of samba - comprising ex-presidents, ex-mestres, ex-baianas and so on. They are given great respect and influence and it is said that if you do not know who the Velha Guarda are, then you do not know the School. In the carnival parade, the Velha Guards do not usually wear costume but wear white suits etc. The respect with which they are held was famously demonstrated in 2005. Portela realised that they would not be able to get past the finishing line within the permitted time unless they cut off the end of their parade which included the Velha Guard. The danger of losing points with possible relegation out of the special group led the school's president to truncate the parade so that the Velha Guarda did not parade. This caused great outbursts of emotion from the crowd.

## W

### **WILD INDIANS**

Based on the dress of the Native American Indians and original people of the Caribbean.

### **WINING**

Wining describes the gyrating or spiraling movement of hips and pelvis in carnival dancing. It probably derives from 'winding', as in 'winding round'.

## X

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## Y

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## Z

### **ZOUK**

This French Antillean style is a uniquely Caribbean contribution to the world music scene. Created by the band Kassav in the 1980s, zouk is a studio produced, incredibly danceable, and expressly marketed genre. Designed to fill a niche in the world music market, zouk is party music for those who want a bit of Creole (French Patois) in their collection. But zouk represents more than a sellable sound. It is a direct challenge to France, a wake-up call to the nation that Creole is respectable, that the Antilles can produce amazing music, and that France doesn't have the corner on what constitutes art.