



Carnival: an introduction

Carnival evolved from the collision of cultures in the Americas between European colonisers and enslaved West Africans. It presented opportunity for the enslaved to reclaim public space as a statement of presence as an act of political protest as well as an artistic celebration. Today, carnival is a celebration of life and can be found in many countries across the world.

Many commentators believe Carnival's influence dates back to the middle ages when many European countries celebrated religious festivities. The Feast of Fools, for example, a popular festival amongst the clergy, took place before Lent and is thought to have involved parody and buffoonery of religious authority by younger members of the clergy. In the European Christian tradition, the word "carnaval" has been linked to "goodbye to the flesh", which refers to the 40 days preceding the Catholic season of Lent. During this time, Christians, and in particular Catholics were not allowed to eat meat and as such days before Lent were periods of abandon, indulgence and an escape from societal rigidity.

Carnival developed in Italy during the 16th Century where masquerade balls were popular and people wore masks and costumes. Carnivals in Italy became famous and the practice spread to France, Spain, and all the Catholic countries in Europe. As the French, Spanish, and Portuguese began to take control of the Americas and other parts of the world, they brought with them their tradition of celebrating carnival. Slaves shipped from West Africa were often permitted to carry out their traditions of story telling, drumming and dance. With the abolition of slavery in the early 19th century it was only to be expected that the expression of celebration would follow on from new found freedom.

As Catholicism spread throughout Europe, so did the traditions of Carnival. In France, Mardi Gras developed as the celebration on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. In Central Europe the tradition of drowning a doll (symbolising bad luck, illness and death) developed. In England, where Catholicism was stunted, festivities of a Carnavalesque nature were incorporated into pagan rituals.

In Trinidad, carnival started as masked balls in the colonial houses. This developed into a stronger African influence through Cannes Brulees, a burning of the sugar cane celebration where plantation workers were allowed to walk to neighbouring plantations to help with the work. Carnival in Brazil, under Portuguese colonial rule was an



established annual event. The Portuguese settlers allowed the African community to join in with the celebrations.



Carnival in UK

Carnival in the UK is an artform that embraces a variety of cultures, art forms and disciplines. Its main influence come from the historical, traditional English carnival style as well as a strong presence from Caribbean carnival. Brazilian carnival tradition features regularly in carnivals across the UK and a Brazilian style carnival celebration now takes place annually in London.

The English style carnivals of Bridgwater and the Isle of Wight have histories dating back four hundred years. Caribbean style carnivals in the UK such as Birmingham, St Paul's, Notting Hill, Leeds and Huddersfield boast histories of forty years.

Participation is a major part of the cycle of activity undertaken by most carnivals and carnival bands. Local communities are heavily involved from carnival conception to the final presentation on the road. The majority of costume bands involve a broad spectrum of the community in the artistic decisions, the making of the costumes and final performance in costume.

UK Carnivals attract very large audiences. Notting Hill Carnival is capable of attracting two million spectators over the August Bank Holiday weekend, of which many are international visitors. Smaller regional carnivals will attract between 30,000 and 100,000 people. Attendance at UK carnivals grows significantly each year.

Carnival disciplines in the UK

On the street, the carnival art forms fuse together with other disciplines such as music, visual art, theatre, dance and literature to make what the carnival sector refers to as "the Greatest Show on Earth". Some of the carnival disciplines in UK carnival are:

- Mas – Masquerade, referring to the Caribbean carnival traditions featuring designed costumes and themed artistic expressions
- Calypso (Caribbean music style, originated in Trinidad and Tobago at about the start of the 20th century).
- Steelpan
- Floats
- Majorettes (popular in traditional UK carnivals)
- Samba
- Marching bands (popular in traditional UK carnivals)
- Mask (refer to the section on Costumes and masks)
- Mobile Sound Systems (Sound system played on the float for the parade)



- Static Sound Systems (Sound systems in carnival based on a particular location)

The carnival band

A carnival band (also known as carnival club or mas band) is usually led by a bandleader. On the road the band will feature a king, queen, prince, princess and other major costumes followed by a section or sections. Each section will have twenty five to eighty participants in costumes relating to their chosen theme.

Music for the processing carnival bands (especially the Caribbean and some UK style carnival bands) is normally provided from a float equipped with taped music, a live band or acoustically (in the case of African and Latin American carnival) by drums, samba or steel band.

The carnival workshop (mas camp in the Caribbean or creation centre in Europe) is a place where the carnival artists and the community meet to create their costumes or decorate floats. Nowadays there are a lot of rules and stipulations, which have to be adhered to in terms of health and safety and licensing laws. Therefore going on the road or setting up a carnival workshop requires more than just getting the community together.

The majority of the traditional English style carnivals take place in May or November e.g. Guy Fawkes Night (Bonfire Night or Cracker Night). Often the emphasis is on collecting money for charity. The Somerset carnivals place great energy in float building and producing beautifully costumed tableaux.

The main Brazilian groups taking part in Notting Hill concentrate on creating fantastic costumes and samba music. They spend time decorating their floats in homage to the large Rio style carnival floats.

The Caribbean carnival bands tend to use mobile sound systems which play pre-recorded music. Most of the Caribbean style carnivals do not build floats as most of their time and money is dedicated to costume making and choreography. The costumed elements are influenced by the Trinidad style carnival and many UK designers have developed their own contemporary style.