



Carnival Floats

Introduction

The name “float” is derived from the first floats, which were decorated barges, and were towed along canals with ropes held by parade marchers on the shore. They were originally introduced by the churches in the Middle Ages as mobile stages for religious plays where pageant wagons were used as movable scenery for passion plays. Built and decorated by artists, these wagons were most noticeable during Corpus Christi (Festival) established in 1264 by Pope Urban IV where 48 wagons would be pulled through town with each one representing a play in the Corpus Christi cycle.

Float building and decorating is an aspect of carnival which is taken seriously in certain carnival cultures and ignored by others. The floats themselves play an important part in supporting the troupes who take part in processions by providing them with a decorated platform. A float is normally built on a mobile platform or flatbed lorry and is then towed by truck or tractor. In Rio, floats have to be pushed by teams of people as engines are not allowed. Apart from using the usual carnival materials to decorate them, some of the carnivals decorate using plants or flowers, e.g. Jersey Battle of Flowers.

Floats Today

In the Brazilian carnivals especially Rio, a lot of effort and time is put into designing and creating large scale floats which also serve as performance space for carnival artists. Further north of Brazil they focus on using the float as a stage with amenities for the troupes such as a bar, kitchen, toilets and rest rooms. These are called Trio Electricos and were introduced by Dodo and Osmar in Salvador in the 1950s. They have become an important part of the carnival groups' presentations.

In the Caribbean more effort and time is put into large moving costumes rather than floats. Most floats feature space for a DJ or a live band but with limited decoration.

In Asia and Africa, where carnival is not a major artform, the building of floats for carnival is non-existent. Instead animals and traditional forms of transport are used, for example, elephants and horses in India and horses and boats in Nigeria's Abuja Carnival.



In Europe there are carnivals such as Viareggio in Italy and in South West England which have a tradition of creating large carnival floats designed to suit particular themes.

In the UK, environmental concerns, the introduction of new licensing laws in 2003 and increasing insurance premiums have placed the use of floats in processions under some difficulty. The weather restricts artists' ability to work outdoors, where most floats are decorated, and is another reason for a lack of decorated floats. There are exceptions however; carnival in Somerset for example continues to be float based.

A number of carnival organisers are trying to do processions which are eco-friendly, e.g. using trailers pulled by a team of helpers.

In some carnivals especially the Caribbean, UK and the Americas, carnival artists and organisations invest a lot of money on designing and making costumes. Usually by the time the costumes are finished there are no funds to invest in decorating a float.

Types of Carnival Floats in the UK

There are two main types of carnival floats used in most UK carnivals, these are:

- the standard floats with accompanying music played on PA (public address) systems by a DJ or live band
- the specialist floats which are specially decorated or designed with performance space and in some cases amenities for the troupes on procession.

Some of the carnival processions would also have an extra truck or mini bus, which is used as a "support van" for children and the elderly to rest or for storage of broken costumes.

Float Logistics

The standard floats are the most commonly used. Most groups who do not have the budgets or resources to decorate a float use standard floats for delivering the music for the troupes and audiences.

It is difficult to dress up a float on the day especially if you want to spend time decorating it. The float will need to be made available a day or two before the carnival to allow more time to work on it.

Storage of a decorated float will require large space and be kept away from wet weather, which is a huge challenge for organisers of



carnivals in the UK. Use of a trailer as a float makes it easy to work on in small spaces and is more environmentally friendly.

The music equipment requires a team of people to rig the PA onto the float and an understanding of Health and Safety regulations. For example, if rigging an open flat bed lorry, it will need scaffolding as well as rigging to ensure equipment is fixed safely.

Generators will need to be placed in a way that does not cause fumes to affect the participants or audiences. Larger floats will have greater restrictions and regulations placed on their usage.

Allocation of floats to participating groups needs to be coordinated two hours or more before the procession begins.

During the procession the float will need stewards to keep people away from the wheels and exhaust fumes.

In summary the main elements required to put together a carnival float are:

- A flatbed or curtain sided lorry
- A driver and stewards
- A Vehicle Special Order (see the separate fact sheet called "Sound systems and trucks" for information on VSO)
- Diesel or petrol powered generator
- Material for decorations
- An awareness of Health and Safety e.g. ropes and straps to ensure secure fixing of equipment
- A ladder if the float is high
- A PA system, a DJ and sound equipment e.g. CD player, mixer, microphone
- Signage for Health and Safety
- A banner with the name of the carnival group