

ANGELS AND DEMONS

Text and photographs by Karoline Hjorth

Trinidad & Tobago's revellers are getting ready to go from hell to heaven in 48 hours and promise it will be ecstatic at both ends.

"Raise Yuh Hands, Jump up and Get on Bad!" It is 2 am, a hot and steamy February night in Port of Spain.

A guy dressed solely in plastic devil horns and a tight Speedo shouts out his passions and gulps down a "Bake n' Shark", the seafood version of the humble doner kebab.

A group of luxuriant women have strategically positioned themselves in front of a truck converted into a rolling disco for the occasion, enough to make any ragger green with envy.

Restless dancing shoes are fired up with rum on the rocks, rum and coke, warm rum, white rum, or a stranger's rum.

Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) is on the verge of emergency when an army of howling creatures, smothered in mud, paint and oil take over the streets.

An entire community looses the plot intently and collectively when J'Ouvert (Creole for "dawn") marks the yearly ritual opening of the world's most copied carnival. From birth to death

"Carnival is festival, carnival is burlesque, a party, a satirical cavalcade and a freak show!"

Mud, paint and rhythms

Wendell Manwarren and Roger Rogers make up two thirds of T&T's famous rapso trio 3 Canal and after living the carnival business for more than 15 years they passionately explain what it is all about:

"It's a beautiful clash of fantasies, drives and dreams, a magical metaphor and a celebration of the cycle of life; from birth to death and to birth again", says Rogers.

"It's very primal and the essence of J'Ouvert is to take off all your Western trappings and get right back to skin and flesh", Manwarren explains.

3 Canal is closely linked to the traditions of J'Ouvert and has been a crucial part in the development of T&T's self- designed music genre: a suggestive mix of traditional Caribbean calypso, American soul, Jamaican Reggae and Indian rhythms.

Soca and rapso tunes pumps up nasty devils, bats and mud monsters and even the most stubborn of British wallflowers would have great difficulties keeping out the contagious rhythms.

Everything from trucks to barrows function as rolling stereo sets and djs, rhythm sections, small and large steel bands are giving it all in the competition for the ultimate carnival hit.

Monday a bat, Tuesday a butterfly

Manwarren believes carnival plays a crucial part in defining Trinidadians as a group and works as an efficient cultural safety valve:

"People invest everything in these two days and Carnival offers an opportunity to be as devilish, as dirty or as nasty as we want to be. We go mad during Carnival so that we can say 'yeah whatever, I had a good carnival' during the rest of the year."

This is the essence of J'Ouvert, or "dirty mas" (mas= masquerade). The rule is no rule, figures of authority and unpopular politicians are mercilessly caricatured and they all dance themselves into Carnival Monday in impeccable company of painted blue devils and oily batmen.

When the sun finally rises a much-needed powernap is squeezed into the tight schedule and all traces of last night's orgies are removed.

Lucky ones might even be offered a round of high-pressure washing, loaded with a potent detergent mix of water and petrol.

A dream or two later, angels and butterflies have replaced mud and slime, and "pretty mas" takes over the streets.

Carnival might start rough and raw but it ends in beauty, with thousands of more or less advanced constructions of fake lashes, glitter, feathers and vibrant colours meeting for a majestic rhythmical congregation.

Beads, feathers and bikinis

Participation is the carnival's unquestionable mantra, and the party muscles are supposed to get a harder workout than the eyeballs.

"To play mas" is the core carnival activity, where you join a mas band under the visual leadership of a highly profiled costume designer.

Every band consists of a group of masquerades that follow the band's theme of costume and the size varies from a small group of ten, to an army of more than ten thousand members for the most popular bands.

Sharp rivalry characterises the competition for the costume prizes and several months of mental and creative preparations culminate in an ecstatic celebration of life.

The big climax for many is to cross the Queens Park Savannah Stage in the heart of Port of Spain, where every band gets the stage for themselves and receives ovation from the audience and a striking verdict from a strict panel of judges.

Carnival is also big business and critical voices are turning increasingly louder regarding powerful designers' fine-tuning of financial antennas in close relation with the carnival committee.

Manwarren and Rogers have noticed how the carnival is moving away from its original popular starting point and nostalgically remember the times when Carnival was about 'good old' society satire.

"Nowadays it's all about beads, feathers and bikinis", says Rogers, referring to the far from flattering description of contemporary masqueraders who choose their costume out of favourite colour instead of a need for personal expression.

Manwarren believes J'Ouvert might be the last arena for the living carnival community, although he is not rejecting the more exclusive take of today's carnival altogether:

"No matter how the Carnival will manifest itself in the future, it will always reflect what is going on inside us, where we are going, and what we dream of. If we are able to read the carnival for what it is, it will also help us to understand who we are".

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