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# J'Ouvert!

## Steel Pan and Ole Mas Traditions in Brooklyn Carnival

by Ray Allen, Brooklyn College

It's 4am, Carnival morning in Brooklyn, and the J'Ouvert procession has already begun. Hurrying across Prospect Park I'm drawn toward the percussive din and strains of steel pan that break the pre-dawn tranquility. Emerging near the zoo entrance on Flatbush Avenue, I come face to face with a group of devils. Cheap plastic horns adorn heads smeared in red paint and faces powdered with white talcum. The ghoulish revelers have surrounded the Pantonics steel orchestra, a band of fifty steel pan players and percussionists mounted on two-story moveable racks. The devils, along with hundreds of less elaborately clad party-goers, are jumping up and down to the Pantonic's rendition of the popular calypso "In My House." The band and dancers pulse as one, inching down the road toward Empire Boulevard, then bumping up against the Adlib Steelband and merging into a mile-long sea of humanity. The scene turns surreal as I pass a huge bank of temporary lights that cut through the thick predawn mist, illuminating the fervent crowd and the scores of police who line the street, looking on with great disinterest.

In keeping with the J'Ouvert traditions of humor and the macabre, numerous individuals play mud mas (covering their bodies with mud), dress in old rags, paint their faces, bodies and costumes, and cover themselves with white powder and flour. Many masquerade as devils, witches, ghosts, and goblins, while others don satirical outfits and carry signs with humorous political commentary. Tubs of mud are wheeled down Flatbush Avenue, with revelers stopping every so often to smear fresh muck on each other and on innocent bystanders. Buckets of paint appear and creative costumes are splattered on the spot. An "Emergency Room" band dressed in doctor and nurse scrubs carry a maniacal, paint-smeared patient through the crowd, stopping occasionally for "treatment." Suddenly the patient jumps up and grabs one of the nurses in a vulgar embrace while the rest of the medical team shake their heads and wag fingers in disapproval. A band called the Wingate Originals plays a masterful satire mas, "Clinton Tun de White House Red!" A wagon-mounted model house bearing the inscription "Scandal in the White House" is wheeled along by band members smeared in red paint. Men, cross-dressed as Monica Lewinsky, carried lewd placards proclaiming "Bill and I had an oral arrangement" and "I never inhaled, I only smelled it."

As the nighttime slips into dawn, the J'Ouvert procession lurches down Nostrand Avenue and finally begins to wind down. I catch my breath and like thousands of other participants, wonder if I will have the energy to make it up to Eastern Parkway later that afternoon for the main Carnival event.

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For more than a century J'Ouvert "break of day" processions have marked the opening of Carnival in Trinidad. Held in the predawn hours of Carnival Monday, J'Ouvert evolved from 19th century Canboulay festivals — nighttime celebrations where ex-slaves gathered to masquerade, sing, and dance in commemoration of their emancipation. When the tradition was incorporated into Trinidad's pre-lent Carnival, J'Ouvert became an arena for African-derived percussion, witty satire singing, sardonic costuming, and, more recently, lively steelband music. In contrast to the bright, fancy pageantry of Monday and Tuesday afternoon Carnival, J'Ouvert's gruesome devils and mud-covered

### MAKING CONNECTIONS

Brooklyn-based folklorist Ray Allen frequently collaborates with City Lore on his documentary journeys to the places where music and traditional culture intersect. His many projects include *Love Me Like a Rock*, a film on the famed Dixie Hummingbirds gospel quartet, and a forthcoming film on singer Marion Williams. Ray is on the faculty of the Institute for the Study of American Music at Brooklyn College. City Lore's photographer, Martha Cooper, has been documenting the West Indian Carnival parade for the past twenty years.

This article is drawn from a longer essay forthcoming in *Western Folklore*, Vol. 58, (Summer 1999).



Costumed devils at J'Ouvert

revelers manifest Carnival's deepest challenge to order and authority, and for Trinidadian novelist Earl Lovelace, the essence of the "Emancipation spirit."

In Brooklyn, home to the largest West Indian community outside the Caribbean and host to a Labor Day Carnival that draws close to two million participants each year, J'Ouvert is a relatively new phenomenon. Over the past decade Brooklyn's J'Ouvert has grown from small groups of Dimanche Gras (fat Sunday) revelers to a massive predawn celebration attracting nearly 200,000 steelband and old mas enthusiasts.

### West Indian Carnival in New York City

Throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s, indoor Carnival balls and dances were common in Harlem's small West Indian community, but it was not until the mid-1930s that two homesick Trinidadians, Rufus Gorin and Jesse Wattle, began organizing outdoor Carnival parties. In 1947, Wattle managed to get an official permit to close Lenox Avenue for a Trinidad-style Carnival parade featuring fancy costumed mas (masquerade) bands. In deference to the New York climate, the celebration was held in early September, on the Monday of Labor Day weekend, rather than during the traditional mid-winter, pre-Lenten Carnival season. Band leader Rudy King claims to have brought the first steelband to the Harlem Carnival, sometime in the mid-1950s.

A scuffle at the 1961 Carnival and a rock throwing incident in 1964, combined with the Civil Rights Movement which made local authorities wary of large gatherings of black people, led to the revocation of the Lenox Avenue parade permit. Rufus Gorin moved activities to Brooklyn, where the event took the form of huge block parties and spontaneous parades in Brooklyn's Crown Heights and Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhoods. At some point in the late 1960s an energetic young man of Trinidadian parentage, Carlos Lezama, took the reins from Gorin and formed the West Indian American Day Association (later renamed the West Indian American Day Carnival Association, or WIADCA). In 1971 Lezama obtained a permit to hold Carnival on Eastern Parkway, Olmstead's magnificent boulevard that extends eastward from Brooklyn's Grand Army Plaza, bordering the growing West Indian neighborhoods in Crown Heights and Flatbush. For three decades Lezama and WIADCA have successfully navigated Carnival through the treacherous waters of New York City ethnic politics. By the mid-1990s Brooklyn Carnival was being hailed as the largest ethnic parade in America, drawing a crowd of over two million spectators and generating millions of dollars in business for New York City.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, nearly all of the music on Eastern Parkway was provided by live steel bands that were hired by individual masquerade bands, or who just "showed" up with their own followers. But this began to change by the mid-1970s with the emergence of soca, a new Trinidadian pop style that fused traditional calypso singing with elements of black American soul and disco music. Like Jamaican reggae, which was becoming increasingly popular among Brooklyn's younger West Indians in the early 1970s, soca's heavy bass lines and mechanical drum rhythms reflected a new, high-volume musical sensibility. Record-spinning deejays, broadcasting over powerful sound systems, produced loud, bass heavy dance music that no conventional steelband could come close



Partying at J'Ouvert

to matching. The number of steel bands declined steadily in the 1980s, and by the late 1990s pan had nearly disappeared from the Parkway. But the drive to reunite pan and “playing mas” eventually led to steelbands becoming involved in the predawn J’Ouvert celebration. According to panman Earl King, it was during the early hours of Labor Day morning (perhaps in 1985) when a few members of the Pan Rebels Steel Orchestra ventured out from their pan yard on Woodruff Street near Flatbush Avenue and began playing on the sidewalk, attracting a crowd of all-night partygoers. Tony Tribuse, a member of the Pan Rebels band that participated in the first J’Ouvert, recalls that a group of fifteen pan players and masqueraders dressed in pajama costumes began moving down Flatbush Avenue. Tribuse claims the group picked up other late-night revelers from neighborhood parties and dance halls, and returned to their pan yard with a crowd of nearly 100. The Pan Rebels repeated the performance for several years, and eventually were joined by the Golden Stars Steel Band, the Metro Steel Orchestra, and the Ju Ju Jammers mas band. By the late 1980s, a small group of steel and mas bands were processing around Flatbush and Bedford Avenues early Labor Day morning, staking out an informal route through the heart of Brooklyn’s West Indian community. As the impromptu J’Ouvert celebration grew in size, organizers realized they would need to create a more formal structure and parade route to avoid conflict with the authorities. In 1994 Earl King established J’Ouvert City International, a not-for-profit organization meant to coordinate the J’Ouvert event. Since then, J’Ouvert’s growth has been explosive, attracting mainstream media attention to the event that drew close to 200,000 participants in 1999.

JCI founder Earl King elaborates: “J’Ouvert puts pan in the spotlight. You see, pan got lost on the Parkway when the big sound systems and deejays took over. So we were determined to do something to preserve pan, to let our children know where Carnival really comes from. So in J’Ouvert it’s just pan and mas bands, no deejays invited. Now people are remembering the joy you can get by taking your time and playing mas with a steel band, just inching up the road, pushing pan. We’re trying to revive that whole thing.” As costume designer Burtrum Alley reflects: “Steel pan music in the early morning is the best thing to my ears; everything else is still and you’re hearing pure pan — it’s like birds in the forest.”

### Brooklyn J’Ouvert: Revitalizing Tradition

Brooklyn’s J’Ouvert represents the revitalization of what some see as “endangered” Trinidadian traditions. While Trinidadian Carnival continues to provide the basic model for the Eastern Parkway parade, there has been a steady encroachment of other Caribbean and African-American influences. This is not surprising, given the multicultural nature of Central Brooklyn and the diversity of Caribbean groups participating in Carnival, as well as the complex nature of New York City’s ethnic politics in which Carnival has become embroiled. Thus, Carnival in New York, argues Philip Kasinitz, “vacillates between its Trinidadian roots and its pan-Caribbean agenda.”

For some participants the Parkway Carnival has apparently drifted too far from its Trinidadian moorings into a pan-Caribbean sea. Today, Trinidadian calypso and soca compete with Jamaican reggae, Haitian konpa, Martinican zouk, and



Monica madness in the J’Ouvert parade

Martha Cooper



J’Ouvert antics

Martha Cooper

the latest pop music offerings from Grenada, Barbados, and Panama. Meanwhile the thousands of vendors who line the two-mile route hawk foods, crafts, clothing, and recordings from around the African diaspora.

Carnival on Eastern Parkway was never a carbon-copy of its Trinidadian predecessor, because it quickly evolved into an arena for multi-ethnic cultural display and identity negotiation. While permitting the exhibition of individual island affiliation — through music styles, banners, flags, etc. — Brooklyn Carnival also strives to meld individuals from different English-speaking islands into “West Indians.” When the growing number of Haitians and other French-speaking islanders are added to Brooklyn’s Carnival pot, a broader category of “Caribbean people” is constructed. To this mix, add members of Brooklyn’s native African-American community and the result may be, at least for an afternoon, a sense of pan-African unity.

Carlos Lezama and his WIADCA associates have attempted to cast this complex cultural diversity issue in a positive light, carefully proclaiming “we is one.” In reality they walk a fine line, trying to maintain Trinidadian control over Carnival while finding room for other islanders — particularly the large numbers of Jamaicans and Haitians who now live in central Brooklyn — to comfortably participate. New York City’s politicians, always looking for votes, have contributed to the official discourse of unity by proclaiming Carnival a distinctive creation of New York’s rapidly growing Caribbean community. This persistent emphasis on the pan-Caribbean nature of Brooklyn’s Carnival, both in public display and discourse, has apparently made some Trinidadians, especially those deeply involved in the steel and traditional mas bands, feel squeezed out of what they once perceived as “their” event. Their response was to create a new Carnival performance setting — actually to revive a traditional setting that up to that point had been absent from the Brooklyn Carnival — that would showcase exclusively Trinidadian forms. In addition to its steelband only policy, JCI pronounced in its 1997 J’Ouvert Program Booklet that “the organization’s ideology is the preservation of three Caribbean art forms originating from Trinidad and Tobago: steelband, calypso, and mas.” The larger mission, “to educate and teach young

people about the origin and history of our culture,” leaves little doubt as to whose culture is in need of preservation. The 1995 Program Booklet rhetoric proudly announces that J’Ouvert’s “sweet steelband music” and old mas costuming make “Flatbush Avenue resemble Frederick Street in Trinidad.”

Consider also the geographic aspects of Brooklyn Carnival. Eastern Parkway, locally referred to as “Caribbean Parkway,” actually forms one of the northern boundaries of the borough’s West Indian community. Eastern Parkway is the border area where the English speaking West Indians, Haitians, and Hasidic Jews of Crown Heights meet the African Americans of Bedford Stuyvesant and the Irish, Jews, and Yuppies of Park Slope. The J’Ouvert celebration, on the other hand, takes place south of Eastern Parkway, at the intersection of the Crown Heights, Flatbush, and East Flatbush neighborhoods, deep in the heart of Brooklyn’s black West Indian community. The original route is lined with West Indian produce stores, roti shops, restaurants, bakeries, social clubs, dance halls, record stores, and Spiritual Baptist storefront churches. Half a dozen mas camps are located along the route, and eight pan yards are within a few blocks. By moving the action from the Parkway “down” to Flatbush, West Indians in general, and Trinidadians in particular, have asserted their domain over J’Ouvert.

Martha Cooper



J’Ouvert devil

Reviewing this evidence might lead to the conclusion that the J'Ouvert and Eastern Parkway celebrations have taken on distinct and perhaps oppositional connotations. J'Ouvert is Trinidadian, traditional, and community-based, evoking deep carnival symbols to reinforce a sense of shared cultural heritage. Eastern Parkway, by contrast, reflects a multi-cultural, modern, and commercial sensibility by showcasing the most contemporary pop styles, proclaiming a unity among diverse Caribbean and African-American peoples, and providing New York's politicians and private businesses with a forum to advertise their goods and services. However, like many cultural dialectics, J'Ouvert and the Parkway may ultimately complement each other. J'Ouvert strengthens internal cohesion and reinforces in-group identity, while the Parkway provides public display and cultural validation in a larger arena. Many participants see no contradiction in the two events, and some choose to participate in both. Arddin Herbert, the director of the CASYM Steel Orchestra, told me that many of the young players in his band enjoy the raucous excitement of beating pan on J'Ouvert morning, and after catching a few hours sleep head to the Parkway to jump up to soca and reggae spinning deejays. For these individuals and many like them, J'Ouvert merely becomes another choice in the kaleidoscope of Carnival events.

The recent emergence of J'Ouvert in Brooklyn underscores the incredible dynamism of the modern, urban Carnival, and its natural tendency to strike a relative balance between tradition and change. The forces of modernity and globalization have pushed Carnival to embrace new technologies, the latest popular music styles, mas themes based on contemporary media images, corporate sponsorship and tourism, and the politics of multiculturalism; but these forces are countered by the urge to revive and maintain core steel pan and ole mas traditions. If novelist and social critic Earl Lovelace is correct in contending that the "Emancipation-Jouvay spirit" has the power to transform official Carnival into "a stage for the affirmation of freedom and the expression of the triumphing human spirit," then Brooklyn J'Ouvert may serve as a source of inspiration not only for Trinidadian immigrants, but for all Afro-Caribbean New Yorkers who struggle to assert their humanity in their new American home.

Martha Cooper



Steel band plays at J'Ouvert

#### For further reading:

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