

EVENT REVIEW

Rhonda Allen

Former Director of the Sheffield Carnival
and international Carnival judge

Sensing Euphoria/Dysphoria in Carnival Culture and Judging Interview Part One

By Dr R. L. de Matas

Could you give us a brief overview of your childhood, your place of origin, and your background in the carnival space?

I was born and raised in Cocoyea Village, San Fernando, Trinidad and Tobago, where my mother cultivated in me a deep and lasting connection to carnival culture. From my earliest memories, she immersed our family in the complete carnival experience. We would attend Calypso Fiesta and Panorama Finals at Skinner Park, where I'd hold on tightly to my mum and younger sister as the crowds jumped to steel band music. I can still remember the excitement of watching the performances and helping push the steelpans into the park. On Carnival Sunday nights, our family would gather around the television for Dimanche Gras, mesmerised by the Calypso Competition finalists and the elaborate King and Queen costumes.

The real magic happened early on Carnival Monday mornings at J'ouvert. At 4:30 am, DJ Mad Man Maddy would knock his tyre rim to signal it was time, and our entire community would gather to chip down to Ciperio Street into San Fernando behind his truck. I'd excitedly search for my eldest brother playing fancy sailors with Free French Steelband, while encountering the traditional characters that make carnival so vibrant – dragons, black and blue devils, jab jabs covered in black oil paint frightening children for coins, men dressed as gorillas, and masqueraders depicting social and political issues with placards and comical outfits. On Carnival Tuesday, I'd help my mother prepare traditional dishes like pelau, fried chicken, and cheese paste sandwiches before meeting our neighbour at 6:00 am to head to Port of Spain for the Parade of Bands on Independence Square.

My dream of becoming a masquerader was born at age ten, while sitting in the Independence Square stands, when a magnificent silver stingray costume paraded by and its long tail gently grazed us in the audience. At that moment, I knew I wanted to play mas when I grew up. My mother, a talented seamstress, nurtured this passion by

creating my school carnival costumes. As an adult, I fulfilled that childhood dream, wearing costumes in our school parade and later playing mas in Stephen Derek's band for several years alongside family and friends. This journey from spectator to participant embodies the cultural legacy my mother instilled in me and my enduring connection to Trinidad's carnival tradition.

From the beginning of this journal, you have written about carnival; can you tell us about your most memorable carnival?

I have enjoyed many memorable carnivals throughout my life, but two stand out as being particularly significant. One of the most memorable was when all my children and I played J'ouvert with D'Image People in San Fernando. This experience held deep meaning for me because I felt I was passing on the legacy of carnival that my mother had given to me. Just as she had woken me and my siblings up at 4:30 am to experience the magic of J'ouvert—the community gathering, the chipping through the streets—I was now sharing these same traditions with my own children. Watching them experience the excitement and energy of J'ouvert in San Fernando and my daughters playing mas in San Fernando and Port of Spain as children and adults, I realised I was continuing a generational thread that connected my childhood memories to their own carnival journey.

Another pivotal moment occurred the first time I qualified as a costume judge and was selected to be one of the carnival judges for the King and Queen finals on 'Dimanche Gras' night in Port of Spain. This moment was profoundly full circle for me. I thought back to those Sunday nights as a child, sitting with my parents and siblings gathered around the television, looking in awe at the elaborate King and Queen costumes while we waited to hear who would be crowned. Now, decades later, I found myself not in the audience but as one of the judges making those very decisions—evaluating the artistry, craftsmanship, and presentation of the King and Queen costumes. It was a

powerful acknowledgement of how far my carnival journey had taken me, from that 10-year-old girl mesmerised by the stingray costume's tail grazing me in the stands, to becoming someone entrusted with preserving and evaluating the standards of this art form I had loved my entire life.

Are you involved in and dedicated to other events as much as carnival? Why carnival?

Yes, I'm open to experiencing other cultural events—I've judged calypso competitions and food competitions, including dessert and 'jollof' rice. However, my passion, commitment, and love for carnival come first. There's something about carnival that runs through my very core. The costumes, the steelpan, and the music, whether Soca or calypso, all speak to something deep within me.

Carnival isn't just an event I attend or participate in; it's woven into the fabric of who I am. From my earliest childhood memories of holding onto my mother's hand at Panorama Finals, to waking up at 4:30 am for J'ouvert, to that transformative moment at age ten when the stingray costume's tail grazed me and ignited my dream, carnival has been the constant thread throughout my life. It represents my heritage, my family bonds, and my cultural identity as a Trinidadian woman.

The art form itself captivates me in ways that other events simply don't. The craftsmanship and creativity involved in costume design, the thunderous energy of steel bands playing mesmerising music as they push their pans through the streets or perform in competitions, the lyrical storytelling of calypso, and the infectious rhythm of Soca combine to create an experience that is both deeply personal and universally celebratory. When I pass this legacy on to my children through J'ouvert with D'Image People, and when I step into my role as a King and Queen judge on Dimanche Gras night in Trinidad and Tobago and St. Vincent, as well as judging the Parade of the Bands, I'm not just participating in an event—I'm honouring generations of tradition and contributing to its future. That level of connection and responsibility is what makes carnival irreplaceable in my life and why my dedication to it surpasses any other event.

In your reviews, you have talked about your work as a carnival judge. How did you first get involved with judging carnivals?

My journey into carnival judging began through my late aunt, who was herself a costume carnival judge. She recognised qualities in me that I hadn't fully considered: my eye for detail, my interest in fashion trends, and my years of experience wearing costumes in bands like Stephen Derek's. She encouraged me to get involved in judging, seeing that I had both the passion and the observational skills necessary for this role.

I took her encouragement seriously and attended the interview for new costume judges, which was just the beginning of a rigorous process. I then attended comprehensive training workshops where different designers shared their expertise and craft. These workshops were incredibly educational—designers explained the technical skill of wire-bending, which forms the structural foundation of many carnival costumes. We visited mas camps, where we were exposed to trying wire-bending and other technical elements. The designers demonstrated the use of local materials as well as various imported materials, each with different properties and aesthetic possibilities. We learned about the importance of research and how designers interpret their chosen themes, translating historical, cultural, or conceptual ideas into wearable art through their costume and design concepts.

The training wasn't just observational; there was a written examination that we had to pass to become qualified costume judges. This ensured that those of us evaluating costumes truly understood the artistry, technical skill, and cultural significance behind what we were judging. Passing that examination and becoming a qualified costume judge was a proud moment for me—it validated years of being immersed in carnival culture and transformed me from a participant and observer into someone entrusted with upholding the standards of this art form that I've loved since childhood.



Carnival isn't just an event I attend or participate in; it's woven into the fabric of who I am... It represents my heritage, my family bonds, and my cultural identity as a Trinidadian woman.

Does carnival judging serve a specific purpose and can it contribute to shaping carnival culture? If so, in what way?

Yes, carnival judging plays an important role in carnival, and sometimes I feel it doesn't get the respect it deserves, which upsets me at times. When we think of the Trinidad and Tobago model of carnival, there are three main elements—the costumes, the steel band, and the music, whether Soca or calypso—and each element forms the foundation and recipe for a complete carnival. I boldly state that our carnival has been copied, reproduced, and redesigned by us in the diaspora, as Trinbagonians have taken carnival with us to every corner of the world. I make no apologies in stating that, and I'm very proud of my carnival heritage.

I've attended carnival in St. Vincent, St. Croix, and various cities in the UK, and in terms of design in the UK, some elements are missing—experimentation with various materials, research, and fresh ideas. Many costume designs are awash with the use of beads and feathers, so as a costume judge, it can become monotonous looking at the same thing over and over, even to the point that you could put all the different bands with beads and feathers together and you wouldn't know they were sadly different bands. I understand that money invested in UK carnival relies on funding and community groups have to work hard to produce mas, but this is where carnival judging becomes crucial in shaping carnival culture.

Personally, I think competition is what breeds excellence, as it encourages designers to do their research and wow both the audience and the judges. As judges, we have the responsibility to uphold standards that push designers beyond the easy repetition of beads and feathers. We assess the quality of wire-bending, the creative use of local and diverse materials, the depth of research behind a theme, and the originality of interpretation. When we reward innovation and craftsmanship over unoriginal designs, we send a clear message about what carnival should aspire to be. We preserve the artistic integrity and cultural richness that makes Trinidad and Tobago carnival the original and the standard by which all others are measured. Without rigorous judging that demands excellence, carnival risks becoming diluted into mere spectacle rather than the meaningful art form and cultural expression it has always been.

In your reviews about carnival, what is the most important message you want to convey to readers?

Carnival is an amazing, inclusive, creative experience that encompasses that feel-good vibe, whether it's wearing a costume, playing in a steel band, dancing to Soca music with your family and friends, or just being a spectator. This is the essence of what I want readers to understand when they read my reviews.

I want people to grasp that carnival is not just a party or a parade; it is a cultural celebration that welcomes everyone. From my earliest memories of holding my mother's hand at Panorama Finals to passing the tradition on to my own children at J'ouvert, I have experienced firsthand how carnival brings generations together. It creates space for families, communities, and even strangers to share in joy and creativity without barriers. Whether you're a designer spending months preparing an elaborate costume, a steelpan player practising for Panorama, a reveller chipping down the road to Soca, or someone sitting in the stands taking it all in, there is a place for you in carnival.

The creativity aspect is particularly important to me, especially in my role as a judge. I want readers to appreciate the artistry, research, and craftsmanship that goes into costume design, the skill and dedication of steel band musicians, and the storytelling power of calypso. But beyond the technical excellence, I want them to feel the spirit of carnival—that infectious energy that makes you want to move, to smile, to celebrate life.

Ultimately, through my reviews, I hope to convey that our carnival is a gift from Trinidad and Tobago to the world. It represents our heritage, our resilience, our creativity, and our joy. When I write about carnival, whether I'm judging costume design or describing the atmosphere of J'ouvert, I want readers to feel that same magic that transformed me as a 10-year-old girl watching that stingray costume. I want them to understand why carnival will always come first for me, and why it deserves to be celebrated, preserved, and elevated wherever it takes root around the world.



Article images provided by Rhonda Allen
UK Carnival and various judging appointments