

A Review of UK Carnival 2022: A Personal Narrative

Rhonda Allen

Former Director of the
Sheffield Carnival and
international Carnival judge

"...in both the Leeds and the London carnivals, costumes are worn by people of all shapes and sizes, and the aesthetics standards are mainly judged according to the artistry of the costume, rather than the beauty of the wearer" (Connor and Farrar 2004:265)

The 2022 carnival season in the United Kingdom has been a busy time for many carnivalists in the Caribbean diasporic community, having moved from online and virtual events and returned into the public space. The utopic feeling of being able to socialise outdoors with others, being able to hug, laugh, dance, whilst observing and sharing the sights, listening to the musical sounds, taking in the smell of Caribbean food cooking at the food stall, the colourful costumes and the crowds is, in itself, everything that encapsulates and celebrates what carnival means to me. I felt that I needed a refill of those moments and the atmosphere, and so I attended a few carnivals this year.

In the carnival sphere I wear a few different hats: masquerader, judge, organiser, even playing pan (musical instrument), and supporting big and small bands with making their costumes. My other persona as a carnival costume judge (as both a spectator and participant) was equally exciting, acting as a judge in Preston. I enjoyed seeing the people come out to Leeds and Huddersfield to support the carnival, particularly after such a challenging past two years and—iif that was not enough carnival for one enthusiast—I attended yet another event: this time the samba festival in Liverpool. To wrap up my carnival season tour, I attended a live music performance. Admittedly, I am a die-hard soca fan and could barely contain my excitement at seeing and experiencing soca artist Bunji Garlin in Manchester.

It was an exhilarating feeling to be back in costume in Luton as a masquerader, and the thought of wearing a costume again brought me so much excitement. The night before performing in Luton I was anxious, because I still enjoy the euphoria or adrenaline rush of wearing

a costume and seeing the reaction of the audience, as I dance and parade behind the music truck playing soca music. My costume portrayal was an interpretation of peace, love and unity for a sickle cell organisation in the UK, and was all white – a white headpiece, adorned with white feathers, embellished with beautiful and sparkling beads that sparkled in the sunshine, with a white top and tabard, leggings, arm and leg bands, and a white dove in flight as our backpack. The designer, who was the queen of our section, wore a costume themed 'peace', displaying a white dove with a red beak, flowing white sleeves, white trousers, and a magnificent headpiece similar to the one I wore.

Through my personal experience, I will now explore a few things that I noticed in the various cities I visited. Some were attention-grabbing and empowering, others frustrating and disappointing. Based on my experience wearing a costume and as a carnival judge, I noticed some troupes (bands) were able to deliver creative and colourful designs that had a theme and a focus, however, others perhaps could have done a bit more. For example, I felt that some bands seemed to have been grouped together as one troupe, with little thought about different themes, and some costume ideas and



Image Luton Carnival 2022, courtesy of the author

design demonstrated either a lack of time, imagination or creativity beyond simply feathers and beads.

In Luton there were adults and children showcasing their costumes, and we had to battle with the weather elements—rain, cold and then hot sunshine—throughout the event. The audience in Luton consisted of varying ethnicities and ages, lining the streets as they cheered on the troupes while we paraded through the city centre in costumes of varying colours, sizes, heights and weights. I enjoyed still being able to wear a costume, as this keeps me grounded in understanding the concepts of designers and sharing that feeling of being a participant, whereby the onlooker and the participant are sharing the same space public space.

The carnival in Deighton was a smaller event, with a few costumed masqueraders. The parade began in the local park, and went through the local community before returning to the starting point. I enjoyed the experience of 'chipping' behind the music truck through the streets of the local community, and felt happy and excited seeing the children and families coming out of their houses to wave. Some joined in with parents, others joined the procession on their bikes, feeling a sense of belonging and that they were welcome to join in the carnival activity.

The samba festival in Liverpool was smaller in size this year, with less bands performing. However, there was still a feeling that people wanted to come out and support the parade, as it was an opportunity to see friends, dance and enjoy the carnival-like atmosphere. The drumming was enjoyable and the costumes had the Brazilian feel and the dancing that entertained the crowd.

At Preston carnival, I joined a team of judges, where we were responsible for looking at the costumes and performances. It was an interesting experience as there were not many troupes, but the hearts and passion of the masqueraders filled that space, and seeing the live steelband playing on the back of the truck was an added bonus. Unfortunately, the weather once again had an impact on the day's procession. Though the sunshine fought to come through, sadly the rain won over, and in the end the troupes returned to the park to perform for the audience and judges despite the rain, as it did not dampen the enthusiasm of the masqueraders as they danced their rehearsed performances.



Image Samba festival, Liverpool 2022, courtesy of the author

In Leeds, as there was not a judging element of costumes and troupes, I was able to attend with my friend and enjoy the proceeding as a spectator. Additionally, I escorted the Mayor and his wife around the carnival event at the Potternewton Park in Chapel Town, highlighting the Caribbean cuisine, beverages and, of course, the costumes on parade. I truly believe that Soca music is made for carnival to be performed on the road, and there were some elements during the event that I feel should be addressed. I feel there was a limited amount of Soca music being played on the road, there should be a better balance of old and newer songs, and updated Soca music for the troupes and onlookers to appreciate how the music has evolved, which is the complete opposite of the costume designs that I witnessed. In fact, soca artists produce soca songs for the carnival troupes and this shows the level and commitment, creativity and versatility of the artform to create music annually.

I also attended to a soca event at the Madhouse in Manchester, featuring Bunji Garlin: a soca artist from Trinidad and Tobago. The event was well attended, with popular soca DJ's and eager 'soca lovers'. It was an



Image Costume Judging on the road, Preston Carnival 2022, courtesy of the author

exciting, vibrant and inclusive event, with nationalities from all over the world, displaying their country's flag and all enjoying themselves to the infectious and powerful soca music. Garlin did not fail to deliver, performing his renditions of old and new songs, such as 'Big Bad Soca'. The event made me feel nostalgic, bringing back memories of attending soca parties in Trinidad and Tobago for the carnival season. The hype and energy that soca music brings to an event evokes a feel-good feeling that truly transports you. In the appropriate reflective words of the Rector of All Saints Canon Richard Jacob:

"...we believe God is the source of all that is creative and good. We celebrate what is good and uplifting and give folks an opportunity to rethink how we express that God-given creativity at carnival"
(Rector of All Saints' Cathedral, Trinidad and Tobago)

In my opinion, (based on the events attended, mentioned above) the costumed troupes seem to be getting smaller, while the crowd of spectators is growing larger. Spectators stand near by the static sound systems, blocking the costumed troupes from performing. Carnival organisations are concerned that they are hosting a carnival where soca music—one of the most important elements of carnival—is not being played at the events, replaced by reggae music. If UK carnival is to survive, the organisers need to look at the history of carnival, beyond the buzz words of inclusivity and cohesion, and include soca music as the true accompaniment for the culture. My sentiments



Image Sharing a moment with Simon Bundy, Leeds Carnival 2022, courtesy of the author

are shared by soca artist Mr Killa 'if you don't like soca what you doing here'. I am pleased that carnival has returned to streets and the community, as this offers an opportunity for people to improve their mental health and wellbeing by enjoying the outdoor ambience, to meet, greet, laugh, dance, sing, enjoy good food, be in costume or stand on the sidelines, whichever way one was part of the carnival event. Hopefully, this will allow all the stakeholders in carnival to bring fresh and new design ideas, rethink, regroup and recharge.

References

- Cardinez, Gary, 'Glorious mas', *Trinidad and Tobago Newsday*, 20 (2018), <[#### Open Access](https://newsday.co.tt/2018/09/20/glorious-mas/#:~:text=There%20is%20an%20air%20of,%2Dgiven%20creativity%20at%20Carnival.%E2%80%9D>val-dzaleka-refugee-camp-malawi> [accessed 2021]</p>
<p>Connor, Geraldine and Max Farrar, 'Carnival in Leeds and in London', in <i>Carnival: Culture in Action: The Trinidad Experience</i>, ed. by Milla Cozart Riggio, (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 265</p>
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