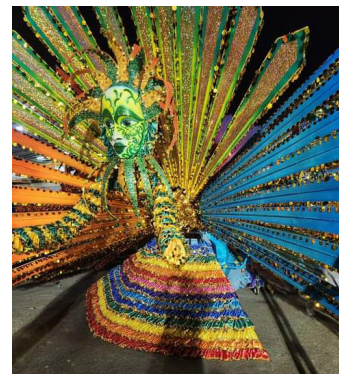


Review of Carnival 2023: A Reflective Perspective

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“ Carnival with all its grandeur and beauty in order to live (remember it cannot die) must be transported (legally and otherwise) to all corners of the globe. Therefore, Carnival has become an international festival and an international discourse – a discourse that is opening and conquering new people, new cultures, new horizons and new societies” (Grant 2004)

Trinidad images
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In this article I explore my visits to various carnivals, both in the UK and internationally, where I have been involved as an observer/participant, masquerader and costume judge. My 2023 carnival tour began with a sense of nostalgia that I always encounter when returning home to my native Trinidad and Tobago, with this year's carnival having been dubbed the "mother of all carnivals". I looked forward to hearing the latest calypsoes, soca music, steelband performances, 'jouvert', the carnival fetes, and marvelling at the creative costume designs, updated for 2023.

Trinidad and Tobago: The Music

'So soca must live and never die' Olatunji (Soca song 2023 Engine Room)

Calypso music is a vibrant, controversial, and socially captivating genre that is deeply rooted in my own culture. Calypso music originated in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T), and therefore holds a significant place in the country's history and identity. Mason (1998) states, "*calypso can be party music taken to its limits and it can be biting social satire, or anything in between, but it is born and bred in Trinidad, and the people love it for that..... Calypso lives and breathes carnival*" (1998: 9).

In this section, I will share my views on the soca music that I heard throughout my carnival tour – the music this year was especially palatable and engaging, and it was a pleasant surprise to see a departure from wine, jam, and women's body parts being the subject matter of the musical hook. It demonstrated the vibrancy of soca music, which was widely regarded to have been created in Trinidad and Tobago by the late Ras Shorty I, who experimented with a fusion of soul, reggae, chutney, and African and Latin musical styles.

The rhythmic energy of soca music is uplifting and infectious – the lively beats and catchy melodies always put me in a good mood and encourage me to dance. Love, celebration, and cultural pride are common themes in the lyrics, which add an extra layer of positivity to the genre. Among the soca songs I heard this year were 'Shelter' by Bunji Garlin, 'Hard Fete' by Bunji Garlin, 'The Spirit Calling Me' by Machel Montano, 'Shelter' by Bunji Garlin, 'Hard Fete' by Bunji Garlin, 'The Spirit Calling Me' by Machel Montano, 'Like Yourself' by Machel Montano and Patrice Roberts and 'Bless the Fete' by Patrice Roberts.

Panorama

In my opinion, the Panorama Steelband competition is an exhilarating and vibrant showcase of talent and cultural heritage. This annual event brings together steel bands from across Trinidad and Tobago to compete for the coveted title of Panorama Champion.

The visit to the pan yards, listening to the steel bands rehearse for the panorama competition, is an experience like no other. Interestingly, steelpan aficionado Dr Kim Johnson notes that this situation is unique in that listening to the steel bands rehearse in their pan yards leading up to the event is generally not permitted in any other musical competition.

"You can only experience the power and glory of the steelpan in TT. You can only hear a full 120-member band here. I will go further, to say to fully experience pan, you have to be able to go in a panyard and hear them when they practise. That camaraderie, that vibe, that experience, is unique. When you go, you are integrated into the band" (Johnson 2021).

The competition serves as a platform for these talented musicians to demonstrate their skill, creativity, and musical prowess. Each Steelband meticulously prepares their arrangement, blending traditional calypso and soca rhythms with contemporary elements to create a unique sound that captivates audiences. Not only does the Panorama Steelband competition provide entertainment for spectators, but it also

plays a significant role in preserving and promoting our culture. The performances are infused with rich cultural traditions, showcasing the history and spirit of carnival through the sound of the steel band.

The rivalry amongst the steel bands is invigorating as pan players find enthusiasm in displaying their versatility in playing the various pans. The steel band is made up of the Frontline Pans (the tenor, double tenor, and double seconds pans); the Mid-Range (the quadraphonic, cello and guitar pans); the Background (tenor bass, plus six bass and between seven to nine bass pans) and the Engine Room (the percussion and rhythm section). The Panorama finals are held at the Queen's Park Savannah in the capital of Trinidad, Port-Of-Spain. Personally, I do not go into the paying stands to listen to the final night performances – I prefer to stand on the 'drag', which is a paved area leading to the Queen's Park Savannah Carnival Stage. It is a popular spot for carnival activities, such as masquerade bands, calypso tents, and steelpan competitions, but is also known for its street food vendors, who sell local delicacies such as doubles, corn soup, chicken and chips and roti. Listening to steel bands rehearse before going onto the stage evokes a real feeling of nostalgia because, as a child, my mother would take my siblings and I to Skinner Park, where the finals of the panorama were held in the 1970s. I remember the crowds, excitement, the dust rising from people jumping, shoving and pushing, the pans, the feeling of holding on tightly to my mother's hand, the smell of oranges, rum, guava flavour from the snow cone and the smells of so many different kinds of food. Those memories have stayed with me, and reliving them as an adult transports me back to those fond childhood moments that I can somewhat replicate while standing and looking on from on the 'drag'. The pan supporters push the pans along with the pan players, I listen to the steelbands rehearse their tune of choice before going onto the Savannah Stage to be judged, I watch the crowds of supporters converge to support, critic and discuss the pan arrangement and who will win the panorama this year.

The Panorama Steelband competition fosters a sense of community among participants and supporters. It brings people together in celebration of music, artistry, and unity. Overall, I believe that the Panorama Steelband competition is an essential part of our culture. It celebrates musical excellence while preserving traditions and fostering a sense of identity within local communities.

All those involved in the many Steelband orchestras truly deserve to be congratulated, and I hope they know that their involvement and commitment are recognised and appreciated. I sincerely thank them for taking me along on this musical journey, as I am never disappointed.

My Perspective on Carnival Costumes, as a Judge

Kiddies Carnival

The event that brings me so much joy and hope for the future is the 'Kiddies Carnival'. The effort, creativity and innovation of the designers, parents and young people is evident, as they put on a spectacle of colour, beauty and innocence in the costumes, 'playing mas' with such admiration and glee. I have the utmost respect for costume designers who create amazing, colourful and avant-garde designs for the children's bands, such as Rosalind Gabriel, Zebaquik Productions (Allen Brothers), Lilliput Theatre, but also the schools, community groups, parents, teachers and young people that also design their own costumes.

A large number of the children's troupes perform in serpentine formation which is, in my opinion, a fantastic choice for group performances, as it not only showcases the beauty of this art form, but also highlights the power of collaboration and unity among dancers. The serpentine dance involves a series of sinuous and graceful movements, mimicking the motions of a snake, and the fluid, synchronised movements of the participants create an enchanting visual spectacle that captivates audiences. The dancers create intricate patterns and formations that add depth and complexity to the performance. Group performances also offer more space for creativity and coordination among masqueraders, incorporating different levels, formations and transitions to enhance the overall impact of the dance, while also creating a sense of unity among the participants as they work together to bring their vision to life. This sense of camaraderie helps the dancers learn to trust each other's movements, timing and cues, creating a visually stunning performance.

In my opinion, costumes play a significant role in making the carnival experience enjoyable and memorable for children. Carnival is a time of celebration and excitement, and dressing up in vibrant costumes adds to the festive spirit. Children love to transform into their favourite characters—whether that be superheroes, princesses, animals, or mythical creatures—as costumes allow them to immerse themselves in their imagination, and bring their dreams to life. Not only do these costumes spark creativity and imagination, but they also promote social interaction – indeed, when children see each other dressed up in different costumes, it becomes a fun conversation starter and encourages them to engage with one another. Moreover, wearing carnival costumes can boost a child's self-confidence as, by embodying a character that they admire or aspire to be like, children feel empowered and more willing to express themselves freely during the festivities.

A large amount of careful consideration goes into the designing of age-appropriate and comfortable costumes for children that ensure both their safety and enjoyment during carnival celebrations. Parents should take into account factors such as size, fabric quality, ease of movement and any potential allergy concerns when selecting the perfect costume for their child. As long as these issues are addressed, children's carnival costumes add an extra layer of magic and joy to this special occasion, and allow them to fully embrace the spirit of celebration while unleashing their creativity and imagination.

King and Queen Costumes

Carnival costumes are an integral part of the vibrant and joyous celebrations that take place during carnival season, adding a special touch of excitement and creativity to the festivities. Carnival costumes allow individuals to express their unique personalities and immerse themselves in the spirit of the event – they come in all shapes, sizes and themes, from traditional cultural attire to fantastical creations inspired by mythology or popular culture.

The attention to detail and craftsmanship that goes into creating carnival costumes is to be admired, whether it be hand-sewn embellishments, intricate beadwork or elaborate headpieces, these costumes showcase the skill and dedication of their creators. Moreover, wearing a carnival costume can be a transformative experience. It allows both the wearer and spectators to temporarily step out of their everyday lives and embody a different persona or character, while encouraging self-expression, fostering a sense of belonging within a community and creating unforgettable memories. Carnival costumes are not just outfits: they are an embodiment of celebration, creativity and

cultural heritage that bring joy to participants and spectators alike, adding an extra layer of magic to the carnival experience.

When attending Carnival the Queens Park Savannah in Port-of Spain, Trinidad, I walked along the track as designers were putting their costumes together to perform before the judges. I was pleased with their use of local materials, steering away from the often overbearing, over-used feathers and beads that are common in many carnivals of this nature. In fact, some costumes did not use feathers at all, and it is refreshing to see designers utilising different, innovative materials while still maintaining the striking width and height that carnival costumes are traditionally known for. Some designers even implemented Pyrotechnics and engineering – the King and Queen costumes were particularly impressive, with much time and effort clearly having gone into such majestic, masterpieces of visual art that glide, turn, spin and rotate across the Savannah stage, while the traditional 'Moko jumbies' evoked a sense of nostalgia, walking tall and proud on their stilts. The history of the Moko Jumbies is particularly interesting, with Coomansing (2019) noting: *"traditional part of Caribbean culture, particularly in Trinidad and Tobago. They are still walkers or dancers who wear colourful garb and carnival masks. The face of a Moko Jumbie is usually completely covered, obscuring their human identity, even if they do not wear a decorative mask. The name "Moko" means healer in Central Africa, while "jumbi" is a West Indian term for a ghost or spirit that may have been derived from the Kongo language word zumbi. The Moko Jumbies are thought to originate from West African tradition brought to the Caribbean.....In Trinidad and Tobago, the Moko Jumbie is considered a god who watches over his village and is able to foresee danger and evil due to his towering height. The Moko Jumbie would be represented by men on towering stilts and perform acts that were unexplainable to the human eye"* (Coomansing 2019).

Jouvert

Jouvert is a pre-dawn street party that marks the start of Carnival festivities, and is a vibrant and exhilarating celebration that takes place annually in Trinidad and Tobago, widely regarded as one of the most exciting and unique cultural experiences in the world. The energy and enthusiasm displayed by participants during this event is truly infectious, as the streets come alive with music and dancing, with many participants wearing costumes or even painting their bodies with mud, oil and brightly coloured paints.

Jouvert's historical significance is particularly fascinating, having originated from the emancipation celebrations of enslaved Africans, who would gather before dawn to express their freedom through music and dance. This rich history adds an extra layer of depth to the event, and attending Jouvert allows you to immerse yourself in the local culture and witness firsthand the pride that Trinidadians have for their heritage. It's an opportunity to let go of inhibitions, embrace spontaneity, and join a joyous celebration like no other.

It is, however, important to note that Jouvert can also be quite an intense and overwhelming experience for some individuals due to its energetic nature. Though it may not be to everyone's taste, it offers a unique blend of history, culture, excitement and community spirit for adventurous spirits, filled with music, dancing, and cultural immersion.

Too excited to sleep the night before, on the day of Jouvert I woke up at 4 am to get ready with my family. The experience for me is very much a family-oriented one, as not only

do I spend general quality time with my adult children, my sister and my son-in-law, but we also perform in a band together as part of the Jouvèrt celebrations. We all got into our Jouvèrt outfits—ensuring we had our sunscreen, mug, rucksack sunglasses and, of course, positive energy—before arriving at D'Image People Jouvèrt camp, where we have been loyal members of the band for over 10 years. Breakfast consisted of a mouth-watering array of 'Trini' breakfast delicacies such as 'doubles', bake and chow mein, bake and cheese, bake and saltfish, aloo (potato) pie, corn soup, coffee, tea and orange juice. We gathered together as the DJ truck arrived, prayed and headed off on the route to the judging point, listening to the various soca sounds and the lyrics of Patrice Roberts' 'Bless the Fete'.

Parade Of The Bands: Adult Mas on the Streets

The Parade of the Carnival Bands in Trinidad is a vibrant and lively event that showcases the rich cultural heritage of the country and is, in my opinion, a spectacle that should not be missed. Trinidad's Carnival is renowned worldwide for its extravagant costumes, infectious music and captivating performances, with the parade bringing together bands that each represent a unique theme or concept. From traditional masquerade characters to modern interpretations, the creativity displayed by these bands is truly awe-inspiring – in particular, I enjoyed seeing the traditional Red Indian Mas and Fancy Sailors, accompanied by the steel bands that keep the community spirit alive as they chipped along the road.

Attending the Parade Of The Carnival Bands in Trinidad allows visitors to immerse themselves in the festive atmosphere and experience the energy and enthusiasm of both participants and spectators firsthand. The vibrant colours, rhythmic music, and infectious dancing create an electrifying ambiance that resonates throughout the streets. Moreover, this event offers an opportunity to appreciate and celebrate Trinidadian culture, providing insights into local traditions, folklore and history through artistic expression, street theatre, and the elaborate, intricate costumes that often convey powerful messages or narratives.

Whether a visitor or a local resident, the Parade Of The Carnival Bands offers an unforgettable experience that celebrates diversity, unity, creativity, joy and synergy. A catharsis experience like no other, attendees can truly feel the Spirit of Carnival really call to them.

In conclusion, I believe that attending all the carnival events that are on offer—the calypso tents, fetes, the children's Parade Of Bands, King and Queen of The Bands, Panorama Finals Steelband finals, Jouvèrt and the Parade of the Carnival Bands—is an absolute must for anyone wanting to immerse themselves in this enchanting cultural extravaganza.

United Kingdom

Luton Carnival

The weather was kind to Luton carnival as the sun shone, allowing the masqueraders and the audience to make the most of the day. I was fortunate enough to have walked along the carnival route to take pictures of the various troupes, with participants having travelled from all around the UK. It was particularly good to see such inclusivity at the event, with so many different communities and faiths involved in the carnival parade, including performances from Ghanaian, Nigerian, South Asian and Ukrainian dancers.

The Moko Jumbies performed on stilts in their colourful and flowing costumes, while children masqueraders of all ages and ethnicities danced to the child-friendly soca music being played from the groups taking part in the parade. Though some DJs played more modern soca music, it was the old soca songs that seemed to be the order of the day – though it is always good to hear the classics, I personally believe that it's incredibly important to champion new artists too. The atmosphere was electric – the weather was sunny and hot, the crowds were bustling, the smell of Caribbean food hung in the air while people queued to purchase food and greeted their friends as a steel band played.

Barking and Dagenham

I attended Barking and Dagenham Carnival on July 8, 2023, though this time I was looking through the lens of an assessor. This was a new experience, as I had to take in every aspect of the event in much more detail than usual, in order to present a report after the event. It was important to note both the elements that I liked and also those that could be developed, in order to assist festival organisers in creating a fresh, new carnival experience that still maintains a traditional element of carnival, such as using steelband, mas' and soca music and focusing on youth involvement.

Though there were intermittent rain showers occurred throughout the day's activities, they did not dampen the spirit of participants and spectators. This was also in part a result of the event's musical performances, which were hugely uplifting and kept the carnival vibe, engagement and energy alive. Drum Works' opening performance was very energetic, setting the carnival tone for the day, with the young people playing in the band performing with great enthusiasm.

In addition, there were performances from two youth steel orchestras—including Kingsdale Foundation School, who won the Steelband School-O-Rama competition—playing popular songs that had the audience dancing and singing along. The IROKO African Drumming gave a rhythmic and spirited performance by male and female drummers, dressed in brightly coloured green African attire. Some of the female drummers were also dancing, and encouraged participation from the audience – indeed, some joined in and seemed to enjoy themselves!

An Afro-Portuguese Community, Capoeira & Batuque, provided a fantastic performance, representing the Brazilian Community with the use of sticks and choreographed dancing and drumming. Resident DJs then entertained the audience with uplifting soca music from the past and present, supported by various musical accompaniments, and the sound system was of good quality, evidenced by the clear sound through heavy rain showers.

The vibrancy and energy of the event superseded the damp conditions, with its masqueraders, adorned in colourful costumes and dancing to infectious rhythms, creating an atmosphere that is truly captivating. The presence of traditional characters such as the Moko Jumbies dancing on their stilts, and the performance by soca artist Trini Juice, had the audience participating in the celebrations, with even the mayoress joining in. In addition to the music and dance, attendees could enjoy food stalls serving various Caribbean dishes such as saltfish fritters, rice and peas, mac and cheese, coleslaw, jerk chicken and fried chicken, as well as craft stalls and the opportunity to take a picture wearing a carnival headpiece.

Having rehearsed for months leading up to the carnival, the performances showcased diverse cultures, ages and genders, with masqueraders old and young having travelled from across the world. It was, however, the international performers from Trinidad and Tobago such as the 'Dame Lorrianes' that brought the carnival to a resounding and unforgettable carnival finish, with a culmination of all the costumes and masqueraders.

Nothing Hill Carnival

The Notting Hill Carnival, held annually in London, is known for its vibrant atmosphere and diverse cultural displays. There are many positive aspects of Nothing Hill carnival, and I truly hope that the media will highlight the positive elements of this uplifting event. Often, the media presents a massive bias, focussing on the presence of drugs, theft, crime, drunkenness and reckless behaviour that can be present at most large events, result in the carnival being perceived as dangerous and unsafe to attend. I strongly believe that we must work together to commend our young people for their involvement in positive activities, and not let the reckless and risky behaviour of a small minority spoil the effort and commitment of others. In this section, I would like to share my personal experience and offer my opinion on steelband competitions. Having attended several over the years, I have come to appreciate the unique artistry and cultural significance that these events bring. On my first night in Nothing Hill festivities, I attended some of the rehearsals, and it was so uplifting to see so many young people of different ethnicities and background practising their pan playing with such enthusiasm, concentration, commitment and discipline, which must be recognised, appreciated and praised.

I attended the Panorama Steelband Finals on August 26, 2023, and which was an exhilarating and joyful experience. The bad weather did not dampen the spirits of those in attendance, with the musical arrangements from the young pannists put the audience in a trance, as they were taken on a captivating musical journey.

Steelband competitions showcase the talent and skill of musicians who masterfully play instruments made from discarded oil drums. The rhythmic melodies produced by these ensembles create a lively and infectious atmosphere that captivates both participants and spectators alike. In my opinion, steelband competitions not only celebrate the rich musical heritage of Caribbean culture, but also serve as a platform for fostering camaraderie among participants. The dedication, discipline and teamwork required to deliver a flawless performance in these competitions is truly commendable.

Furthermore, steelband competitions also provide an opportunity for talented musicians to gain recognition on a larger scale. Winning or placing in such prestigious events can open doors to professional opportunities and help propel their careers within the music industry. These events not only showcase incredible musical talent but also foster a sense of community and pride in cultural traditions.

The carnival continued on August 26-28, where, this time, I was involved in a professional capacity as Head Judge for Nothing Hill Carnival. I enjoyed working alongside my fellow judges and adjudicator, DJ Martin Jay, the staff, members of the Nothing Hill Trust and so many more interesting people who made the experience unforgettable. I watched the children's bands, 'Dutty Mas', T-shirts, costumed bands, Samba and Brazilian bands and steel pan performers on both days. The costumes in particular were to be commended,

as the designers' thorough research, creativity, artistry and innovation was evident, and had a huge impact on the overall experience. It was a privilege to witness such incredible craftsmanship – from intricate beadwork to elaborate headdresses, every detail was meticulously designed and executed, and it was fascinating to see how each costume represented different themes and cultural influences through the breathtakingly beautiful colours and patterns used.

Being part of the judging panel allowed me to appreciate the participants' hard work and dedication even more so than I would have as a spectator, and it is so wonderful to preservation of cultural heritage through these stunning costumes. It was evident that countless hours of planning, sewing and crafting went into creating these masterpieces, and interacting with the participants further enhanced my experience. Their enthusiasm and pride was infectious as they shared stories behind their designs, making for a joyous celebration of culture, diversity and artistic expression. My experience as a judge at Notting Hill Carnival emphasised how important it is to embrace different cultures and showcase creativity on such grand platforms. I am grateful to have been part of this incredible event that truly captures London's multicultural spirit. Unfortunately, the carnival judging experience left much to be desired due to a lack of innovation and design in costumes. I felt that many were somewhat boring and unimaginative, failing to capture the excitement and vibrancy that is typically associated with carnival celebrations. Throughout the judging process, I couldn't help but feel disappointed by the lack of creativity displayed in some of the costumes. Many seemed to be repetitive and lacked originality, making it slightly more difficult to appreciate the huge amount of effort put into their creation. It appeared as though there was a missed opportunity to push boundaries and truly showcase the artistry that goes into designing carnival costumes.

In conclusion, my experience with carnival costume judging highlighted a need for more innovative and imaginative designs. By injecting fresh ideas and pushing creative boundaries, future events can reignite excitement and captivate audiences, resulting in a more memorable celebration.

At times, I feel a juxtaposition in terms of costume and design as I have been bombarded with feathers being used to project every theme under the sun, I feel like there is a need to stop and reset, go back to previous designers and learn the basics of the art, creativity and designing a costume that has depth and imagination. This has been an interesting and hectic carnival experience, where I have been lucky enough to see carnival through the eyes of a spectator, masquerader and a costume judge, and I look forward to the events I will attend and review in the future.



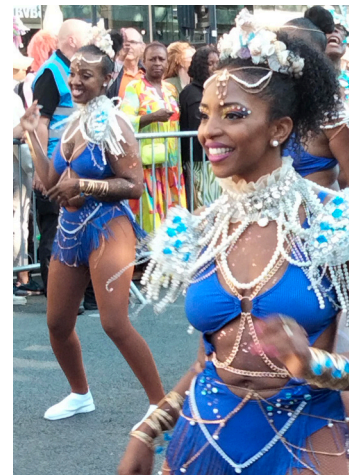
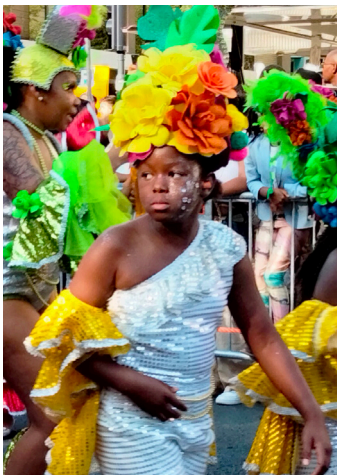
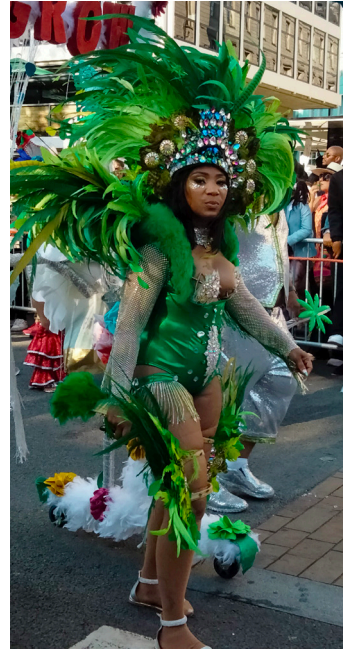
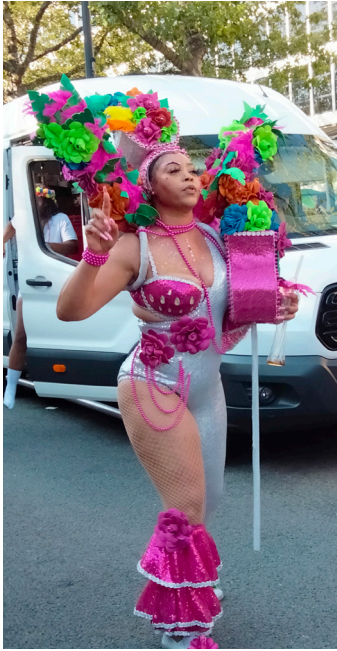
The Netherlands: Rotterdam Carnival

My first visit to Rotterdam Carnival was an exciting and invigorating experience, that truly exceeded expectations, with a standout aspect being the energetic live stage performances. I walked around and listened to music from the 'Dutch Caribbean', Zouk and soca music, sampling different foods and enjoying the atmosphere – I particularly enjoyed the delicious 'bari', which is a fried, seasoned dough served with a tomato and spicy tamarind sauce, and is a speciality from Surinam.

The parade of costumed bands, which took place on the Saturday of the event, consisted of approximately 25 participants. They came through an orderly fashion, accompanied by live DJs and steel bands on the trucks adorned in colourful, creative, innovative and beautiful costumes. Similarly to my experience at the Trinidad carnival, it was refreshing to see designers stepping away from the norm and not simply relying on beads and feathers for their costumes. Instead, their intricate attire reflected themes ranging from historical events to folklore or simply artistic expression, adding an element of visual splendour to the festivities. There were many striking headpieces with intricate use of fabric, plastic-moulded craft, cardboard, materials, papier mâché, wire bending craftsmanship, hats and wigs.

One cannot overlook the immense community spirit that permeated the Rotterdam Caribbean carnival. Participants come together as one big family – united by a love for their heritage and the desire to celebrate it with others. This sense of camaraderie creates an atmosphere that fosters inclusivity and ensures that everyone feels welcome.

However, one could not attend an event without any element of controversy. The organisers of the event did not want masqueraders 'twerking' or dancing in a sensual manner, so two bands displayed a protest when passing the VIP seats and mayoral balcony. The first opted to turn their music off, expressing their frustration at the organisers' attempts to control the carnival, claiming that they had been taken back to an era 400 years ago. Another played Machel Montano and Patrice Roberts' song "Like Yurself", which contains lyrics that mirrored their discourse with the organisers.



Rotterdam images
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