

## Memories of Carnival... 1<sup>st</sup> Instalment

From Bob Heath

I started working on Carnival in 1988 as part of My Degree- Art in Society, It was the first time I had really encountered Afro- Caribbean People in Preston and the experience was a real eye opener.

On my first day I sat with a very quiet dark skinned man who was a friend of Gana Mcoys and sat as he seriously and intently placed Christmas Baubles onto a Strange looking Backpack piece... a sort of cross between a tree and something used by North American Indians in Shamanic rituals...I was intrigued by the seriousness of the event but also the underlying comedy even absurdity of the act..At this time Gana Mcoy was the head artist and a very imposing figure he was indeed. He would come around get upset about something- some act of sabotage or band that had asked him to do something he clearly wasn't interested in doing and then put us rookies from College to task... He made myself and Alastair Price another artist from College make and remake "The Santa Maria" Christopher Columbus's Ship (made out of hardboard and painted up ) five or six times- just to make sure it would get out the doors of the Catherine Beckett club (situated on Meadow street in Deepdale).

One day Gana came into work after his day job as a tin -basher to find his tool box completely filled to the brim with contact adhesive... he was fuming and put it down to more acts of sabotage this time with racist connotations as there had been the bad words flung at us by the over 70's dancing club who shared the venue...

Anyhow through all the various shenanagins I began to realise I was hooked on Carnival. My first road march was half spent asleep from Meadow Street on aboard one of the trucks worse the wear from drinking too much rum bedecked out in a pseudo Egyptian costume... A balloon had sufficed for the paper -mache hat/ mask and a cloak and some odd leggings... I looked more like a cast off from a Roxy music covers band ( before the days when covers band were legitimate) Alastair looked much better with an Alligator God head and Doc Martin boots too match!!! ( we were Egyptians!!!)

What I think intrigued me about carnival was you only got a small glimpse of what it was or what it meant,- to me - to Gana - to the greater Afro Caribbean community of Preston. Like peeling away the skin of an onion to find another layer.

What I can say is it meant a lot of things to the Afro- Caribbean Community and in those days on Carnival Monday Preston was full of Afro-Caribbean families and friends up to see the first Carnival of the season. People dressed neat- looked sharp. Preston was packed- at night there "blues" – informal dances going on in Caribbean houses everywhere. The towns clubs were

packed.. The Caribbean club would be rocking till 4.00 or later in the morning. Outside during carnival day sound systems would set up with Bass bins that would churn your stomach they were so loud playing the latest mix of soca and reggae... Needless to say lots of alcohol was consumed and dancing done... It was better than raving!!

I began to meet loads more Characters at the Caribbean Club. I remember my first meeting chaired by Pyro- Roland Alison Thomas ( Chairman of Preston Caribbean Carnival Committee) The imposing figure who was more like Napoleon to Al and myself. In the 70's and 80's and early 90's he was the head of the Carnival and his band always or nearly always won by fair means or foul... or so other band leaders thought. Anyhow this first meeting quickly descended into a heated argument conducted in a very Caribbean fashion - hot like chilli but over in a flash with the combatants now on friendly terms drinking with each other at the Bar.. The animosity forgotten... But one thing I began to realise was that Carnival was deadly serious and revered in an almost holy fashion by the Caribbean community it was worth arguing about because of the time and commitment the various bands put into their costumes but also what it all meant.

Part of the problem was the judging which has always been arbitrary and tenuous... Someone has to win... Some group will always try to dominate Carnival... In the 80's it was certainly the Dominicans... They loved their mas .. Dominican mas is slightly different to Trinidad and Tobago Mas - its freer as Gana used to explain and there were more Dominicans in Preston. Gana was Dominican so was Pyro, so were most of the Bandleaders. One of the favorite costumes of the Dominicans was the Sensay- a ropey man costume Originally thought to have come with the Slaves from West Africa from the Twi people where Sensay is a type of feathery fowl.

One time Gana told me the story of Mas back home which was seen as a whole different affair to this watered down British event .Vendettas were played out on Carnival day - a lover might try to right a wrong caused by a third party. Three or four Sensays were dancing together the pieces made from rope from ships.. somebody who had an issue with one of the wearers decided to set him alight, because the ropes were treated with paraffin they were extremely flammable. The Sensay wearers friends tried to extinguish the flames and were burnt themselves.. That day three guys died and afterwards Sensay costumes were banned for a while as they were deemed to be too dangerous to wear.

I was often told by Dominicans that Mas was a serious business, that the ancestors would be about come carnival day, that wrongs would be righted that the truth would be out. Ingrid Merrifield who was my Second Boss after Pyro told me guys used to come out with bullwhips back home on Carnival day. And that wearing a piece could be a punishment for your wrongdoings of the year...

Carnival was beginning to place itself in my head as a very serious business-

spiritual, creative, almost cathartic even shamanistic but always with a touch of fun.

It was a place, or the space of an alternative world trying to come into being forged through the catastrophic events of forced migration and slavery – a place where every soul that passes could meet- on equal terms.

Thankfully Sensays have now returned to Dominican mas. Look them up on Google especially with cow horns they are great to see as they are not "Pretty Mas." Which is all feathers and fancy trims looking more like something somebody on Strictly Come dancing would wear.. Sensays have lineage directly back to Africa. Through Slavery via the plantations where Carnival developed as the slaves day off in the year. Where social conventions were dropped and the slaves could let their hair down, party and take the rise out of their masters whose fashion of the time was to have masquerade balls. It is a great shame now that the Dominican influence has dropped off in terms of Preston Carnival. With their leaving – mainly through retirement Gana will be nearly 80,. Pyro left in 1992 and died in Dominca in 1996 still playing Mas. Now much of the meaning, humour, symbolism and mystique of Carnival has gone. Though Carnival still looks good on the road it has changed. It is safer and more predictable, a family event for the inhabitants of Preston.

Gone are the individuals who would turn up on the day who had worked on their pieces at home to join in the masquerade -some uninvited- but always welcomed into the throng. One year I went as "Death" only to meet another "Death " on the road.. it turned out to be Cecil Walsh- A Dominican Rasta who lived near me in Avenham though at the time I didnt Know him " Oh Sh..t!!! "he said as he saw me "if I'd known you were coming I 'd have come as something else!!!"