



Carnival and the performance of heritage

Notting Hill Carnival: history

1948:

Britain actively recruits Caribbean workers to help rebuild its economy.

Darcus Howe:

This is a part of the Caribbean history in England.

Chris Mullard:

The race relations debate changed quite radically during the sixties.

Claire Holder:

Notting Hill has a particular significance in the life of black people in this country.

Chris Mullard:

This is the only major cultural institution that has an authorship that is black.

Darcus Howe:

People came and made it an event and if you don't understand that, you do not understand carnival at all.

Ansel Wong

former carnival chair

Ansel Wong:

The main traditions we drew on was based on the carnival that most of us were familiar with in Trinidad and Tobago. Carnival has an historical continuity; it's rooted very much post-emancipation in the struggle for freedom, so it's important to recognise that historical route and that long link with rebellion, with resistance very much is in evidence here in Notting Hill. Trinidad Carnival also has a link to European festivals, because there's a historical colonial relationship with Trinidad and Tobago from the metropolitan countries of Spain, Portugal, France and the United Kingdom.

Darcus Howe

former carnival chair

Darcus Howe:

Wherever ex-slaves gather, whether it's in the south of America, or Trinidad or Jamaica, or whatever, the party with fun and dance is crucial.

Claire Holder

former carnival chair

Claire Holder:

Carnival was initially celebrated because the slaves were not allowed to walk the streets, so they ran onto the streets in song and dance in celebration of their freedom. That was the carnival that we left in Trinidad. Now we come to Notting Hill where when we started coming to England after World War II in the early fifties, where there was so much racism, there was a major race riot in Notting Hill in 1958, and it was about black people who were here claiming the right and the freedom to live freely within the community of Notting Hill.

Notting Hill carnival arose as a direct response.

Ansel Wong:

The carnival has a number of origins, all of them contested. There's certainly a notion that the mother of carnival, Claudia Jones, started the first carnival at St Pancras Town Hall.

Archive narrator:

In a famous London ballroom, a West Indian get-together, a Caribbean carnival they called it, I believe.

Ansel Wong:

Claudia Jones saw carnival as a process by which she can celebrate her people's achievements. She agreed that the proceeds from the sale of tickets for the carnival shall be used to pay for the legal fees of those people arrested during the Notting Hill riots the year before.

Indoor carnival continued for several years, eventually moving to Notting Hill.

Darcus Howe:

The first carnival I was in England I cried tears 'cos all they had was a carnival dance at Porchester Hall around Notting Hill. And some people wore costumes but haltingly. I contest with a lot of people that carnival did not begin in those dances, it began on the street, because carnival is the development of concealed practice into the open.

Chris Mullard, former carnival chair

Chris Mullard:

It came out of this cauldron, if you like, of hate that was expressed by white people towards black people in the 1950's in this country. I remember walking down the street, just down here where I lived, you know, being spat at, being bullied, being in fact, being attacked by the British fascist movement who had their offices up the end of the street. There was a feel I think in the country then that something should be done in terms, seriously done in terms of community relations, in terms of race relations, and Carnival was always seen as part of that. Carnival's rootage was still that because there are many political people involved in carnival, you know, it isn't just people dressing up and dancing on the streets. This is about community action.

Carnival on the streets started in 1965. Darcus Howe was there.

Darcus Howe:

We came out of the bottom of this road, Great Western Road, and then I look up and I saw a bus, 28 bus, and I thought, oh my god, these white people are going to think we are crazy, so every step was taken haltingly, you know, not "yeah!", now you get that, but then, but the rhythm is there, but a little bit of quiet tune, you know, that's how it began.

Michael La Rose
writer and publisher

Michael La Rose:

I first went to carnival in 1973 and it was the first time I'd ever been to carnival in London and it was a magical moment. And there was a real pride that we have done this thing, and we have brought this thing to Britain.

Darcus Howe:

There was not a gradual development. Suddenly one summer we move from about ten thousand people to quarter of a million. Where did they come from, why did they come? Because they needed it - from all over England, Germany, Holland, France.

Michael La Rose:

Carnival is the control of a space by people who don't have control of it normally and that's why it attracts so much political attention. It doesn't matter where you are in the world and you have a carnival where people take over the streets; it's an important event, and a dangerous event to any government.

Michael La Rose:

By the mid-seventies, we knew that there was a real attack coming to the carnival so by 1976, the carnival of '76, when 3,000 police turned up instead of the usual 300, people knew that this was a problem, and this was going to be a problem that particular carnival. The atmosphere in '76 was nearly a feeling of being assaulted. There were 3,000 police instead of 300 as I said before, but they were all encamped on different corners of the areas, really a kind of swamping situation, and as the day went on the day became tenser and tenser, and what inevitably happened was a full-scale riot took place.

Clare Holder was carnival chair in the 1990s.

Claire Holder:

That year characterised carnival, the reputation of carnival, and so we had to work hard to get that reputation put aside, and to also say to the young people – well, this is your thing, respect it, get involved, you know, there is stability now. You've got an organisation you can relate to, and this organisation is actually seeking your interest, and once they began to be convinced by that argument, suddenly more and more people started coming, started getting involved at grass roots level.

Woman Vox-pop:

Performing on the street's fantastic, being able to be in the open air and not stuck in the building, letting the public be free to see what's going on without having to charge them and, you know, just expression of every individual, you know, and not everybody can afford sometimes to go to events to see these sort of things, so I think it's fun, it's got to be on the street 'cos that's where it stems from, you know.

Woman Vox-pop:

It makes me feel really proud that such a small country can make such a big impact in London, do you understand what I'm saying, because carnival is mainly from Trinidad and Tobago, you get me, so I'm really proud to say I'm a Trinidadian.

Ansel Wong:

Yes it has its roots in what happened and what is happening in Trinidad and Tobago, but we're living in one of the largest cities in Europe, which is very diverse, with so many different communities and nationalities, and backgrounds and cultures, so it's inevitable that we also bring about the opportunity for these cultures to intermingle and to help to develop a unique and distinctive London carnival.

Darcus Howe:

The carnival did more to bring whites and blacks together than anything else. Nobody had ever seen so many people gathered at ease than the carnival.

Man Vox-pop:

Everybody gets along, it's a nice atmosphere, everybody is in the same atmosphere, having a good time, we don't get no trouble, it's exactly what you want really.

Man Vox-pop:

In London this is the only time as a West Indian community we can all come together and celebrate our culture.

Chris Mullard:

Why Notting Hill, we might ask, started in Notting Hill purely and simply because of the riots in 1950, and people came together and said well we've got to express a new way of relating to the host society, and there was this need to also express anger. There was a need to control

anger, to contain the anger which carnival could do that as well as express it, so there is a tradition that comes from being British, as well, in Britain, as well as a tradition that you can trace back via colonialism and imperialism to slavery, through slavery back into Africa.