



Carnival and the performance of heritage

Notting Hill Carnival: challenges

Steve Pascal, current carnival chair

Steve Pascal:

In terms of how the London Notting Hill Carnival was funded, we receive a combination of public and private funds. We have public money from places like the London Council, the Mayor's Office, and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, in terms of local area agreements and grants, and we have a private income strategy which is very much about our marketing and sponsorship.

Claire Holder

former carnival chair

Claire Holder:

How do you generate income that could be ploughed back into the development of the event when it's a free event that receives very little funding and very little support generally?

Steve Pascal:

Does it mean that we become commercial and we put our artistic integrity in danger? My argument has always been that as a carnival artist myself, one of the things that actually affects your ability to design a costume or to play a steel pan, is your financial prerequisite. What we're trying to do is to galvanise that spirit, that already exists within carnival, and professionalise it in terms of how we acquire money from the private sector.

Claire Holder:

Most of the major international carnivals even if they are not fully funded there is major government investment in these carnivals because these governments they see the carnivals as part of the national culture, it's part of the national economy, whereas that isn't the case here with Notting Hill. And I don't think that's the case with any event in England except for, say, Remembrance Day, you know, they feel they have a duty to fund it, and so they should, but carnival has that message, it is about commemorating the sacrifices that our ancestors made that allowed us to be here.

Chris Mullard

former carnival chair

Chris Mullard:

That angers me when I see the millions and millions that are poured into the, say London Opera, you know, and the Opera House, and then you go to the Arts Council and you get a measly £60,000 for carnival. Where two million people are involved in it over a weekend, more people than attend the Opera House all year.

Unpaid volunteer artists work on their Carnival acts throughout the year.

Steve Pascal:

What makes Carnival quite unique is that the grass roots community isn't as detached as one would imagine for such a large event. The actual artists are DNA of Carnival. The artistic organisation which represents the arenas have a direct relationship with the board itself.

There is a representative of each main discipline on the carnival board.

Chris Mullard:

There are a lot of people involved in Carnival. It's a democratic organisation. There are five arenas. There are some fifty thousand people that take to the street actually as participants in Carnival, that belonging to bands. At the heart of Carnival lies community. At the heart of community lies the individual, and individual freedoms and individual rights. And Carnival has always been about the expression of all that within a collective form.

Whilst many Notting Hill businesses close for carnival, others come into their own.

Joseph Perry
Hamanidos café

Joseph Perry:

It's very, very busy, we don't stop the two days, like we work like 48 hours. Every day we're preparing, we're preparing ourselves for the weekend carnival, Sunday, Monday, yeah, we're well prepared.

Gordon McIntyre
The Metropolitan pub

Gordon McIntyre:

For us it's kind of like a kind of Christmas and New Year come at once in two days. We sell tickets which we never normally do 'cos as a pub we don't tend to sell tickets, but it's just a massive, massive income for us.

But the businesses that profit most from carnival are often located outside the area.

Claire Holder:

When you consider the overall importance of carnival to the economy of London, and it is estimated that carnival generates an economy, a spend economy of about £200 million over the two days, it is an insult really to those who produce carnival that they are not being given the support that they require in order to be at their productive best.

Steve Pascal:

In the absence of significant public funding, we're forced into the position that the Carnival really needs to exploit commercialisation.

Claire Holder:

There should be some way in which income could be generated in a major way to plough back into Carnival, either say through the sale of the intellectual property rights so that the media would have a greater input, make a greater input of funds into the event, or either through corporate sponsors who will exploit parts of the event that will generate money that will go back into the event, and for which the community that organises carnival will need to be accountable, with a view to making a profit, so that profit can then go back into the development of the event.

But is there a tension between carnival's commercialisation and its authenticity?

Michael La Rose
writer and publisher

Michael La Rose:

There is nothing wrong with entering the mainstream; it's what you enter the mainstream with. Is it authentic, or is it something that's diluted? And I think that is the battle within the carnival movement. The creators of the carnival don't get proper funding from the Arts Council. There's all kinds of pressures on them to survive, and that pushes them down into this commercial route which is less creative, less artistic.

Ansel Wong
former carnival chair

Ansel Wong:

The tradition of masquerade, the tradition of costumes, is being replaced by the opportunity just to dress up and to perform and to dance and to enjoy, and I think that's a healthy tension in that it's also a creative tension to the extent to which the traditions of characters, the traditions of individuals, and large costumes can sit easily with those who are just beads and bikini, and therefore they are there for pure enjoyment.

And how does commercialisation sit with carnival's roots in community action?

Chris Mullard:

Carnival does need to be commercial. Carnival needs to be business-like, but this is not necessarily the same as saying it should lose its community base. If you say oh it's got to be very commercial, let's run off and get sponsors, let's run off and get Mr X to give hundreds of thousands to do this, this and that, and let's start selling things left, right and centre, then in fact you've got to remember that what you're doing is no longer actually protecting and developing a cultural institution, and that's what it's become. What you are doing is, in fact, selling a product.

Steve Pascal:

We are committed to develop this brand so it's not only an entertainment brand that generates finance that enables artists to perform, but it's a brand that has some form of social responsibility.

Darcus Howe
former carnival chair

Darcus Howe:

There is a culture of get-rich-quick because of the times we are in. It's nothing to do with carnival. But "look at the amount of people we could be rich". How are you going to do it? They are individual and separate groups. You ask me what I think of a lot of them - you can't centralise them, it's instinctively anarchic. It's difficult to handle and that is what I like about it. And you have to, you have to, you can't run it, it runs itself, and until you get that in your head you're going to get yourself in a lot of trouble.

Steve Pascal:

Every other event is either supported by the state or by a private company on this planet, that's the uniqueness of the London Notting Hill Carnival. Fundamentally ownership of carnival is everyone. It belongs to me, it belongs to you and there is no other event that can attract Boris Johnson and me in the same place.