

GENESIS IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE



J'OUVERT: Origins in Trinidad

For nearly two centuries, J'ouvert "break of day" processions have marked the opening of Carnival in Trinidad. Held in the predawn hours of Carnival Monday, J'ouvert evolved from nineteenth century Canboulay festivals—the nighttime celebrations where ex-slaves gathered to engage in traditional stick fighting, calinda dancing, masquerading, and singing in commemoration of their emancipation.

When the tradition was incorporated into Trinidad's pre-Lent Carnival, J'ouvert became an arena for African-derived percussion, witty satire singing, sardonic costuming, and, more recently, lively steelband music.

J'ouvert's gruesome devils and mud-covered revelers stand in contrast to the bright, fancy pageantry of Monday and Tuesday afternoon Carnival.

The satirical masquerading and dense rhythms of J'ouvert manifest Carnival's deepest challenge to order and authority, while celebrating the essence of the emancipation spirit.

J'ouvert is primordial, a feeling of coming awake, of Genesis, always mysterious. It's in a liminal space, between dark and light. It feels almost like it's stolen time.

Michael Manswell,
Something Positive, Inc.



West Indian Calinda Slave Dance. Drawing by François Aimé Louis Dumoulin, 1783



Carnival on Frederick Street, Trinidad, 1888. Drawing by Melton Prior



THIS PLATE (representing a CUDGELLING MATCH between ENGLISH and FRENCH NEGROES in the Island of Dominica) is humbly dedicated to
HONORABLE ORDER of the BATH
by his most Excellent and devoted servant,
A. Brunias, Secy. of the
London, Published at 25, Finsbury, by the
A. Brunias, Secy. of the

"Stick Fighting among Slaves." Lithograph by A Brunias, 1799.
From the Barbados Museum

J'OUVERT Comes to Brooklyn



Brooklyn is home to the largest West Indian community outside the Caribbean. Since 1971 the borough has hosted a daytime Labor Day Carnival parade that draws close to two million participants to Eastern Parkway every year.

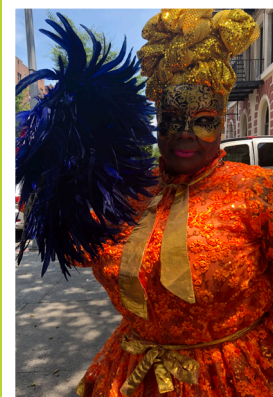
The seeds for an early morning Brooklyn J'ouvert were planted sometime in the late 1970s, when Flag Woman Janet and small groups of Dimanche Gras (Fat Sunday) revelers informally took to the streets on Flatbush Avenue.

In 1994 steel pan man Earl King and community organizer Yvette Rennie formed J'ouvert City International and procured a permit to parade down Woodruff Avenue and Flatbush Avenue at 3am on Labor Day morning. The event eventually grew into a massive predawn celebration, attracting nearly 100,000 steelband and ole mas enthusiasts.

Swaying to the rhythms of drums and steel pan, J'ouvert's ghastly devils, mud and paint-covered revelers, and mysterious ancestral characters process together down Flatbush Avenue and across Empire Boulevard. Together they announce the opening of Brooklyn Carnival with the first morning light.

J'ouvert is spiritual, it's something about that ancestral memory we connect to. And with that early morning, and that sun rising, it's like a whole communal kind of atmosphere. All together, down the road going to this rhythm! J'ouvert is a groove, it's like a flow, it's a feeling of togetherness.

Sandra Bell, community organizer and masquerader



J'OUVERT MUSIC: Rhythm and Steel

J'ouvert's music is anchored in the rhythms of Africa. In Trinidad, the freed slaves incorporated skin drums, shakers, and a variety of hand percussion instruments into their emancipation celebrations that eventually evolved into Carnival J'ouvert. When the British colonial authorities banned skin drums in the 1880s, Carnival bands responded by using bamboo tubes (tamboo bamboo) to provide rhythmic accompaniment for chantwells (singers) and masqueraders. Today's J'ouvert rhythm sections feature conga, boom, and dudup drums, along with timbales, iron brake drums (played with metal sticks), scrapers, and shakers.

Our ancestors were drummers—we come out of that African goat skin drumming. So, when we start to know we get into a certain zone ... And you listen to the rhythm, we call it that 'jumbie.' It's like a spiritual groove—you understand? It makes everything synch together. So yes, it goes back to the roots of it all.

Anthony Reece, Kutter's Rhythm Band

In the twentieth century, Trinidad percussionists began to experiment with metal containers and oil drums, eventually creating the steel pan, a unique percussive/melodic instrument. By the 1960s, pan players organized into steelbands became the favored musical accompaniment for Carnival masquerade bands. Initially the players strapped single drums around their necks, a tradition that became known as "pan around the neck." But eventually pans were mounted on mobile racks that could be pushed and pulled, allowing individuals to play multiple pans as their bands processed down the streets of Port of Spain.

By the 1970s, Brooklyn steelbands had become an integral part of the big Eastern Parkway Carnival parade, but they were eventually overwhelmed by amplified DJs and soca bands. J'ouvert, with its "pan and rhythm only" policy, emerged as the home for acoustic steelpan "on the road," reviving a Carnival tradition.

J'ouvert puts pan in the spotlight. You see, pan got lost on the Parkway when the big sound systems and deejays took over. So we were determined to do something to preserve pan, to let our children know where Carnival really comes from. In J'ouvert it's just pan and mas bands, no deejays invited. Now people are remembering the joy you can get by taking your time and playing mas with a steelband, just inching up the road, pushing pan. We're trying to revive that whole thing.

Earl King, Co-founder of Brooklyn's J'ouvert City International



Pulling pan with the Pan Liberty Steelband, Brooklyn J'ouvert 2019



Anthony Reece and the Kutter's Rythm Band, 2023

J'OUVERT: COSTUMES

Unlike the intricate, brightly colored costumes of beads and feathers that dominate daytime Carnival in Trinidad and Brooklyn, J'ouvert attire tends toward the simple and often homemade.

In keeping with the J'ouvert traditions of humor and the macabre, individuals play mud mas (covering their bodies with mud), dress in old rags, smear paint on their faces and bodies, and cover themselves with white powder and flour. Some may masquerade as devils, witches, ghosts, and goblins, while others don satirical outfits and carry signs with humorous political commentary.

Small J'ouvert mas bands, such as those organized by Brooklyn's legendary costume designer Roy Pierre, portray specific themes or characters such as devils (red, white, and black), Indians, master/slaves, and African warriors. Traditional ole mas characters often appear: the satirically curvaceous Dame Lorraine, the mischievous Midnight Robber, the pompous Pierrot Grenade, and oil soaked jab jab devils.



J'OUVERT: COSTUMES



DAME LORRAINE
Costume by Susan Leung



JAB-JAB
Costume by Shamila Alfred



PIERROT GRENADE
Costume by Image Nation of
Trinidad & Tobago



DRAGON
Costume by Shakella Daniel



BABY DOLL
Costume by Sonny Salina



MIDNIGHT ROBBER
Costume by Kendell Julien

J'OUVERT: COSTUMES

KING JAB

Costume by
Cynthia "Cinti" Salandy
& Curtis "Bruiser" Noel



FANCY SAILOR

Costume by
Sonny Salinas &
Steve Gomez



BAT

Costume by Image Nation of
Trinidad & Tobago

BLACK INDIAN

Costume by
The Warriors of Huracan

JASON AUDAIN: PHOTOGRAPHER

Jason C. Audain is an award-winning, published and self-taught visual artist who continues to expand his roster of clients, which includes The National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago, Departures.com, designer label The Cloth, mas band Moko Somoko, among others.

What animates his work is the desire to tell a tale as true as it can be visually spun. Mas photography brought with it all the kinetic abandon Audain could have hoped for as an emerging talent. Prestigious digital and print platforms *Caribbean Beat* and *National Geographic*, have spotlighted his shots.

With his solid foundation as a fine art photographer, Audain's storytelling instinct and imaginative bent have seen him transition seamlessly to video production. He is currently working on his first film.



Jab Jab, 2018

FILMMAKERS

MARIO T. LATHAN

Mario T. Lathan has produced two documentary-short films for JGIE that delve into the history of J'ouvert in Trinidad & Tobago and its vital role in present-day Brooklyn. The first film unravels the origins of J'ouvert in Trinidad & Tobago, exploring the amalgamation of African and French influences that shaped its unique traditions.

The second film focuses on the emergence of Brooklyn J'ouvert within the local West Indian community. Lathan documents the migration of Trinidadians to Brooklyn and their efforts to preserve and adapt their cherished traditions. Throughout these two documentaries, Lathan artfully weaves together historical context, personal narratives, and vibrant visuals, offering a compelling exploration of J'ouvert's rich heritage and contemporary significance.

DeANDRÉ VIDALE

Presented through the latest in immersive video technology, filmmaker DeAndré Vidale brings you to J'ouvert celebrations in Trinidad & Tobago. Your journey begins shoulder to shoulder with generations of emancipated Afro-Trinidadians, and you will join them in an electrifying ritual in the remote mountain region of Paramin, Trinidad. You will then be baptized by rhythms and black oil in a mass of revelers, ushering in the sunrise in Trinidad & Tobago's capital city, Port of Spain.

LONG LIVE J'ouvert!

In recent years pessimists have speculated that creeping gentrification, the high costs of mounting steel and mas bands, and fear-mongering on the part of the press will lead to the shutdown of Brooklyn J'ouvert, and perhaps Labor Day Carnival itself. But history suggests otherwise.

By nature, Carnival has been a flash point for controversy. Yet it has survived numerous attempts by colonial and contemporary civic authorities to shut down or curtail its transgressive play.

Carnival and J'ouvert have persevered through the Canboulay riots of 1883, the Crown Heights riots of 1991, and countless lesser confrontations. When the New York powers-that-be canceled Harlem Carnival in 1961, a new generation of migrants nimbly reconstructed the tradition in Brooklyn where it has endured as a vibrant display of Caribbean culture and identity for half a century.

Today the J'ouvert spirit continues to thrive in Brooklyn, igniting a joyful celebration of human creativity, and liberation, along with a cry for social justice.

Here in America J'ouvert is a nostalgic feeling, like being back home in Trinidad when J'ouvert started at five in the morning. You could hear the cocks crowing and the steelbands coming, and then the sun starts coming up and everyone is having a good time. So now this is where you are going to enjoy, this is your Carnival, right here in Brooklyn.

Martin Douglas, President of the United States Steelband and Association



Michael Manswell, Brooklyn J'ouvert 2022



Hearts of Steel Steelband,
Brooklyn J'ouvert 2022



American J'ouvert for Rufus Gorin

I.

In the dark we come
down Flatbush Avenue —
Old Black Joe
face painted and long,
Wilkinson the preacher,
pilloried and chained,
Harriet Tubman and
The Freedom Train,
Emmett Till's mother
and a stern-faced Toussaint,
cotton pickers, and cane-cutters
When Cotton Was King
— and on Empire Boulevard we parade
in a J'ouvert band called Cotton & Cane.

II.

Across Grand Army Plaza, when
a cold wind blows, for heat
we huddle between the pan
and the exhaust of the police van.
Between tall buildings,
Flagwoman in front, we portray
Aborigines, with albino crocodile,
Harlequins and Pierrots, clowns
with tears, and smiles. In Rags to Riches,
someone asks, The cross heavy?
No, is only cardboard and paint. And
on Nostrand, when they say, Stop!
Is only then we remember how far Mouse,
dressed as Delilah, must travel to get home.

— Mervyn Taylor

Mervyn Taylor and Philicia
Matthews as Adu the Seer and The
Courtesan, Brooklyn J'ouvert 2019

J'ouvert Genesis Immersive Experience

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Additionally, we extend our gratitude to the Brooklyn Museum for generously lending the mannequins for this exhibit.

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Jason C. Audain: Featured Exhibit Photographer

DeAndre Vidale: Filmmaker

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