

We—Carnival

IT IS POPULARLY acclaimed — "The Greatest Show on Earth": that is "We — Carnival". Thousand of visitors from all over the globe are here. Hundreds of thousands have gone also to Rio. Thousands more, in one week's time, will find their way to Basel, a city that lies on the border of France, West Germany and Switzerland. These thousands of globetrotters love the thrill and excitement of Carnival. They will go where they can find it. Many, who have had the privilege to witness the festival in all three places, have concluded that our Carnival stands out. It is a unique human experience with a universal appeal.

Each Carnival has its distinct charm and attraction. It must, however, be assessed in its own cultural and historical setting. The Carnival of Basel is similar to ours in the spontaneous and contagious gaiety, which prevails in the street among spectators and masqueraders alike.

The spectacle, also very colourful, is culturally very different. Masqueraders are heavily disguised. Each Carnival band contains a group of musicians, who gaily play martial music while the masqueraders march briskly through the town. The music has a subdued tone. The instruments are mainly fifes and flutes, interspersed with kettle-drums. Celebrated every year, one week after our festival, the Basel Carnival heralds the arrival of spring. It has a limited European appeal. The themes of the bands are local; for the most part they are social commentaries on life in the German sector of Switzerland.

The festivals of Rio and of Trinidad, however, have similar cultural roots. Both trace their origins from the interaction and merging of Roman Catholic and African influences. Both celebrations occur on the days immediately before the start of lent. Although the pageantry of each is distinctly different, both Carnivals have experienced similar developments.

During the first two decades of the present century, prominent among the masqueraders in Rio was a multitude of bats, devils, perriots, sailors and pirates. These characters continued to be dominant in our Carnival long after this date and are even today distinct categories among our mas' players.

Before the Second World War, two important features of the Trinidad festival were disguised balls and the parade of masqueraders on Carnival Monday and Tuesday. In this early period, mass participation in street Carnival was rather limited. Revellers played mas' in their various balls. When they ventured out of the dance halls, they jumped up in open trucks driven on the street. These mas' players were disguised in fancy costumes and wore masks and dominoes. In that era, there was limited direct contact



Dr Cuthbert Joseph

our Carnival its distinct human attraction. The pageant of the Carnival of Rio is a beautiful spectacle to behold. The presentation of bands (*Escolas de Samba*) before the judges is the high point of the festival. But there are no street parades of these bands all over the city, before and after the judging, as is done on the two days of our Carnival. The bands in Rio present themselves before the panel of judges from about midnight on *Dimanche Gras* until early on Monday morning. After that event, the street Carnival virtually comes to a close.

In Rio, the spectacle of the different bands of masqueraders is breathtaking. It involves intricate samba steps, the melodious chanting of these songs, the dignified display of costumes, the artistic creativity of designs, the exciting presentation of Carnival themes. In spite of its human appeal, it is an event which one looks at rather than participates in. In yet other respects, Rio Carnival differs fundamentally from ours. The majority of masqueraders are traditionally of African origin, who live in the slums in the suburbs of the city. In selecting topics for presentation, Carnival bands are required to choose only Brazilian themes. In its disguises, each band is permitted to display only its official colours — usually two in number. The music accompanying each band is restricted to percussion instruments; wind instruments are prohibited. One Brazilian author has remarked that "the Rio Carnival is a show only for the spectator. But for the masquerader it is a mission, a mandate, a supreme moment of deliverance and self-sufficiency."

This quotation could equally be applied to our masqueraders. There is, however, one striking difference. In our Carnival, no barrier exists between spectator and masquerader. The freedom that pervades Trinidad and Tobago Carnival contributes to its unique character. There is freedom of social integration, freedom of Carnival themes, freedom of display of colours, freedom of musical forms. The free spirit of our Carnival brings out, in a gigantic human



Defending National Panorama champion, Catelli Trinidad All Stars, who was fourth-placed Saturday night in a tie with Fertrin Pandemonium.

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between the main body of masqueraders and the crowds of spectators in the forum of the street. This aspect of Carnival has since been radically transformed.

An important feature of Trinidad Carnival today is its street character. For all participants — masqueraders as well as spectators — the main stage of Carnival has shifted to the street. Masqueraders and spectators of all races, sexes, colours, classes and creeds, converge in *One Spirit* on the street. This is the reality of children's Carnival. This is the essence of Monday and 'Tuesday Mas'. Carnival today is mass street theatre with mass street participation of spectators. It is perhaps this quality more than any other that has given



TCL (Trinidad Cement Ltd) Skiffle Bunch, winner of the pan-round-the-neck competition Saturday night at the Queen's Park Savannah.

explosion, the creative and artistic genius of our people.

It is this free spirit that generates the humanness of the festival, thereby accentuates the sublime with the ridiculous and the profane.

Our Carnival is capable of dramatizing any conceivable theme of human experience with our multi-racial people as actors.

It is perhaps this feature that gives our spectacle its unique universal appeal.

For this reason, our Carnival should be viewed annually by not only the thousands who visit our shores, but also by a world-wide audience through satellite communication.