

The Notting Hill Carnival

1 Before you read

What carnivals or carnival-like festivals are there in Germany? How are they similar or different from the carnival featured in the photos below?

2 Drawn by the magic of 'mas'¹

Read a Londoner's thoughts on Notting Hill Carnival. As you read, take notes on what the writer found special about preparations for the event.

"I was born in 1964, the year of the first Notting Hill Carnival, and always make it back from wherever I am to be part of it, if only to sit on my step and watch it all go by." –Jenneba Sie-Jalloh*

Wow, reading that sentence really took me back years, way back to the early 1970s and my first ever involvement with the Carnival. Although in those days we lived at the opposite end of town from Notting Hill, in an area which was then predominantly white, the school I went to was a stone's throw from Brixton, which had a large Afro-Caribbean and Asian population. It was the year my closest friend told me her younger brother, Kingston, had been arrested while waiting for a mate outside Brixton tube station. The police had confiscated² his 'weapon' – a steel comb – and he was fined for 'loitering with intent'...



Soon after that Marlette asked if I'd like to join her and her family at 'mas camp' for that year's Carnival as anyone who could sew was more than welcome. I went along mainly out of curiosity. I was sat at one of about twenty machines that they'd set up in a nearby school. I thought I'd see lots of outlandish costumes but we spent long afternoons mostly sewing endless colourful strips of material together according to elaborate instructions which were stuck up on the classroom wall. Other helpers constructed wire frames onto which the costumes would later be mounted. Monotony, you may think – but far from it! We were sewing to the sunny rhythms of Caribbean music, whose sounds, it seemed, were helping to embroider³ the fabric.

On top of all that there was lots of singing, humming, friendly joking and laughing going on, and countless cuppas or cold drinks brought round (could I smell rum in the air?). Further, definite 'see-you-next-session' factors for me were the yummy Afro-Caribbean homemade delights they offered for tea – and of course, the promise of fantastic costumes at the end, knowing they had taken shape with *my* help.

*from the contributors' notes in the anthology *The map of me: True tales of mixed-heritage experience* (London: Penguin, 2008)

¹mas — masquerade [mæs, məskə'reɪd] here: one of the five carnival disciplines • ²to confiscate ['kɒnfɪskət] *beschlagnehmen* • ³to embroider [ɪm'brɔɪdə] *besticken*

During that summer, I learnt that even in the UK this Caribbean carnival tradition is much more than a fun and over-the-top parade of costumed groups or 'bands', and not just any two-day festival of music and dance. In Britain its beginnings actually date back to an indoor event in January 1959, after race riots had spread across the country the year before.

In the above quote Jenneba Sie-Jalloh refers to her year of birth, the year plans were made for the Notting Hill Carnival to move *outdoors*. With this street procession the organisers sought to counter the violence of previous riots and racial tension in the area itself by getting black and white people together and giving the communities a better image and self-image – or put simply, they wanted people to make friends and be happy. However, the larger the event grew from year to year, the greater the political and police authorities' concern for public safety. With this aspect in mind there were attempts in the past to relocate the Carnival or alter the route dramatically – but none of these were successful. For now at least, amidst the ever-growing commercialisation of a long since officially recognised mega event, the spirit of 'mas' thankfully still resides in Notting Hill.

The upside of the modern-day event is that nowadays, at a click, you can learn more about the Carnival's roots, look up the coming event on specific websites (e.g. www.thenottinghillcarnival.com), join a costume-making

workshop, read about safety in the crowds, or plan to be one of over a million happy revellers⁴ next time round. Meanwhile, the lucky few – Notting Hillers of the first hour – will again be returning from wherever, drawn once more by the magic of 'mas', to watch on (or over) their great celebration of diversity.

by Hamida Aziz



⁴reveller [ˈrevlə] a guest at a party or other fun event, having a good time

3 Comprehension: Carnival past, present and future

Read the text again and answer the questions.

1. What do you learn about the history of the Notting Hill Carnival from the text?
2. What are the advantages over the past of having a big event like the Carnival nowadays?
3. What does the author of the text think may threaten the Carnival in future?

4 A Quiz: Carnival and its roots

a) The text doesn't describe the event itself or its roots. Research on the Internet and do the quiz.

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| 1. Where does Notting Hill Carnival have its roots? | 6. 'Mas' is one element of Carnival. What are the other four? |
| 2. How did the event start there? | 7. In which park in London was there an alternative event in 2005? Who organised it? |
| 3. Where is the biggest Carnival in the world held? When does it take place? | 8. Where does the procession on Monday usually begin? |
| 4. Who had the idea for the first indoor event in London? Where was she originally from? Where was the event held? | 9. How much body paint did they expect to use at the 2007 event? |
| 5. When is the Notting Hill Carnival now held? | |

b) Prepare a presentation using the information from your research. Look for photos and perhaps find a sample of typical Carnival music to make your talk more interesting.

5 Just for fun: Useful 'Carnival' tips

- a) How do you feel about being in an extremely big crowd at a carnival, sports event or festival? What precautions would you take, if any? Discuss with your partner.
- b) With the crowds getting bigger every year, pickpockets have an easy time of it, especially with newcomers to the Carnival. Read the tips below which may save visitors from ruining their day there.

Tips for newcomers to the Notting Hill Carnival

Sunday is best for younger children with lots of activities/workshops for kids along the route. Monday is the big 'party' day, with celebrations going on way beyond the official closing time (9pm). The usual official public safety warning applies: If you spot an unattended bag or package, inform a police officer right away (there'll be enough of them around). Generally people are friendly and helpful and like you they are there to have fun!

- Some **tube stations** may be closed or run a limited service. So work out your **route & travel times** & get your **travel card** in advance. In a group you should all have a **Carnival map** so you can fix **meeting points** where necessary.
- Stay close to the route & **keep nothing of value in your back pockets**.
- You'll need **cash** – you don't want to miss that glorious food to be had at every corner, but **leave cash card/rolls of bank notes at home**.
- A fun **costume, masks & body paint** will make you fit in, but jewellery may get you the wrong kind of attention.
- A **mobile** ringing can't compete with Carnival music: So put it on vibrate & keep it well out of sight.
- Give your feet **comfortable shoes** & they'll keep you dancing/walking/standing all day & maybe late into the night.
- **Don't dry out** – drink a lot (of water!). But then finding a loo may be a problem.
- Clever revellers download the list of **Carnival toilets** in advance – and head there well before they're desperate (the queues can be lo-o-o-ong!) They also find that having their own **tissues** can be really handy.
- Be kind to others and stay pleasant all day: **Use a good deodorant!**

- c) Put the tips in your own personal order of importance. Compare your list with your partner's.
- d) Use the information from your Internet research (Ex. 4) and the tips above to make up a dialogue between two friends planning to go to the Notting Hill Carnival. You can start like this:

A: But what's the best way to get there? – B: Well, I think it's best to check ...

Go on, and then act out your dialogues in class.

1 There's something similar known as *Fasching* in Germany. In the south it's more in the Swabian-Alemannic tradition with scary wooden masks; around Cologne, for example, it's also called carnival (*Karneval*). I don't think the costumes are so complex and in Germany it's not a real multi-ethnic event in terms of the people who take part in the procession. The music is also different: Although the *Fasching* bands often have lots of drums, you rarely see any steel pan bands at the event here.

2 The writer found the atmosphere during the sewing sessions at the mas camp cheerful and very interesting (not at all monotonous). This was because of the lively Caribbean music they played there. Everyone had a good time. On top of that, they were offered lots of drinks and tasty Afro-Caribbean food – which was a real highlight for the writer. She also thought the camp was special because she would get to see the final products – wonderful costumes which she herself helped to make!

3 1. It's more than any ordinary parade. It started in the UK with an indoor event after race riots in 1958. With this event the organisers wanted bring peace back to the area by trying to get people of different communities together. The Carnival got too big for an indoor event and in 1964 it went outdoors. The authorities began to worry about people's safety as the crowds got larger. Past attempts to change the route or even the place were not successful.

3. The author is concerned that as the event becomes even more popular and more commercialised, the authorities may try to move it away from Notting Hill where the tradition in the UK started.

4 1. In Caribbean carnivals of the 19th century, 2. after slavery was abolished in the Caribbean; there was no longer a ban on blacks celebrating and they could finally have festivals, e.g. in Trinidad, where they paraded the ways of their former European masters – e.g. using flour to whiten their faces, or wearing masks (therefore *masquerade*), 3. in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (*Carnaval*), on the Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, 4. Claudia Jones, Trinidad, St Panteras town hall, 5. August Bank Holiday, 6. Steel Pan, Calypso, Soca, Static Sound Systems, 7. Hyde Park (Caribbean Showcave), Greater London Authority, 8. the Great Western Road, 9. 100 litres

5 Sehr individuelle Lösungen