

"LEW PLAYMAS!"

*Emergence & Evolution of
UWI Carnival*



Southern Caribbean culture first came north with students coming to the University College of the West Indies, UCWI; and perhaps most obviously through the pre-Lent masquerading and the pan sound that evolved into UWI Carnival. Many Jamaicans within and outside the university embraced the resultant bacchanal, creating a band of the faithful who annually head south to the source; but also helping smooth the way for the eventually introduction of Jamaica Carnival by Byron Lee in 1989-1990.

UWI CARNIVAL EMERGES

UWI Carnival in its most basic form appears to have emerged in the academic year 1954-1955.

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MAS

Playing Mas (short for Masquerade) was the first and principal element of Carnival to travel north and the Trinidadian and other southern Caribbean students brought with them the idea of dressing-up and acting as any recognizable group or impersonating well known individuals – Ole Mas. With greater organisation came the costume bands for which real costumes were sewn or crafted, along with elaborate Carnival Queen costumes – Pretty Mas.

Carnival Events:

In the early years, once it became an organised activity, Friday night was the Carnival Queen show; Saturday morning was Ole Mas and the costumed bands took to the street on Saturday afternoon.

Chappie St Juste recalls that the road march sometimes ended up in nearby Mona Heights; but eventually it was contained on Ring Road. By the 1980s and early 90s, Carnival stretched over more than a week, including a Poolside Lyme, Reggae/

Calypso Show, Costume Show, Firs' Lap, where the costume bands from the various halls, each with various sections, paraded and were judged, after which visitors joined in a jump up. This was followed by an Out-of-Town Lime and carnival ended on Shrove Tuesday with a Las' Lap finale. (Locksley James, Taylor Hall).

Now, UWI Carnival is made up of four elements:

- . Integration fete**
- . - J'Ouvert**
- . - Ring Road**
- . - Beach Party**

Halls, Carnival and Costumes:

The Halls of Residence became, from early on, the focal points for Carnival activity. And though some halls had steel bands in the early years, with Taylor Hall central, it was in the area of the costume bands that the halls were and continue to be known.

Conceptualising and constructing of costumes became an important aspect of carnival for the hall residents and eventually for the halls as a whole.

Velma Pollard recalled that carnival costumes emerged from individuals or groups of friends rather than from hall committees or other official or semi-official direction.

In the mid-1980s, Locksley James recalls that a special hall committee would determine the theme and sections for the halls' bands and organise the costume making activities, including both road march and queen costumes.

STEEL BAND

Arden Williams played the first pan heard at UWI and maybe in Jamaica as a whole. 'Gun' Williams was a Trinidadian student who brought up a pan with him in 1953 and played it at a fete, according to Dr Archie Hudson-Philips. Dave Williams gives the honour to Williams and another Trinidadian, Jackie Martin. He said that at first no one was interested. But the Trinis formed a steel band within a year or two, making the pans themselves in the back of Taylor Hall's Block D.

They had to overcome inexperience in making as well as playing the pans, though a few had played before.

“It was in those early days that the help of people like Dave Wildish, Buntie Rolle and James Ling proved invaluable. Fellows were needed to help cut the rough, unwieldy, evil smelling oil drums, to cart them up from the stores to the back of Block D Taylor Hall, to heat and tune them...” (Williams, Pelican Annual 1955, p51)

And the early sound was jarring; even after they started performing at the union. But both the playing

and the instruments improved. *“In spite of its many shortcomings the Band lent a certain spice to campus, particularly at Carnival and on Hall-Faculty matches where undergrads worked themselves into a frenzy to the pulsating calypso rhythm of the pans.”*

Williams also mentioned the roles of Hugh Moss Solomon in teaching band members rhythms besides calypso, and Stanley Luck who was contact man and advertising agent.

Steelpan continued to be important on campus through the years. Hall bands emerged. Denise Gooden recalled that Irvine Hall had a band called *Playboys* in the early 1970s.

Then in 1977, there was a decision to consolidate as one group known as Panoridim, which still remains active.

Timing:

When it started, Carnival was in its traditional pre-Lenten position. However while that continues to be the case at St Augustine in Trinidad, home of 'real' Caribbean Carnival, the dates shifted at some point for the campuses farther north.

It's not so simple to identify the exact year of the shift, but Carnival at Mona and Cave Hill now takes place in mid- to late-March.

Ring Road song:

“Now in Trinidad everybody going mad, is a big mas of noise and confusion. Jamming on they head, people jamming til they dead; It leaves me to only one conclusion., I ain’t going there, I ain’t got no plane fare, so I’ll do the next best thing for me: I’ll be jamming jammin here on Ring Road, I’ll be jamming Carnival here on Ring Road. The party getting hot hot on Ring Road, I is going to have a ball here on Ring Road.” - [Fab5 Ring Road Jam](#) 1986, Yu Safe album

***Ring Road Jam* has become a carnival anthem at UWI and beyond. A *Gleaner* story in 2007 tells how Alvin Campbell, who used to go to UWI Carnival with friends even before becoming a UWI student in 1973, wrote the song. It sat about from 1968 or 1969 until he recorded it, as part of Fab Five band, in 1986.**

(Mel Cooke, 'Story of the Song – 'Ringroad Jam' ages like fine wine, *Gleaner*, Sunday Nov 18, 2007)

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Guild of Students:

“Campus Carnival is said to be the birthplace of Carnival in Jamaica on a whole. Brought about by the influence of the cultures of the various CARICOM nationals attending the University. Every year the show casing of Carnival highlights the cultural exchange that takes place daily on the campus. A theme is selected by the Guild every year. This theme is what the various bands that participate are supposed to portray in their costumes through creative styles and designs. These bands consist of the halls on campus, as well as the Western Jamaica Campus, alumni, the different Island associations and outside entities such as Island Mas.”

UWI CARNIVAL, JAMAICA & JAMAICA CARNIVAL

Carnival parties and bands (Orange Carnival, Grapefruit Carnival, Frenchmen) became popular in uptown Kingston in the 1980s. Carnival formally came to Jamaica's streets on April 22, 1990, when Byron Lee introduced Jamaica Carnival, having announced its coming in 1989. Lee and his iconic Dragonnaires band had been regulars at Trini Carnival for years. In 2000, Jamaica Carnival came together with Oakridge, Raiders and Revellers for

Carnival 2000 which subsequently became Bacchanal Jamaica.

Jamaica Carnival was always a combination of fetes and the Pretty Mas road march, though a Jouvert element was later added.

Did UWI Carnival in any way help pave the way for the adoption of Carnival in Jamaica? Probably *not directly*. But it certainly created a wider pool of Jamaicans who knew about and even became addicted to the carnival culture.

