



NOTTING HILL



Running Down The Hill

West London's Notting Hill hosts Europe's biggest street festival over August bank holiday. But Carnival has outgrown its traditional boundaries, argues Ferdinand Dennis

I first attended the Notting Hill Carnival 13 years ago. It's close to north Paddington, where I grew up. Getting to the Carnival neighbourhood was a short journey across the Harrow Road and the Half-Penny Steps, which span the Grand Union canal. It was an exciting occasion, full of colour and vitality, evocative of a time and place a world removed from its decaying surroundings. Ladbroke Grove and Notting Hill have, of course, improved environmentally since then. But Carnival still has that foreign feel, even on the most miserable August bank holidays.

My first Carnival was also the first year when the event seriously degenerated into violent clashes between black youngsters and the police. The following year was even worse, and it happened again subsequently. And last year Carnival claimed its first victim. While the young widow still grieves for her husband, the 13-year old controversy over what to do with Carnival has

taken a new twist.

For several years after 1975, each Carnival was followed by demands either to ban it or take it off the streets - which for the organisers amounted to the same thing. The emphasis now is on how to make it more orderly. At the forefront of this call are actual Carnival participants, masqueraders and steel-band players, many of whom were shocked and appalled at the tragic killing last year. Nobody wants to see that repeated. Carnival is a celebration of life.

Up until recently the call for a more orderly Carnival has come from without: the police and some conservative political figures. But the solutions suggested have been against the spirit of Carnival. Wormwood Scrubs, often mentioned as a possible venue, may be suitable for funfairs, static events, but not for a carnival. But then neither are the streets of Notting Hill and Ladbroke Grove alone.

The Carnival organisers - who are mainly older Caribbean folk - have as usual closed ranks in reaction to criticisms of the event. Yet they have, implicitly, long recognised that it needs more than the streets. In recent years they have made use of several nearby venues, including the Commonwealth Institute, for Carnival shows. Such events enable people to appreciate the spectacular costumes away from the crowds. This audience/performer format is of course particularly European, in contrast to the Caribbean carnival which demands participation. So concessions, however small, have been made.

The organisers' reluctance to loosen their hold over the event (which would hasten the process of adapting Carnival still more closely to the British way of doing things) has many causes. As with so many cultural practices brought from the Caribbean, Carnival's survival has had to be fought for and defended tooth and nail. That it continues today is testimony to the organisers' tenacity and commitment. But Carnival is

also lucrative business. Only the innocent or the simple-minded would believe that Carnival organisers are altruistic men and women dedicated to serving the black community.

Yet there is a certain sense in which the Carnival organisers are right to resist the latest attempts to wrest it from their control. At present the event is a boon for many small black businesses - bakeries, bookshops, t-shirt printers, etc. The new spirit of business efficiency (reflecting the influence of a Thatcherite age) demanded by some Carnival participants would not necessarily benefit those small businesses. As I was told recently in a Ladbroke Grove pub: 'At the moment Carnival belongs to us. 'Is not perfect but is our t'ing. What those people talking 'bout is bringing them City boys to run it. Next t'ing you know, we lose Carnival.'

That is certainly one way of seeing it. What is clear is that Carnival has become too big for its founders. Its future requires better organisation, and if that has to come partially from outside the black community, the present organisers might do better to adapt to that inevitability. That way Carnival might grow towards Hyde Park - a far more suitable direction for expansion than the bleak Wormwood Scrubs.

Another problematic feature of Carnival is the tension between the steel bands and the sound systems (which are famous for their wardrobe-sized speakers). The mobile steel bands with their masqueraders require a freedom to move around which is incompatible with the static nature of the sound systems. One is Trinidadian, the other Jamaican. In the Trinidad carnival the problem doesn't exist. But it's very real in the British version. Caribbean people, too, do have their cultural clashes.

Contrary to the conspiracy theories, these clashes are not engineered by external forces. A few Carnivals back, I found myself, along with more than 1,000 people,

listening and dancing to a sound system near All Saints Road. The crowd formed a dense mass and getting from one end to the other took ages and even more patience.

Suddenly the sound-system crowd was required to part like the Red Sea to admit a steel band, its masqueraders and followers. Their passing took quite a while. During that time, neither sound system nor steel band was clearly audible. Instead, an unbearable cacophony was created, adding to the discomfiture caused by pressing bodies. Better planning would avoid such situations, which have become all too common at Carnival.

It has been suggested that the sound systems should be reduced. This would be unfortunate because for many Carnival goers - especially British-born ones - Carnival would not be the same without the sound systems. The blockages caused by the sound-systems' audiences are indicative of Carnival



Carnival masquerader

needing more space, and it is generally agreed that better planning is needed in the siting of the sounds and routing of the steel bands.

However improved the planning of future Carnivals, I do not believe that the stealing and violence of the past will be totally eliminated. They are the result of experiences brought to Carnival, not created there. A society such as ours, which permits the formation of an increasingly large group of people - black and white - with no stake in society, must expect our parties to be spoilt. •