

Houston Caribbean Festival Shows the Many Colors of Houston

Written by Ashura M.I.R. Bayyan
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When I went to San Miguel Arena on Friday, July 5th I knew nothing about J'Ouvert or the Caribbean community in Houston. Once I arrived, I saw swarms of black people pouring into the streets from every direction, with cars parked on the sidewalks, in grassy fields, the driveways of surrounding homes and businesses, or anywhere a car could fit without the guarantee of being towed before sunrise. Thousands of men, women, boys and girls anxiously shuffled towards the single arena entrance, the majority of them dressed as if they were headed to the beach, with tank tops, flip-flops and swimsuits. But there were no lakes or oceans nearby, only the sea of black bodies flooding in and around the stadium walls. I've been to New Orleans during Mardi Gras and I've been in Brazil post-Carnival, but I had never seen such an enthusiastic turnout of the black community for a single festival. Inside I was immediately greeted by the bouncing rhythm or reggae music blasting from a truck piled 20 feet high with speakers, and around it people were grooving, some of them rolling on the ground carelessly and others dancing in groups with their faces speckled with different colors of paint and their hair white from sprinkles of baby powder.

Interestingly, the energy between the dancers was all positive and even through all the commotion I could find no signs of conflict or frustration in any of the faces layered with dirt and grime. Beyond where I was standing, men in costumes danced beside vendors serving grilled jerk chicken, and fresh fruit smoothies across from tables lined with jewelry and flags from what seemed to be every island in the Caribbean. In the dim light of dawn, no one was paying attention to the details of clothing, but rather the energy of the festival pulsing through the streets. Deeper into the heart of the activity, I found a swarm of people seemingly having mosh pit in the center of a rodeo ring. There was a group of men on a stage jumping and dancing while spraying water, paint, and powder onto people below them enjoying the music. None of the people moved or tried to avoid the sprays but rather they seemed eager to be caught in the line of fire.

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My whole life I've been fundamentally curious, so I began asking some of the attendees what was the deal with all the antics from the fire blowing to the paint throwing. I discovered that beneath all the celebration lies a rich Caribbean history of emancipation and independence dating back to the late 18th century, celebrated in many parts of the world but originating on the Island of Trinidad where French plantation owners settled and entered into the slave trade. The French never colonized Trinidad, however elements of the French customs and culture mixed with local traditions and thus Carnival took root. J'Ouvert is at the heart of Caribbean Carnival and the roots of J'Ouvert are sprinkled with elements of the French customs; for example, the name J'Ouvert originates from the French "jour ouvert," meaning daybreak or morning, and the festival takes place pre-dawn until the sun comes up the following morning. It evolved from the French Canboulay festivals of the 1800s, which were nighttime celebrations where the elite landowners dressed up and imitated the negro slaves. The slaves, having been banned from the masquerade balls of the French, would stage their own mini-carnivals in their backyards — using their own rituals and folklore, but also imitating and mocking their masters' behavior at the masquerades.

After full emancipation of the slaves in 1838, the Canboulay festivals became a symbol of freedom and defiance. For African people, carnival became a way to express their power as individuals, as well as their rich cultural traditions. The British colonial government attempted to outlaw the festivals including the drumming, stick fighting, masquerading, and any elements of African-derived religions. They considered the celebrations a debauchery and attempted to stamp them out of the culture. In response, the festival-goers would cover their body in mud and paint while at the festival in order to hide the identity of whoever was being rowdy. The British failed at trying and now J'Ouvert has become a hallmark of Trinidadian identity as a celebration of the end of slavery.

The Houston Caribbean Festival is in its eleventh year and seeks to positively impact Houston communities by celebrating cultural diversity through song, dance and artistic expression for many years to come.