John Cupid

We Have Been Called Carnival People

an interview by Ruth Stegassy

STEGASSY: John Cupid, working for the National Carnival Commission, you are very much involved with the preservation and transmission of traditional Carnival. As a Trinidadian, what does Carnival mean to you? Why is it important?

CUPID: It means everything to me. I see it as the one big thing that distinguishes us as a group of people. We are about a million and a half, no more than that, making up this twin nation of Trinidad and Tobago. Carnival distinguishes us from anybody else I have met, anywhere in the world. And from what I have been able to research, this Trinidad Carnival is unique. It is part of us, and, like a passport, we go with it everywhere.

STEGASSY: It’s part of your identity, distinguishing you from the rest of the world?

CUPID: Yes.

STEGASSY: But inside your island now, inside Trinidad: How does Carnival intermesh with daily life? How does it work with the way you live?

CUPID: We have been called Carnival people; we live the whole style. And you have to understand what Trinidad Carnival is. You need to understand why it is like this: because we are a mixture of African descent, East Indian descent, European descent, and even before that a mixture of Amerindians. So we have got these heavy strains here. The Trinidad Carnival is the one thing above all else that unites us, keeps us together, identifies us as a people. You go to Toronto and see a guy looking East Indian, and the music starts and he reacts to the music in a way that the Canadians around him do not. To the same music, another person looking African and a white-looking person react...all Trinidadians. They react in much the same way, different from the Canadians. There was a white-looking woman I remember living in Miami; when she “keyah keyah,” when she laughs, then you know that she does not belong to Miami, she belongs to somewhere else, Trinidad. It’s part of the total life. And we all live it. It might happen that it is celebrated at its most intense around these two days before the Lenten season. It means a lot more than even some
of us suspect. Because preparation for the Lenten season is what the French Roman Catholics would have done when thousands of them came by invitation through the Cedula de Población in 1783, even before that, when the Roman Catholics came as Spaniards [1498 arrival; 1592 settlement]. But there were always celebrations on the island. Where we are here on these hills and high valleys of Lopinot, there were people celebrating just as those in every region throughout the country with cariétos (an early form of calypso sung by Amerindians) and the parang type of music we are hearing in the background. Celebration would go on “All day, all night like Miss Mary Ann,” as the vintage calypso goes. Long before the Catholics came, there were celebrations on the island of Kairi, which the Spaniards changed to La Trinite—Trinidad.

The Catholics positioned them during the year according to the Catholic calendar of religious days. The Capuchin monks who came here (in 1687, I think the first ones came) adopted the culture of the place. It was the only way they were able to make effective inroads among the people living in the island. There was an exchange of cultures. They learned the language of the people who were here. They also observed their celebrations.

STEGASSY: I just can’t imagine them wining in the streets.

CUPID: Why not. As a good monk. And even in recent times there were priests playing mas in the streets at Carnival, not only Roman Catholics, but of the Anglican religion, Reverend Joseph. Sometime ago, Father Pascal of Cedros R.C Church came to town, Port of Spain, with his Carnival band. This year a group of Pentecostals took to the streets and onto the Queen’s Park Savannah Stage on Carnival Tuesday with their kind of music and expressions. But all of this to us is quite normal, quite natural. Carnival has always been about protest.

STEGASSY: From what everybody says, is it actually 10 percent of the population who are involved?

CUPID: It is more than 10 percent. It affects and is expressed in many different ways. Even people who leave Port of Spain, where the big celebration occurs, and go up to Pax Guest House on Mount St. Benedict where the monks are, take recorded music of the Carnival and they carry on a celebration. You see, almost the total population becomes involved. The Hindu men with their rumshops, the East Indian women with their roti stalls and thousands of non-East Indian vendors with sweet drink, snowcone, souse, pelau—all enjoy the Carnival celebrations with their best sales of the year. Those who protest so much that they are not becoming involved in it go to the beaches and camps and indulge in pleasures and prayers. Remember Carnival Monday and Tuesday are not public holidays! In my own office there was a young trainee. She was a member of a church where they admonish their followers: “No, don’t get involved in Carnival.” She had been working there for more than a year, researching traditional Carnival. I did not even know it, because we don’t ask these kind of questions: To which church do you belong? And when Carnival time came, after working on Carnival Friday at the Traditional Carnival Character Festival in Old Port of Spain, she said, “Mr. Cupid I will see you next Wednesday.” I said, “What do you mean, you are not coming to work on Carnival Monday and Tuesday?” She said, “No, my church and I, we are going to the beach.” A professor from Montreal who was there said, “Oh, you mean you are working in the Carnival Commission, you are doing research on Carnival, and you are not going to be here on Carnival Monday and Tuesday? Why are you doing it?” Her answer was plain and simple. She said, “I want my children to know about Trinidad Carnival.” So you see there is a much larger percentage of involvement in one way or the other.
STEGASSY: So tell me now about the traditional Carnival characters. Who are they?

CUPID: Well, there are some you can identify by name: there are the Bats, the Dragons, the Burroquite, the Sailor, the Fireman, the Pierrot Grenade, the Midnight Robber, the Clown, the Jab Molassie, to name a few. But each one of them has a complex, interesting and exciting history. The one who takes us furthest back into our history is the Guarahoon. Guarahoons have been here long before Columbus. They are still around. The Guarao people are still living on the mainland, in Orinoco and other river regions in the northern part of South America. The kind of guidelines that you get in the tourist information, even in the education system, omit all these key facts. They are omitted for all kinds of reasons. But the Guarahoons are alive, still threatened with extinction but very much alive.

Two years ago, I was invited by Milla Riggio to Toronto to deliver a lecture at the Société Internationale pour L’Etude du Théâtre Médiéval, on Trinidad Carnival. I replied, “I am not coming unless it could be arranged for some Trinidad Carnival characters to be with me: a Guarahoon, a Moko Jumbie, and a Dragon.” The organizers agreed. The team of four of us demonstrated and lectured. The conference participants—scholars of world renown, reputable researchers, members of a prestigious society of medievalists—were all exhilarated by the presentation. They have been organizing conferences every three years and exchanging information and ideas over a much longer period. They meet and discuss drama and performance, including Carnival and the carnivalesque, from before medieval times to the present. At the Toronto Conference through the “Lecture, Performance, and Exhibition on Trinidad Carnival,” they were seeing and hearing, and also experiencing things which they have been theorizing about, often as dead things from the past. Some expressed amazement and, of course, the desire to follow the road to Trinidad Carnival.

STEGASSY: But who are the Guarahoons? Who is the Moko Jumbie, and who is Pierrot Grenade?

CUPID: The Guarahoons (Wild Indian is a misnomer; a very misleading nomenclature) are those in red, rookoo red. Rookoo (Bixa orellana) is a berry that
they used for coloring. In their celebrations they used to paint themselves with rookoo. They had and still have many things about which to celebrate. However, in this century, for Carnival costuming, red merino or jersey is used. The traditional Carnival Guarahoon is red all over. The stockings are red, the alpagatas (rope sandals), the bloomers, the skirts, the pants, and headpiece are all red. The top of the headpiece could be a boat or a bird, symbolizing all kinds of things very important to them and their lifestyle. They have their stories of crossing seas and rivers, but above all else, living in harmony with the environment. Yes, Guarahoons were celebrating here long before Columbus.

STEGASSY: Do they say anything?

CUPID: Oh yes, in their language, of course. They sing and chant. They have got dance, they have got mime, they have got drama and all the ingredients of good theatre. Not all of Trinidad Carnival is a parade along specified streets. You play mas any and everywhere. It is performance. Guarahoon movements carry them one behind the other zig-zagging along the road on Carnival days. If you were to throw a coin and hit one of them, it could create a peculiar reaction. Because money is supposed to be evil, and strange to them, the hit would cause the Guarahoon to fall to the ground, as though sick or dead. The others would perform a ceremony with prayers, chants, and dancing with a particular pelvic motion which would cause the fallen to recover completely: “Ee histay, ee bustay/ ee tu mamutay, yarcarack/ gracias Santa Maria” [chant].

The Guarahoon experience is an incredible example of survival and resilience with resistance to all kinds of domination, oppression, and other adverse conditions and circumstances. They do wine in the streets in whatever way necessary for the portrayal and the message. The Moko Jumbie, if you asked him, he would say from under his masked face that he has been walking all the way across the Atlantic Ocean from the West Coast of Africa, laden with many, many centuries of experiences and, in spite of all the inhuman attacks and encounters, yet still walking “tall, tall, tall.” The Pierrot Grenade in his costume of rags and bags with book and whip and mask and wit and language at its sweetest in patois came, as the name implies, from the neighbouring Caribbean island of Grenada. In more recent times he or she, when challenged by another Pierrot Grenade, could spell “CHICAGO” in English—“chicken in the car and the car can’t go dat de way to spell CHICAGO”—and escape licks, a whipping. But the Guarahoons, as portrayed by the Carnival character, are special. They are from right here, true, true family with those on the mainland of South America.

STEGASSY: What about women? Are there women characters?

CUPID: Yes, there is the Baby Doll, and there is the Dame Lorraine. Those are two of many. But there is no restriction on what a woman could play. A woman could play a Bat, a Dragon, a Demon or a Blue Devil. A woman could be a Fancy Clown, a Bear, a Cow, a Pierrot, a Fancy Indian, a Fancy Sailor, even a Moko Jumbie...anything. There is no traditional Carnival character that prevents any woman from playing. The fiercest ones are the stickfighters, and there have always been female stickfighters.
STEGASSY: Really?

CUPID: Let’s see, there were Techcelia, Sarah Jamaica, Long Bobby Ada. The list is long. Moonefar, the daughter of the famous champion stickfighter King Frederick of Talparo, is the best known currently.

STEGASSY: What do the Bats do?

CUPID: The Bats, they mime like bats, walk like bats, make sounds like bats, eat fruits like bats, dance like bats, even suck blood like vampire bats. You may not know this but Trinidad Carnival people do very extensive research for each year’s mas that they play. The presentations and portrayals are developed from solid research and history, together, of course, with their creativity. The traditional mas players are continuously studying the characters they are portraying. They will look at a real bat when they are making the costume. They will take a bat into their room and examine every detail of its structure. In the streets or on the competition stage during Carnival, it is the real bat in a larger form. Not only how it looks but the sound is there, the movement is there, the detailed physical features are there; it is a bat out of their minute observation. Carlisle Chang is reported to have made the claim that Trinidad is the only place where the bat is used in costumery. But researchers have found recently that near Lake Chad, in the heart of Africa, they have got bats in their costumery.

STEGASSY: Why do traditional mas people choose the same characters?

CUPID: They identify with and specialize in the traditional characters of their choice. Same yes, yet always different in many very interesting ways. Each year some new detail in the costume and presentation is added or changed, based on new research information and their own creativity and fantasy. Over time, the player becomes the character even after Carnival. The attraction could be uniqueness; the peculiar characteristics with which the player could relate, admire, and emulate. In the old days, not so much nowadays, the spectators used to recompense them with a pecuniary reward for their amiable presentation. As they played through the streets on Carnival days, they would ask of their friends and knowledgeable people among the spectators: “How ah come?” They would be very pleased with the approbation and approval: “You come good.” One spectator would agree with another: “He come good, oui.” Many traditional mas players would have some money and good feelings to take home après Carnival là. Don’t forget Trinidad Carnival is not a parade; you can play your mas anywhere on any street in any town or village. Also you can play anytime in accordance with the Proclamation from 2:00 A.M. [official time in 1997 but variable] Carnival Monday morning [Jouvay] to midnight when Carnival Tuesday changes dramatically to Ash Wednesday. “The road make to walk on Carnival Day,” Lord Kitchener, an internationally famous calypsonian, has immortalized. Nobody tells anybody what to play. If someone chooses to play the same traditional character every year, then so be it. A Bat is a Bat whether it is red, black, blue, yellow, green, white, or brown. In the Kingdom of the Carnival all Bats are Bats. And the players express this kind of freedom as they play mas. Same thing with the people who play Jab Jab.

STEGASSY: What’s Jab Jab?

CUPID: A Jab Jab is not what the books say Jab Jab is. Not a Jab Molassie or Blue Devil. Jab Jab is another character that looks like a European medieval clown. He is supposed to be a happy character. But when you go close, you realize he is a fierce character with no clowning. You hear in the chants, in
the songs they sing, the resistance, the readiness and ability to do battle. They use this kind of thing! They put on a costume, a happy clown costume, but inside that costume is a fierce warrior. They fight back. They really attack. They protect their heads sometimes with an iron pot under the headdress. When they are hit with a rope or hit with a stick, their head is protected. So, Jab Jab, why Jab Jab, what’s Jab?

STEGASSY: I don’t know.

CUPID: Pas connaître jiable, ou pas connaître diab.

STEGASSY: Le diable!

CUPID: Oui! So that in Trinidad patois it becomes Jab. Jab Jab. Twin Devils, Double Devil, Jab Jab. Fierce fellow. And they go along the streets in bands (sometimes individually or with a stickman) chanting and cracking whips in space, on the road or on bodies, their own body sometimes. The whip in the hand is highly symbolic. You find that the East Indian communities specially like this kind of mas. Why the East Indian or Indo-Trinidadian is so attached to it, is anybody’s guess... A matter for more research... But this is their choice. There is an East Indian group, Alfred’s family and friends in the sugar cane–belt village, called Perseverance. They have been playing Jab Jab for as long as anybody could remember. A few years ago there was another Jab Jab group in Balmain led by a man from Grenada. He has since died. Until the ’50s Jab Jab mas used to be plentiful in Aranguez, Quay d’Orsay, St. Joseph, Tunapuna, Dinsley Village, Tacarigua...in all the places along the Eastern Main Road where sugar cane villages used to be.

STEGASSY: Many of these characters are quite frightening, aren’t they?
CUPID: But they should be. This is what the Trinidad Carnival in its intermingling process is also about. It has always included the sorting out of serious life and death socioeconomic and societal problems. Possible solutions to adverse historical situations in Trinidad and Tobago have emerged out of the Carnival process. Trinidad Carnival has been providing opportunities for the claiming and reclaiming of self and space and being, and also defense from perceived and actual threats. The Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago is not only the parade that the tourist books say it is. There is a lot more to it. It is a medium for psychological release... for affirmation of deep religious-like commitment... a stress reliever. Historically, Trinidad Carnival with its principal components—mas, calypso, and steelband—has been a paramount crucible of resistance. The Africans who were enslaved used it. East Indians who were indentured used the same method. Both groups were able publicly to say for two days, “We are free, we have liberty, we have license, to say who we are as powerfully as possible.” “Clear de road, they coming down,” coming down chanting, dancing with sticks and whips. If you look closely at the costume of some Jab Jabs you may see among the decorations on the heart-shaped breastplate mirrors, rhinestones, a star, a crescent moon—are they Muslim symbols? Quién sabe, who knows.

STEGASSY: Like you see a lot of death also...

CUPID: Why not death? To them death is like life. Death is another state of being [...] to them. So that death does not frighten them. They are as ready to deal with it as with anything else. And at Carnival time as artists they express themselves, the joker or whatever. However they feel, they smile up, but then down inside there is sadness. They are vex. In a moment, the same moment, there is sadness and joy as they celebrate life. This is what Trinidad Carnival is. A total celebration of life. With all its rites of passage, with everything. So in one expression they cover the whole thing. The traditional characters carrying on playing their mas. If the character right next to one is portraying death, the other one is portraying life, in all kinds of form, and they are happily going up and down the road together. This is why the traditional Carnival is so important. It includes and treats with almost any and everything. You mentioned preservation and transmission. I have met children who say, “What are you talking about Mister Cupid, this traditional cultural thing, I don’t know what you are talking about.” You go to the schools, and you spend one week with these children and... You are surprised at the positive results. I remember last year in the week before Carnival, lecture demonstrations and workshops were organized for traditional Carnival. The children came first to see, then they became involved. In the New Town RC Girls School the children told the teacher, “Miss, we want to change what we playing.” They abandoned whatever they had planned to play (advertising for some kind of sweet drink, beverage, soft drink) and they changed plans to play traditional mas; because they confessed that they never knew traditional mas had so much. It’s this kind of experiment that has shown that the transmission is possible. There was a brilliant little girl from one of the so-called prestige Catholic schools, Holy Name Convent. She came to the workshops,
Guarahoon Chants

1. A mix of Guarahoon and Spanish Roman Catholic prayer used for healing:
   
   Ee histay, ee bustay
   Ee tu mamu te, yarcarack
   Gracias Santa Maria
   
   Eey histay, ee bustay
   Ee tu mamu te, yarcarack
   Gracias Santo Monto Christo

2. Triumph over evil (Buckeeram)
   
   Gua ree nay ee choco
   Elloweenah choco loco (repeat)

3. Resistance song—“Do not submit”:
   
   Ee kee ray, ee kee rah
   Nahray nahray ah bendooray
   Nahray mahray now first tina
   Nahray mahray ah bendooray
   Nahray mahray now second tina
   Nahray mahray now cyclo darco

4. Cassava (staple food) being sung about in song game:
   
   Teenay now swaal booreenay (repeat thrice)
   Casav in ah rootay ah swaal booreenay (repeat thrice)

5. Queen Elloweenah being celebrated in song at coronation:
   
   Elloweenah Hellee Anna
   Teenay ah manittanee, tee nay (repeat)

6. Farewell song—“Goodbye we are leaving”:
   
   Deeanne say Naree Anne
   Deeanne Christianne Naree Anne
   Deeanne say Naree Anne
   Deeanne cyclo Naree Anne

   (The soloist sings the two lines, the chorus answers the same two lines)

7. A boat-rowing song:
   
   In ah sout ah lout ah meree canoe
   Sout ah lout ah meree canoe
   In ah sout ah lout ah whip ee wamboe
   Sout ah lout ah whip ee wamboe

*Collected by Camele St. Louis from an old woman in Cedros and an old Grenadian man, Coconut Trace, Point Fortin, 1986. Guarahoon mas was played by Bands of Youths from Point Fortin and LaBrea and led by Camele St. Louis and Vanessa Hood, 1986–1997.*
she looked about eight or nine years old, maybe she was eleven, but very small. She came to one of the sessions with the Robber, the Midnight Robber. Rupert Archibald the famous traditional mas player from Siparia was there during a session doing movements and speeches. The teachers afterwards asked them to write their impressions of what they experienced, and she wrote in her essay, “When I grow up I want to be a Robberist.” She had no question in her mind that there is a place for her and she moved from Robber to Robberist. I had never heard that before, but there is a little child uninhibited and expressing what she wants to be, and she makes the speech, with the gait and action and full creative confidence. Before long, you might see there is a character called Robberist, a female Midnight Robber talker. There are many other traditional characters. There are the Minstrels. Those who sing as in southern U.S.A., where white people who wanted to do this kind of minstrel act painted their faces black. In Trinidad Carnival, Theresa Morilla Montano and her Minstrel Boys of Maraval and Paramin who play black-and-white Minstrels are all black people. So you have a black person playing a white person playing a black person. It’s an amazing kind of thing. Another male character calls himself a “Tennessee Cowboy Minstrel.” When you examine that, “Tennessee cowboy,” Tennessee sounds like America, and he is playing cowboy, and America is famous for cowboys, so he calls himself Tennessee Minstrel Cowboy and paints his face a kind of pink, not white, but pinkish. His band of four Afro-Trinidadians with face and neck painted pink, with guitars and accordion and cowboy costumes and boots but no horses, go along the streets of Point Fortin singing cowboy songs: “Red River Valley” and “Rio Grand.” The spectators whom they serenade love them and the cowboys are happy. Mr. George (Cowboy George) of Point Fortin, the leader, claims that he was the first person [1947] to play this kind of mas. He has been playing it every year. One year he played it in another Caribbean island, St. Vincent, and he was the star of the Carnival. Last year he trained ten youngsters from Chatham Youth Camp on the main road to Cedros. They all enjoyed themselves in Old Port of Spain at Carnival Friday Traditional Festival playing Tennessee Cowboy Minstrels. Soumarie, another traditional mas, was the way the Hindus in Penal, St. Mary’s, and other districts on Carnival Days play mas borrowing from the remembered festival in India [Durga, earth deity?]. A horse and rider, a groom, and a Princess are the principal characters. In Penal Village, Birbal Jassant and family and friends are the best known players of Soumarie. It is important to note the differences—a horse not a little donkey [Burroquite]. The music is also East Indian.

STEGASSY: How was the Carnival music in the 1940s and ’50s?

CUPID: Nothing like what you hear now...very low on the decibel scale. It was mostly natural sound even with the coming of the steelband—no amplification, no sound system, no big truck—trumpets, saxophones, trombones, kettle drums, and clarinets...musicians and masqueraders playing music and playing mas—on the same road level. A notable exception was mas players on trucks. The bugles, iron rhythm section, and steelband instruments did not push up the sound level too much. It was a kind of transition period from the sweet and low sounds of the string bands. The string bands with guitars, violins, cuatros, mandolins, bandols, teeples, chac-chac, and bass used to accompany the calypsonians and chorus together with the masqueraders all on foot playing mas through the streets. Pasillo [paseo] stringband breakaway music, together with calypsos, played at Carnival time in the previous decade and earlier was taken over by calypso music bands without the calypsonian singing in the road. The calypsonian stayed in the tents and theatres [cinemas].
In the country districts such as Mayaro, Sangre Grande, and Moruga, there was a difference in Carnival music which was significant—not the volume...it definitely was not higher...but the instruments. The African drums and *tamboo-bamboo* held full sway, which together with the *lahway* of the *chantwell* call-and-response of the evocative chorus of male and female voices—created the musical driving power. The drums, kgs, bamboo, and voices kept the stickplaying *gayelles* pulsating and the country Carnival celebrations at a high energy level on the roads between Manzanilla and Sangre Chiquito and Sangre Grande and the sugarcane districts around Freeport and Couva. While in the cities and towns—Port of Spain, San Fernando, Point Fortin, and La Brea—the rhythm section of the *tamboo-bamboo* band was transposed to what has come to be called the engine room of the steelband. Steelband music incubating in the '30s and early '40s hatched and burst into full life and the world experienced the triumphant entry of the steelband music into Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago in the '40s after World War II [1939–1945]. The '50s were tumultuous and glorious years of steelband music evolution in Carnival.

To name just one moment of glory: All Stars finger-beating upstairs in the garret on Charlotte Street and exploding the secret bomb tune before “dayclean.” On Jouvay morning during that decade, European classical music and hymns were played in sweet, sweet calypso tempo while thousands upon thousands were dancing and *chipping* in the streets of Port of Spain with the sun coming up slow, slow, slow. Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin and the other famous composers used to be jumping up and chipping in their graves.

Don’t forget that the Carnival music of the '30s had plenty patois. It was a real revolution in music during the '40s and '50s. From the earliest days when all calypsos were in patois.

STEGASSY: It was all in patois?

CUPID: Oui, all calypsos used to be in patois in the 1800s, from after emancipation in 1834 to the 1890s. It was only at the turn of the century there was the strong anglicizing drive and these kinds of changes occurred. Patois was the lingua franca...tout mond te ca paler patois...so that with everybody changing to English, calypsos also went English.

STEGASSY: Do you know a calypso in patois?

CUPID: *(Singing)* “Pwesoner lever mettez lumiere sur Congo Bara”—Prisoner get up and put a light [hex] on Congo Bara. Fight back! Resist!

STEGASSY: What is there to resist today?

CUPID: Many things. There is always something to resist today: destruction of the environment, loss of enjoyment of life, erosion of cultural identity, the coming of mass tourism. This is an island that is still relatively free of tourists. And there are plans to build hotels on beaches and in forest reserves. Of course, there are the people resisting that. Because once you go blindly along that road, what happens to the country? And unless there are powerful reminders that things have to be put in place to protect, to check and to balance, there could be undesirable social effects and, at worst, total destruction. So there is always something: inappropriate technology, the coming of the satellites, the coming of television. So that really all you see is killing, killing, killing. Every half a second there is somebody shot or killed everywhere. What is this doing to the human mind and little babies, and babies not yet born. So you have a Midnight Robber Brian Honoré standing up and making a speech—“The dish runs away with the spoon”—about all the things which are adversely affecting human beings and indigenous culture and the environ-
ment. So there is always something to protest, to resist, and at Carnival time it comes out subtly; it comes out playfully; it comes out in all kinds of forms, as it has always been coming out over many, many centuries, not only in Trinidad and Tobago but in several other countries worldwide. Trinidad, of course, has evolved its own unique Carnival features which in recent decades are being copied in many large and small cities in the U.S.A, Canada, England, and even Australia. It was President Obasanjo of Nigeria who made the statement at FESTAC, the World Festival 1977 in Lagos (he was the Festival’s Grand Patron), “The greatness of the cultural contributions from Trinidad and Tobago is that they not only created their own music, calypso, but created their own musical instrument, the steel drum.”

Did you say you have been here five days, Ruth? It will take perhaps five years to comprehend fully what you have been experiencing at Carnival time in Trinidad... Here we all are Ash Wednesday night in Historic Lopinot near Sooree Village... The Carnival is over...is it? Or is it the start of the annual prelude maybe to next year’s Carnival? You may have heard it said, while you were enjoying your first taste, that the Carnival over the past five years has reached a plateau in its ascending development—a high high plateau: traditional mas, undergoing a renaissance; famous designer/artist Peter Minshall and other Trinidad Carnival people contributing and being involved in celebrations of Bastille Day in Paris, designing and performing ceremonies for World Soccer in Chicago and the Olympic Games in Barcelona, Spain, and Atlanta, U.S.A., and at home; calypso, soca, chutney combining; panmusic ascending; Renegades on Charlotte Street opposite the Chinese Association and within sound distance of La Cou Harpe people, Rosary Catholics, Church of Scotland Protestants; All Stars on the bank of the Dry River within sight of the Spiritual Baptist Church, the Mosque, the Lodge and Calvary; Desperadoes towering up Laventille Hill; Invaders still under one of the City’s last breadfruit trees on Tragarete Road; Angel Harps in Arima and Enterprise Vil-
lage, Chaguanas; with all the community steelbands in South and deep South together with thousands of other pan musicians, many female, many very young; 100 thousand masqueraders with colors upon colors and movements into more movements in every part of the country [Trinidad and Tobago]—all of these elements coming together on the Carnival plateau and creating a succession of high intensity moments in celebration, and, on a much wider plain, the art of living. Yes, Ruth, Carnival has reached new heights. It has attained new levels with its astonishing intermingling of people and culture capable of powering and launching into the next millennium.

Ah go see yuh merci un pile hasta la vista ah char from the Mecca of Carnival.

Ed. note: This interview by Ruth Stegassy was edited by John Cupid.

Ruth Stegassy is a senior broadcaster at FranceCulture, the “third program” of French National Radio. She has produced a number of programs on Carnival and carnivalesque practices in Europe and North Africa over the past ten years. As a member of the 1996 team subsidized by the National Carnival Commission and Trinity College (Hartford, CT), her interviews and commentaries were broadcast in an hour-long program in February 1997.

6. A young Fireman at Children’s Carnival 1998. (Photo by Carol Martin)