

A Dream come true

[An article by Max Farrar in Leeds West Indian Carnival magazine, 21st anniversary, 1988]

Talking to Ian Charles and Arthur France about the Leeds Westindian Carnival is like being caught up in a whirlwind of enthusiasm. There are a few grey hairs in sight these days, but they have the energy of teenage boys. It's the same energy which has been driving the Carnival in Leeds since 1967. These two are the perfect team - Arthur the public dynamo, Ian the private organiser - and between them there is no obstacle that cannot be overcome in the annual battle to get an even better Carnival on the road than the year before.

Ian Charles was born in Trinidad. Trinidad is the home of Carnival; her Carnivals are the inspiration for all the best costume makers throughout the world. Ian was about 16 years old, just after the Second World War, when he joined his first Mas Camp - a Sailor Band - when he went from his home town of Ariwa to Port of Spain to go to College. He learned about costume making in the Mas Camp each year until he came to England in 1954.

Arthur France came to England from Nevis in 1960. In St Kitts-Nevis, Carnival is a smaller affair, held at Christmas, but Arthur's parents were very religious and they wouldn't let him take part. "My parents looked forward to Carnival but would not let me take part," said Arthur. Ian explained: "In the old days there was a lot of rivalry between the Steel Bands at Carnival and it would sometimes lead to fighting in the streets."

Fascinated

"But I was always very fascinated by Carnival," said Arthur. "When I was a child I remember seeing Levi Jeffers and other men who are in Leeds now in a play called David and Goliath which they put on the road, and the Masquerade troupe used to perform in St Kitts-Nevis." Ian always wanted to be in the troupe of robbers: "They would catch you in a corner and pull out their guns - you couldn't get away until you paid them something!"

When I came to England I dreamed of having a Carnival here. There was no-one to stop me from taking part," said Arthur. There were a number of Trinidadian students in Leeds in the early 1960s, and Arthur became close friends with them. He talked to all the Westindians he met about holding a Carnival. "Apart from the Trinidadians, 80% of the people I asked said that holding a Carnival here would be degrading for them. They also thought that there was no possibility of the police allowing a street festival to take place." He remembers overhearing a woman talking about "this crazy man who wants a Carnival in Leeds". "She said 'I hope the rain come down and drown him and police lock them up'," said Arthur, slapping his leg and nearly falling off his chair with laughter.

Trinidadians

The Carnival movement in Leeds was set in motion by two Trinidadian students, Frankie Davis and Tony Lewis. In 1966 they organised a fete at Kitson college. They booked

the famous Soul band Jimmy James and the Vagabonds. "Marlene Samal Singh, who later married Tyrone Ambrose, organised a troupe of Red Indians, and Frankie Davis got on the bus on Roundhay Road in his costume to come to the fete," said Arthur. That night everybody ended up at the British Council's International House off North Street. "We had a great night - everybody was over the moon," said Ian. The idea of establishing Caribbean culture in Leeds had taken root.

It was in 1967 that the Leeds Carnival went on the road for the first time. "Ma Buck was the central figure," said Arthur, "she was so warm hearted and helpful to everyone." She and her daughter Julia, who subsequently married Ian, took important roles in organising the event as well as in playing mass in costume.

But it wasn't all that easy getting the Carnival going. George Archibald, Cedric Clarke and Arthur France had formed the United Caribbean Association with 22 others in 1964. At first the UCA catered for the social needs - entertainment, dances and such like - of the Westindians in Leeds. When Calvin Beech, Tony Lewis and Rose McAlister joined in the late 1960s the UCA started to address the political problems that were facing the black community, and it developed cultural and educational activities, including the first Saturday School for black children.

Crazy

Since the Carnival needed to be a properly constituted body to deal with the authorities, Arthur approached the UCA to sponsor it. "I'd first tried at the end of 1966," said Arthur "and they threw out the proposal altogether. They said I was crazy." But Arthur France has never been known to take 'No' for an answer. "I went round to each member of the UCA individually and persuaded them." The UCA selected a carnival committee but, said Arthur "They picked the wrong people and nothing happened, so I sacked them all!" Arthur then selected his own committee, consisting of the Trinidadian students Willie Robinson, Wally Thompson, Irwin and Rounica, Samlal Singh, Rose McAlister, Ken Thomas and Anson Shepherd, along with Calvin Beech and Vanta Paul.

That first Carnival sticks in everyone's minds. Ian Charles was working out of Leeds as a survey engineer on the M62 and he came home to find his house in Manor Drive had been turned into a Mas Camp - three costumes were being made inside and he couldn't get in through the front or the back door. The other Mas Camp was at Samlal Singh's house in Lunan Place - he designed and made the winning costume, The Sun Goddess, with Vickie Seal as his Queen. Betty Bertie designed and made The Snow Queen, Wally Thompson the gondolia and Willie Robinson made Cleopatra, worn by Gloria Viechwech. The fifth costume was The Hawaiian Queen.



Arthur France 1975

PHOTO © MAX FARRER

Steel Bands

Arthur built The Gay Carnival Steel Band, which later became the Boscoe Steel Band, with Roy Buchanan, Rex, Curtland, Dabbo, Tuddy, Vince, Clark, Desmond and others. The St Christopher Steel Band came from Birmingham, one came from Manchester and the Invaders (with Prentice as Captain) from Leeds also performed. The procession left Potternewton Park and went straight to the Town Hall where the first Steel Band competition was held in front of a capacity crowd of more than a thousand. The judge was Junior Telford, from London, who had brought the first Trinidadian steel band to Europe.

The winning troupe was the Cheyanne Indians, with Ian Charles (then, as now) The Chief. Vanta Paul formed the Fantasia Britannia troupe and Willie Robinson brought out the Sailors, while Samlal Singh and Anson Shepherd organised a children's band.

Chapeltown and Notting Hill

Junior Telford, along with two other Londoners, Alan Charles and Clyde Alleyne, who had attended the Leeds

Carnival, took the news back to Notting Hill. An Irish woman who ran the Back-a-Yard- club invited the Leeds Mas players down to London. "It rained for the whole week-end, but it didn't stop us," said Ian. Instead of playing the steel bands, they just played 'iron' - beating a rhythm on car hub caps. "I remember that iron so clearly," said Ian, "it reminded me of home."

Arthur recalls the first time he saw the Carnival forming in Potternewton Park in Chapeltown: "I could hear the St Christopher Steel Band in the air and as I came round the corner I could see them playing, just with the pan round their necks. I couldn't believe it. It was a dream come true. I saw this old lady walking in front of me, and as she saw the pans she put her hands in the air and said 'Lord, it's been 15 years since I heard this'."

"People are thrilled to see this culture in Britain," said Arthur. "It was the enthusiasm of the Trinidadians that got Carnival off the ground, but now it has drawn the people from St Kitts and Nevis in, and it brings us all together."