

Cover yourself in Chocolate and Dance in the Street

Description



Pure Lime leader Edison Braithwaite. Photo by the author.

This Guy Gets Londoners to Cover Themselves in Chocolate and Dance in the Street

Notting Hill in West London isn't just famous for the floppy haired Hugh Grant classic. Once a year, it also hosts the biggest street party in Britain. First held in the mid-1960s, Notting Hill Carnival began with a crowd of just 500 people. It was a taste of home for London's then growing Caribbean community—a weekend of celebration inspired by centuries-old carnival rituals, as well as a response to the [race riots that had gripped the area just years before](#). Today, it's hard to tell exactly how many revellers Carnival attracts, but at least 1 million people attend during the August bank holiday event, with over 50,000 costumed dancers, steel band drummers, and soca performers parading through the streets and dancing atop floats.

But as I march with throngs of football fans through the British summer rainfall on a drab Tuesday evening, I feel a long way from vibrant street partying. I'm headed to a pub to meet Edison Braithwaite, leader of [Pure Lime](#), a 750-strong float of masqueraders who add their own twist to the Carnival celebrations by covering themselves and spectators in chocolate. As I walk into the pub, a football match blares from several screens, but Braithwaite greets me with a pint and a warm smile. He

tells me that he moved to London from Trinidad in 1988 and went to Carnival for the first time in 1989.

Dirty Mas

“My first impressions? Well, I was impressed something was going on but it didn’t compare to back home,” he says. “Dirty Mas was missing.” Dirty Mas is part of the *J’Ouvert* (pronounced by Trinidadians as *Joo-vay*) celebrations that traditionally start Caribbean carnival festivities, seeing merry-makers through until the dawn of Lent with an all-night party. Dirty Mas originates from slaves rebelling,” explains Braithwaite. “French settlers, who would hold elaborate masquerade balls in the lead up to Lent, introduced carnival to Trinidad. Unsurprisingly, the colonial powers—who still thought that slavery was a good idea—didn’t extend their invitations to the local community. “There are various explanations for where the Dirty Mas comes from,” says Braithwaite. “This practice, it carried on when the slaves were freed and allowed to go dancing on the streets for carnival. They kept up the dirty side, it’s a tradition.”

Braithwaite and six friends introduced Dirty Mas to London’s Carnival in 1996, filling buckets with liquid chocolate and doling out the sugary substance alongside the Sunday floats. “We had 35 people in 1997, 75 in 1998, and this just continued to double year on year, until in 2010, when we had over 1200 people involved,” says Braithwaite.



Photo courtesy Pure Lime.

Such *J’Ouvert* celebrations can also be traced back to civil disturbances in the colonial Port of Spain, Trinidad, when anti-slavery campaigners would smear themselves with oil or paint to avoid being recognised by the authorities during revolts. “It carried on into the carnival, where they would come and dance covered in mud and grease,” adds Braithwaite. In Grenada, carnival celebrations to this

day see revellers douse themselves in engine oil, as they take to the streets to party during sun up. But Braithwaite and his friends opted for chocolate. “When I came to London, nobody was doing a good Dirty Mas here, so I decided to create my own,” he says. Braithwaite was unable to find the clay to make a mud mixture that worked or find suitable grease for the occasion, so came up with the idea to “bring Dirty Mas into the 21st century with chocolate.” It took two years of experimenting to achieve the right consistency.

Belgian Chocolate

“We use an imported Belgian chocolate spread,” explains Braithwaite. “It’s tasty and thick and it took a lot of time to find the perfect ingredient.” As he shows me Dirty Mas photos from previous years, it’s clear that there’s something more to the mixture than just chocolate spread. “Well, yes, you need to make it viscous enough to spread properly,” says one of the Pure Lime team, visibly excited that Carnival is just a few days away. “We mix it with some other ingredients—all of which are edible—but it’s a secret. We won’t tell you what we do to get it right.”



Pure Lime celebrations at Notting Hill Carnival, 1997. Photo courtesy Pure Lime.

As the pub’s football fans grow rowdy, Braithwaite and I head outside to talk about the logistics of Pure Lime’s Dirty Mas. He explains that this year, 500 kilos of chocolate mixture will be carried in large wheelie bins, having been prepared in the garden the day before. Aside from being fucking delicious, Braithwaite swears that chocolate adds something “magic and spicy” to the Carnival experience. “Chocolate ties everything together,” he says. “It gives you the essence of the traditional Dirty Mas but it’s also some spice, some seasoning. There’s that hint of kinkiness—the fact that you can dance and lick somebody, it’s just a lot of fun.” As it happens,

Iâ€™m heading to Carnival this year and Braithwaite promises thereâ€™s a tub of chocolate with my name on.

[Michael Segalov](#)

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