

BRIAN MACFARLANE: MAS' MAN SUPREME

AN INTERVIEW WITH T&T'S 'KING OF CARNIVAL'



BRIAN MACFARLANE
Artist and Entrepreneur,
Trinidad

Trinidad and Tobago is a small nation – one that could be easily mistaken for a speck of dust on a map – but the potential of our citizens is infinite. Trinidad's very own Brian MacFarlane, master designer, event planner and mas' man extraordinaire, is a prime example of the potential of the country and its people.

It could be said that you have single-handedly done more for an independent Trinidad and Tobago in terms of its image abroad and self-image of its inhabitants than any other person in the last two decades. What are your personal views about that?

What I have done was very much on a personal level. I never saw when I was getting involved in doing it as a nationalistic thing because it's born out of art – born out of creativity. It started off very innocently for me and became a very big thing all of a sudden. I'm very proud to have played a role in it.

Does love of country motivate you in your work?

Most definitely; I pay attention to all details and all the aspects of the cultures that we have. The Indian; the African, the Syrian-Lebanese, Chinese... all of them have a very important role in making us who we are and who we've become.

MacFarlane was born in 1957, on the eve of Trinidad's independence, and raised in a lower-middle class household in Petit Valley, Diego Martin. The fourth of five children, he was a sickly child and, to add to his difficulties, his dyslexia kept him from academic success.

Tell us about your struggle with dyslexia as a child.

I left school at 15. I just couldn't keep up. And I was ridiculed at the same time. In class, [my teacher] would ridicule me and say, "you fool" and all the kids would pick up on that in break time. It was really horrible. There were many

times when I'd just walk out of the school and go over to my grandmother's house and beg not to have to go back.

But MacFarlane was never an average teenager; he didn't simply give up. The day after his decision not to return to St Anthony's College, he took his future into his own hands by walking into well-known mas man and costume designer Raoul Garib's mas camp looking for a job.

You started your career at the age of 15 as an apprentice to Raoul Garib. What was it like working with him?

Garib's band was a great band. It was a very family-oriented band where parents would play with their children and whatnot. Just working with them was great. Going to Garib initially, I worked in the backrooms in the general sections. Chris Santos was the designer at the time. Brenda, Raoul and Chris called me in one day and asked, "Where did you learn about dealing with colours and mixing colours?" They were quite impressed with what I was doing and had me moved to Woodford Street to work on the King and Queen costumes. I had a knack for mixing colours and textures and so on, and they picked it up right away. That just catapulted me forward.

You not only became a brilliant designer, but an excellent businessman too – even though your school education was rudimentary at best. How did you handle that aspect of your career?

I never thought in 2009 that I would be sitting in meetings with the Prime Minister and speaking about doing something like CHOGM (The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting). I can duly say that I think the talent I have is God-given. I am very spiritually-connected in everything that I do. A religious person is committed to a way of being taught and keeping everything that way, but a

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spiritual person is just that inner being – that soul connection, which is not taught. It's just something very natural.

How has your family influenced you?

I grew up in a tight-knit, very close family. There were nights when I'd be home baking cakes and working through the night icing cakes. It started to become a big business, so at one point I did 4 or 5 weddings a weekend. And many a night, my father or mother would stay up and just keep me company. There was that great support that helped to shape my career.

Does the commercial side of your work sometimes compromise the artistic side?

It does. I'll often be doing projects and thinking we need more of this or that here and [my brother] comes with a stick saying, "We can't spend any more. We need to stop!" We have these fights between us all the time but it's good because it's what makes us very successful.

For the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, MacFarlane was called upon by Imagineer, a theatrical production house in Coventry, to tender with them on a cultural presentation. He competed with over 260 designers around the world and was awarded the job. A tremendous opportunity for the artist, he was involved in the parade of Lady Godiva, costuming a procession of 2,500 people. [This interview was done before the 2012 London Olympics.]

Tell us about the 2,500 costumes that you have done for the Lady Godiva itinerary from Coventry to London, and about the opening ceremony for the games at Coventry.

London is divided into 12 regions for

the Olympics. Their approach is to make the games a very cultural experience, seeing that London is such a melting pot with so many cosmopolitan nationalities. Not only is the opening ceremony supposed to reflect that but the entire games and everything that surrounds the games.

The concept is really Imagineer's in terms of the storyline being of Lady Godiva, a story of that region. Our parade starts on the night of the 28th of July in the ruins of the Cathedral and on the 29th it leaves for London. It's a 7-day journey of Lady Godiva. The statue is 35 ft. tall and made up of 50 bicycles that move up in the air; she comes down as she bows and then rises up again, and there's a procession of 2,500 people in costumes behind her. Everything is built over there. The cape that goes onto her is embedded with chips so that when she's moving through the city or moving anywhere on the



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Sachicago: Opening of the 5th Summit of The Americas, 2009

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route, you use your phone and just scan it to her and you can get information about myself, about Trinidad and Tobago itself, the ribbon industry, the auto industry... The technology is fabulous. My contribution is the costumes.

Are the costumes purely in the European historical vernacular or is there a little "Trini flair" to them?

The costumes that I have done do not carry our national symbols, but the architecture of the costumes is very much Trinidad and Tobago's style of costuming. A lot of the elements came out of some of the better pieces I've done over the past 8 years in my bands. How it is coloured might be different because I did have a colour scheme to work with, but I think people could look at it and say, "This is MacFarlane's mas."

Besides your fantastic Carnival bands, you have done a number of cultural pageants in Trinidad and Tobago, the fifth best known of which was the Opening of the Fifth Summit of the

Americas, which was widely televised. Can you tell us a bit about these cultural presentations?

When we did the Summit, it was 735 performers and 200 technical crew, and I moved to CHOGM four months after with 945 performers and another 200-something technical crew, and at the same time still dealing with the Ministers and Prime Ministers. When I get called to any project, I need to get into their mind first before I get into my own mind; trying to figure out what is the reason for this event, what it is supposed to project, what are they hoping to achieve.

When I was asked to do the Summit, I immediately thought, "Summit; there are world leaders coming to us and I think we need to show them where we came from, where we are as they see us now, and what to expect in the future." That was my first thought and from there it started to go to designs.

What is it that shapes your creative impulse?

A lot of different things appeal to my senses. One of the main ones would be Cirque du Soleil.

I love all the different sectors of the show and I've really learnt from that; having all these aspects on different stages that play with the senses. That's the part I think is important – being able to captivate the people.

On a more personal note, who is the private Brian McFarlane?

I am a very shy, bashful person, which a lot of people don't realise at all. I wish I could just be more in the background and do what I love doing, but nobody else can talk about my product for me. I also consider myself to be a very caring person. I get moved easily, when I see people not being treated the right way, when I see culture and race not being respected... It could do so much more for us as a country and it could solve so



many of our crime and social issues if we would just take that more seriously.

You seem to be very generous and active in charitable work. Why is that?

A big part of my work is constantly giving back. In 2005 when my mother passed away, I made a mental commitment to do over the Living Water Hospice. I treat it like any job. There have to be porcelain tiles, all the linens have to match; I make sure it's done perfectly. I believe strongly – and I don't do it for this reason – that as I continue to do this, I will always be successful. As I continue to give, I will always have work.

And MacFarlane, indeed, remains prosperous in the work that he does. Today, his costume design continues to stand out amongst others. It is not merely beads, feathers, and bikinis as mas today has become, but costumes in unison with one another, reflecting our society and the way we develop with each passing year.

How do you deal with the ephemeral aspect of your work, in regard to Carnival today?

I think in a way, it still has a very important role to play in the sense that it has always been, from its inception, the expression of a society. And whether we like it or not, the society is still expressing itself through what we have now. As lost as it may be and as little art form as it may have left, it is still an expression of who we are.

How do you view the independence experience in terms of the arts and of design in T&T?

I think we have one of the strongest and most diverse cultures of the world. And I think we could be doing so much more with it. Because we are now of age – being 50 years and going forward – that makes us more mature, more anchored as a nation, than anything else now, to me, seems it must be easier to move forward; our technology, our industries, our art, our

culture. I think it is of great importance to play that onto who we are as a people and what we have as a nation to offer to the entire world.

Do you think our art and our creativity is a good platform to move forward into the next generation of nation-building?

I think that [our culture] is what will take us there. I remember Hilary Clinton's interview when she came to the Summit. The first thing she said was, "My God! What an experience I just had. It just makes me want to come back for Carnival. I want to see more! I want to get more." That's what [our culture] does; it excites people and wants to bring people here. I think it's a tool that we need to be more serious about.

Closing comments?

I'm blessed to have been born in Trinidad. What I think we have as an independent nation is so unique to the rest of the world, to have these twin islands which we should be so proud of. While I can respect that Tobago would like to have some more self-governance, I would never like to see Tobago as its own independent state, because together, we have so much more strength and we offer so much more value to the rest of the world. The industrialisation and technology of Trinidad; the beaches, the relaxation, the tourism, the folklore and the stories of Tobago – they both offer two unique aspects which are hard to find in any other part of the world.

MacFarlane's life's accomplishments, produced out of a love for the arts and a love for his country, portray the limitless potential that lives within Trinidad and Tobago's citizens. Raised alongside the maturing identity of Trinidad and Tobago as an independent nation, he has contributed to the shaping of our culture as we've progressively grown in our confidence and in our character. And Trinidad and Tobago still has a lot more to offer the world over the next 50 years to come. ■

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Opposite: MacFarlane's 2012 King and Queen of Carnival entry, Malaka Yahweh -The Praying Mantis