

The Birth of Carnaval on the Streets of San Francisco

A Tale in Seven Voices

By Willy Lizárraga

Characters:

Narrator: Wears a black hat

Adela Chu: Wears a carnaval-inspired hair dress

Orlando Hernández: Smokes a joint

Marcus Gordon: Wears a white conga player hat

Pam Minor: Wears a hippie shawl

Lou de Matteis: Carries a camera hanging from his neck

Carole Deutch: Wears a scarf

The Origin of the Origin

NARRATOR: Good evening, ladies and gents. Thank you for coming here. We are here to tell you a carnaval tale. And I say “we” because Lou de Matteis, photographer, myself, Willy Lizarraga, writer, with the gracious help of Akiva Anders, dancer, and Stan Padilla on percussion, have come together today to tell the story of the birth of carnaval on the streets of San Francisco. So, with no further ado, let me introduce to you the principal heroine in this carnaval fairy tale. I am talking about Adela Chu. She was born and raised in Panama and during the seventies made her home in San Francisco. And if it weren’t for her, I am

afraid the history of carnaval in San Francisco would be very different. So, why don't we begin with Adela and with her carnaval dream.

ADELA: "I was three, it was carnaval time in Panama, and my mom was sewing costumes, like every year. She was sewing these cute-pink tutus with a big red valentine over the bodice and a pill-box hat with a valentine on it. I wanted to wear one soooooo badly, but I was told I was too young to be in carnaval. I think since that moment I've always had this carnaval dream with me. Many years later, when I arrived in San Francisco, I brought that dream with me and any chance I had to do carnaval, I'd go for it. People just loved it too. That's why I thought San Francisco would be the ideal place to start a carnaval tradition. The spirit was there, the drummers, the dancers. I was a samba instructor. And I guess you can say that teaching dance was how I kept my carnaval dream alive.

"Anyway, I staged my first carnaval in 1976, in the Masonic Temple. The same year, with Ana Halprin's Dance Company, I also did a carnavalito performance at the 24th St Bart Station. And the following year, with Chalo Eduardo's help, we took carnaval to Ocean Beach where it all became a kind of *Burning Man* thing.

"Then, well, I went to Brazil in 1978. And when I came back, it was like I had no choice. Life in San Francisco without a carnaval didn't make any sense. So I had to do something about it. In this sense, the story of carnaval in San Francisco begins when Cristina de Oliveira invited me to spend carnaval in Rio. She had been a student in one of my samba classes and had just gone back to live back in Brazil. Anyway, her invitation changed my life, which, in turn, changed San Francisco's history. Maybe that's why, after no many years, I still remember every word of her invitation letter with all its grammatical mistakes. And every time I say it out loud, it always feels like the beginning of the most fantastic fairy tale.

“Dear Adela, carnival going to happen in the end of the month. So you can come any time. Because me, my friends, the Sun and Yemanjá are here waiting for you. P.S. Come quickly, everybody waiting.”

From Dream to Reality and from Reality to Dream

ORLANDO: “To tell you the truth, man, I first thought Adela was crazy. I mean there are hundreds of years of dancing tradition in Brazil, Panama, Trinidad and all those carnival countries, you know what I mean. You can’t just come and say I wanna have a carnival in San Francisco. ’Cause one thing is to dance in a class setting, you know, and another to take to the streets and make it real. I mean I was Adela’s drummer in all her samba classes, so I knew all her students. And I’m not putting anybody down, I mean she had the best intentions in the world, and all her students had the biggest hearts, but most of them couldn’t really samba, man, and they had no idea what carnival is all about. And let’s not forget that San Francisco in February is just not the place to be dancing around half-naked in the park. Maybe that’s why it’s so amazing what she did. I mean, who would’ve thought? Carnival in San Francisco? Give me a break, man.”

NARRATOR: That was Orlando Hernández, one of Adela Chu’s most faithful drummers and friends from those days. He forgot to mention something, though, something crucial that turn the whole carnival equation around and was probably Adela’s most important ally in making her carnival dream a reality. San Francisco, at the time, had probably the most vibrant drumming culture in the entire country. As Marcus Gordon recalls:

MARCUS: “Hey, I don’t know if you remember, but the drumming circles in the Bay Area were huge in those years, man. And we all knew each other. I knew John Santos, José Flores, Yele and Teddy Strong from Dolores Park. Aquatic Park was also popular but that was more like tree-shade drumming. Then you had Sproul Plaza, in Berkeley. There I met incredible drummers like Babatunde Leah, Tobajee, Malonga, Bill Summers, so many, really. If you were a drummer in the seventies, the Bay Area was the place to be. It had nothing to envy any other city in the country, not even New York, which is where I came from in ‘69. And I think I was teaching drumming at Berkeley High and Laney College when Adela asked me to help her put together carnival.

“At that time, with Boby Céspedes and other musicians, we had a group called Coco Santo. It was essentially an Afro-Cuban Santeria ensemble, but we could play *guaguancó*, *rumba*, *comparsa*. We could play anything, really. With Coco Santo, anyway, my drumming students, drummers from the different parks, José Flores’ and John Santos’ students, Chalo Eduardo’s and Adela’s dancers, that was how we created the first carnival in Precita Park.”

NARRATOR: Marcus Gordon grew up in Harlem, New York, and although officially Harlem doesn’t have a carnival, the West-Indies community in his neighborhood staged a carnival-inspired parade every year. So, in a way Marcus grew up celebrating carnival every year. And he, like most of the thousands of participants in the San Francisco carnival throughout the years, brought his own carnival expertise and tradition to San Francisco’s melting pot, which is probably why from the beginning carnival in this city had an open, free and eclectic character all of its own.

Interestingly enough, because Marcus Gordon at the time was a Yoruba priest novice, he couldn’t wear a costume. Or better yet, he could only wear one very special

costume. That is the reason why in all the photographs from the first and second carnival Marcus is all in white, running around like a field general, ubiquitous and imposing, wearing attire that best suited his carnival savior role. Oh, yes, because carnival almost, almost didn't happen. Well, maybe it would've happened anyway, but it was Marcus Gordon who at that crucial moment when Adela most needed help, and when "history" could've gone in the opposite direction, yes, it was Marcus who joined Adela and they both pulled it off.

ADELA: "Well, you know how it is. You plan everything so carefully but then things just don't go according to the plan. I mean, I had been working on carnival for months and I had partnered with José Lorenzo, the most amazing Brazilian dancer and carnival entrepreneur in the city in those days. I mean he had the knowledge, the charisma, the energy. There was nobody liked him around, really. Well, two weeks before carnival, José backed out. Yup, just like that. He told me he'd found another gig, a paid gig. And off he went, taking with him the best drummers and dancers I had. That's when a friend of mine recommended Marcus Gordon, and he literally bailed me out."

Bring Back the Sun Parade

NARRATOR: Now, at this stage of the tale, it is probably wise to give a sense of the times in which carnival was born in San Francisco. I mean, we are talking late seventies, a time when the Mission District was a funky, predominantly Latino neighborhood, experiencing its gradual metamorphosis into an alternative bohemian hangout. And although the first signs of change were not very many, they were nevertheless unequivocal—"artists" were arriving and setting shop in el barrio, cafes were beginning to open up, although probably the most

colorful and surreal agents of change were the defiantly loud and tough presence of dykes on bikes along Valencia Street and the punks hanging around 16th Street with their black leather jackets and multicolored hair, all this while the police were too busy cramping down on the low riders, especially on Sundays, when they will cruise along Mission Street and staged their own full-tacuche carnaval parade, pit bulls included, of course. And Adela Chu, Pam Minor and Elaine Cohen would get together at Café Babar, on Guerrero Street, to plan carnaval. Recalling, precisely, those long café hours, Pam Minor fondly speaks:

PAM: “Oh, yes, Café Babar, that sure was our headquarters. I was in charge of costumes, I remember. And in those days, if you needed a cheap costume, you went to the Costume Bank in the Western Addition. And believe it or not, I became director of the Costume Bank because of carnaval.

“Anyway, I remember we got five dollars from all the dancers and musicians. And with that money, we went to the Costume Bank to make our own costumes, all at the last minute, of course. When else? We had a few late nights in the Bank, but we sewed it all ourselves, including the drummers, who at first were kind of ‘me, sewing?’ But then they all got into it.

“I was also P. R. chief of carnaval. Oh, yeah, I had a glamorous title. And my main duty was to get the police permit for the parade. Why was I chosen to do that? Well, it’s gonna sound a little weird, but that year we had a very cold and dark winter –and the People’s Temple massacre in Guyana and the killing of Supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor Moscone happening in the same week in November, I mean, those were dark times for the city. So, one morning, I woke up feeling that if I didn’t do something to bring back the sun, it might just never come back to San Francisco. Sounds crazy, ah? But I swear, I swear that’s

how I felt. And I got a police permit and invited all my friends, including Adela, and we all went around the block singing and dancing, which is why Adela trusted me with getting the police permit for carnival, 'cause I had all this experience, right?"

The Revelers in the Park

NARRATOR: Pam Minor did obtain the police permit for the first carnival, but only for parading on the sidewalks, which might explain why most of the dancing took place inside the park, on the grass, where the dancers, drummers and bystanders congregated before noon on the last Sunday of February, 1979. It was a cold, gray day. The rain could start any minute. They weren't going to be deterred by the weather, though. They weren't going to be deterred by anything, really. And by the time Jose Flores' group Los Dandies, wearing these clownish pachuco outfits with bowler hats, came drumming down the hill to Precita Park, you could say there was no turning back: carnival had been born in the Mission and San Francisco would never be the same.

**Dancer and pandeiro player take the stage

The Carnival Next Year

NARRATOR: Given the enormous success of the first carnival, a committee was created to plan for the second one. Adela Chu, Marcus Gordon, Carole Deutch, Pam Minor, Sir Lawrence Washington, Lou De Matteis and John Santos were the original committee

members. And taking into consideration the weather, carnival was moved to April 13th. As for the parade route, the committee decided it was time to take over Mission Street.

The day of the parade, then, the different contingents of musicians and dancers and a few small floats gathered around Capp St. and 26th St. From there, they were meant to dance their way through Mission Street to Dolores Park, where they had prepared a stage for an afternoon party. The permit the committee had obtained, however, allowed them to use only half of Mission Street. The other half was supposed to remain free for normal traffic. Well, as the parade marched along Mission Street, and people spontaneously joined in, it grew to such an extent that traffic came to a halt. And there was nothing the police or the drummers or dancers could do.

At some point, then, the low-riders, accustomed to cruising and ruling Mission Street, took charge and led the parade safely to Dolores Park. As the crowd arrived at the park, Lou de Matteis, carnival's official photographer, up high on a fire truck aerial escalator, took one of the most spectacular photographs of this or any carnival parade.

LOU: "It was just one of those moments, you know, when you as a photographer feel so lucky, so incredibly thrilled to be part of a thing like that. I mean, to witness and see Dolores Park covered with people, all of them singing and dancing. That was the moment, I'd say, if there was ever a doubt that carnival would take root in San Francisco, that was the moment when it was clear that carnival was here to stay."

The Community Organizer and The Artist

NARRATOR: Now, about the hundreds if not thousands of people who from the very beginning embraced carnival and made it their own, Carole Deutch has something to say:

CAROLE: “Well, there isn’t a doubt that the San Francisco Carnival wouldn’t have happened without Adela and Marcus; but the will, the energy, the creativity, the spirit was there all along. I mean, at the time I was the director of the Precita Eyes Community Center. We had art classes, mural classes, drumming classes. John Santos and Jose Flores, in fact, taught there. So, when Adela and Marcus came to me to ask permission to use the gym for rehearsals, needless to say, we not only welcomed them with open arms but we joined in and made it happen.

“Maybe all I’m trying to say is that carnival couldn’t have chosen a better time or a better place to be born.”

NARRATOR: Carole Deutch was so impressed and excited by what she saw during the first carnival, in effect, that she essentially took charge of the Carnival Committee. And with the appearance of *the committee*, perhaps unavoidably, came the clash with *the artist*, who now had to learn to let go of her dream. And like in any committee, there were different camps and visions that not necessarily knew how to work together.

That is how, after the tremendous success of the second carnival in Dolores Park, the committee began to consider moving carnival to the Civic Center. Dolores Park was just too small and the neighbors weren’t willing to put up with it. Carole Deutch was in favor of the move. She saw it as an opportunity to grow into a true city event belonging to San Francisco as whole and not only to one neighborhood. Adela, on the other hand, saw the

move away from the Mission as a betrayal of her dream. So, once it was decided that carnival would go to the Civic Center, heartbroken, Adela quit the carnival committee.

ADELA: “I went into mourning, inconsolable. I did participate, though, but I didn’t tell anybody. I dressed as a blue mermaid with a big, fat blue tear dropping from my right eye. I just marched along the parade all by myself. I didn’t even make it to the Civic Center. It was just too painful. Carnival was my gift to the Mission. If you took away el barrio from carnival, you took away its soul. So, a few months later, I took off to Amsterdam to play with a salsa band. And then life just took me away from the Bay Area. Now I live in Hawaii.”

Epilogue

NARRATOR: As for the rest of the original committee members of the San Francisco Carnival, with the sole exception of Marcus Gordon, they all quit after the third carnival, overwhelmed by the demand of time and work, and the lack of monetary incentive. Little did they know that carnival would become a full-fledged corporate sponsored event and that the heart-wrenching struggle between the Mission and the Civic Center would remain a constant until 2002, when the Mission finally won.

Before ending this tale about the birth of carnival on the streets of San Francisco, I should also mention that a year before Adela and Marcus created the first carnival in the Mission, Connie Williams, native of Trinidad and long-time San Francisco resident, staged a Caribbean inspired carnival parade in the Western Addition. The fact that it didn’t take root,

doesn't mean, however, that she shouldn't be honored and remembered as a carnival pioneer in San Francisco.

In the same vein, we should also remember Michael Rios' mural *Los Congueros Cubanos*, the first mural in the city about the Mission carnival. And although it doesn't exist any more and very few people even remember it, it began an illustrious tradition that now includes famous, iconic murals like Daniel Galvez' *Carnaval* on the corner of 24th and South Van Ness, whose images are based, by the way, on photographs taken from the second carnival by Lou de Matteis. Then there is Emmanuel Montoya, Josh Sarantitis and Carlos Loarca's carnival mural on Harrison and 19th Street, one the biggest, if not the biggest carnival mural in the country.

There were also posters that came with carnival, poster designed and printed by Nancy Hom, local artist and founding member of the Kearny Street Workshop in Chinatown.

And, finally, going back one more time to the first carnival in San Francisco, going back, in fact, to Fat Tuesday, March 1st, 1979. On that day, Adela led a small parade of dancers and drummer for a few blocks around the San Francisco waterfront to throw a dead sardine into the bay because, as she says:

ADELA: "Everything comes from the ocean and must go back to it. And in Panama, where I come from, on Fat Tuesday es el entierro de la sardina. And if you don't return the sardine to the sea, carnival doesn't come back. And I wasn't going to take any chances. So, with all the dancers and drummers I could gather, we paraded along the bay on a cold and miserably rainy day. And everybody was freezing and tired and wet and mad at me and thought I was insane to do all this for a stupid, dead sardine."