



T'is the season Devon Harris

A few days ago my son Brandon asked me if I was excited about Christmas. The little fellow's inquiring mind has an insatiable curiosity. Whenever I hear "Daddy, can I ask you a question?" I know that like a skilled trial attorney, there will be four or five follow-up questions. Anyway, I digress. I paused before I answered and was surprised at the fact that I no longer approached Christmas with the same enthusiasm that I did when I was his age. Thirty years ago I delighted in listening to the jingles on the radio counting down the days to Christmas, not only because my birthday falls on Christmas Day, but also because of the joy and excitement that the season brings. This year, as I charge full speed ahead towards my forty-first birthday, I am left wondering what happened to all that youthful exuberance.

The cool "Chris'mus" breeze" blowing across the Caribbean from North America and the beautiful red blooming poinsettias were the first signs that Christmas was upon us. Easily the most festive time of the year, it was a time of togetherness of family and community and was filled with non-stop celebrations, fairs, festivals and parties. For us kids the celebrations started in school with a talent show just before the Christmas break in mid December and ended in January when we returned and had a chance to swap stories about all the things we ate and did. In between, it was a time for cleaning. Tree trunks, sidewalk edges and lampposts were all whitewashed with temper lime to give the place an extra lift. You could argue that it was our version of spring-cleaning, but with much more excitement.

We never forgot the real reason for celebrating Christmas and so, in between all the partying and reveling, there was always time to attend church services and sing Christmas carols. We sang all the traditional songs, although we had no concept of a white Christmas or a chimney for Santa to make his grand entrance on Christmas Eve. Not surprising, we also had the reggae and calypso versions of many of the carols, adding a little Caribbean swagger and rhythm to them. Back then the only explosions we heard were firecrackers followed by raucous laughter and joyous shouts of "Chris'mus!" or peddlers shouting "chance" while surrounded by children trying to win the biggest balloons they had on display.

The Jonkanoo (pronounced John Canoe) dancers were always a big hit. Jonkanoo came from our African heritage and these costumed masqueraders dance along the streets and at fairs to the rhythm of flutes and drums. The usual costumes included the horse head, horned cow head, policeman, pitchy-patchy and the wild Indian. The scariest for us kids was the Devil and by far the most popular was the “belly woman.” Just imagine a near term “pregnant” gyrating masquerader dancing and prancing up and down the street and you’ll understand why this costumed figure was so popular with us.

Christmas is when the full array of Jamaican cuisine kicks into high gear. Homemade eggnog, still one of my favorite drinks, flowed. Sorrel, a drink made from dried seedpods of the red sorrel flower, cinnamon, cloves, sugar, orange peel, and laced with white rum was in abundance. Black cake packed with raisins, currents, prunes, and cherries soaked in rum for several weeks, and sometimes even from the Christmas before, was never in short supply. Mouth watering rice and peas, chicken, ham, curried goat, and oxtails delighted our palates.

I have since traded in the whitewash for the white snow, and light my fire crackers in July while the Jonkanoo dance only in my memory. But the essence of my Jamaican Christmases is still a part of how I celebrate Christmas today. The childlike exuberance, which admittedly exited stage left some time ago without my noticing, returns this time of year.

So as we count down the days, I wish you and yours an *irie, irie Chris'mus'*. If Christmas celebrations are not part of your plans this year, I would nonetheless like to wish you a safe and enjoyable holiday season.

T'is the season!

Keep on Pushing!

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