



“Feet of Rhythm presents Ayiti (Haiti): As it was in the Beginning.”

By Tequila Minsky, Heritagekonpa Magazine

Ayiti (Haiti): As it was in the Beginning

Haitian children dance the West Indian Kiddie Parade

(Photo credit Tequila Minsky & Richarson Dorvil)

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If the crowds and scale of the Labor Day West Indian parade on Eastern Parkway are daunting for parents of young children, the Kiddie Parade on the Saturday before is a welcome alternative.

Twenty-seven children of the Haitian troupe Feet of Rhythm, grooved and moved along St. John’s Place turning onto Franklin and danced their way to the Brooklyn Museum; Haitian pop, compas and racine music was blasting from the sound cart that accompanied them. The children with moms, dads, friends and even Haiti’s Minister of Culture proudly represented Haiti behind a charming homemade banner that read: **“Feet of Rhythm presents Ayiti (Haiti): As it was in the Beginning.”**

Ranging in age from four years to “the Queen”, who was 17-years-old, the children wore burlap costumes of earth colors ochre, brown, clay red, orange, green and for color, purple and were adorned with multi-color streamers. Key items of the costumes, like the “pitre” (sisal), had been imported from Haiti to keep the authenticity of Haitian heritage, while colorful details were added for spice. With

artistic creative license these reflected the attire of the native Arawaks and Taino Indians, the earlier inhabitants of Haiti.

The annual Saturday parade of Labor Day weekend is devoted only to children and was started during the 90s to include families in the Caribbean extravaganza. Along with decked-out children, babies in costumes or just along for a stroller ride were on the scene.

At the crack of dawn, the Haitian children met on Albany St. in Crown Heights, a block from the corner where the parade starts, St. John’s Place and Kingston. Finishing costume touches were applied. Decorative face and body marking were added. Not far, other groups amassed carrying their respective flags; particularly, but not exclusively, Trinidad was visible with Guyana, Belize, Jamaica and other Caribbean countries represented. Many groups’ attire were quite elaborate and the gusts of breezes almost knocked over dancers whose immense costumes rising high over their heads acted as sails.



The style, fabric and hues of the Feet of Rhythm’s garb reflected the natives of the Americas theme and though, stylistically simpler than many others in the parade, they were completely in the spirit. The Queen was decorated as royalty in fabric of multi-colored diamond shaped patterns of shimmery, glittery, languid fabric, her headdress surrounding and rising above her head, catching at times bursts of wind. Feet of Rhythm was all girls this year, though boys have participated in years past. Of the dozens of kiddie groups, this

charming troupe was Haiti’s only presence in Brooklyn’s Annual West Indian Kiddie Carnival Parade and the Brooklyn Museum stage competition. Their presence is all thanks to the work of dancer, teacher and choreographer Nadia Dieudonne, driving force and Cynthia Karaha, the troupe’s co-director, visual director and manager, constantly on the scene. (She is also founder of World Music Promotions.)



Dancer Nadia founded Feet of Rhythm in 1993 as a vehicle to introduce Haitian culture to children of the Diaspora. As choreographer and troupe artistic director, as the troupe moves down the street, she blows the whistle and calls the routines practiced so diligently. While many of the other parading groups performed at the Brooklyn Museum competition, Feet of Rhythm performed all along the parade route, breaking into one or another of their choreographed patterns.

The beat and music with DJ Sketch pounded from a generator-powered speaker system tailing the group.

King Posse's Cool Non (Carnival song from the 90s) and RAM's Defile (Carnival 2008) and Gede Masaka along with strains of Boukman and other groups were the sound track of the mile and half parade route. Haiti Minister of Culture Marie-Laurence Jocelyn-Lassègue, festive in a red dress and jacket with an original hand painting, walked the entire route and near Eastern Parkway and Franklin and before the museum for group photos with the Queen and many of the dancers.

The Queen was 17-year-old John Dewey High School student Ervuli Guillaume who portrayed Queen Anakaona, a symbol of anti-colonial resistance. (Coming from Leogane, Queen Anakaona was significant in trying to negotiate with Spaniards and later rallied anti-colonial resistance). Ervuli dances with the Flamboyant and Kongo dancers and is the daughter of Bazille Gran Bwa.



Of her participation Ervuli said, "It was fun, I was happy. I loved taking photos with the children and everyone." Ervuli continued, "I felt special. She (the Minister) sees that we're doing a good thing. We are original and beautiful."

This sentiment was reiterated by Ninaj Raoul of Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees, "This was a beautiful youth representation of Haitian costumes in an original and strong theme and allowed the participants to learn more of the history of Haiti."

There is a lot of pride being part of the Caribbean Day parade, to be part of a "bigger picture," Cynthia said, voicing that frequently Haiti is not part of pan-Caribbean programs and events. This year

things have changed, the greater community has reached out following the earthquake, was more "Haiti sensitive." "We do this from the bottom of our hearts," she said.

Included in this labor of love and to insure maximum participation, Cynthia tries to keep costs down. She dyed the burlap fabric for the costumes and used some donated materials and adornments already on hand. They had someone sew the costumes and rented a space for rehearsals; it cost \$100 to have a child participate. Individual donors helped out.

"It's a lot of work, but worth it in the end because of the smiles and how proud the children are of their Haitian culture," an exhausted Nadia said. Though out the year, Nadia teaches dance to children; parade participants begin learning their routine starting in June.



In this 9th year of participating, the list of thanks to sponsors has grown and includes: Brooklyn Arts Council, Brooklyn Docs, Dr. Charles, Dr. Dalmacy, HaitianBeatz.com, Haitian Consulate, Haitinetradio.com, Infinity cells, Jazz Enterprise, Rockmasters, Solutions Management, Touris Lokal, Tropicalfete.com, Western Union, and World Music Promotions.

Feet of Rhythm Kids (F.O.R Kids) is a Brooklyn-based organization where children take dance lessons

on a regular basis. There are usually about 10 children enrolled during the year and more sign up for special events like this where they have rehearsals prior. This year rehearsals and costume decorations took place at Latin Fever on Flatbush.



“We teach folkloric dance,” Cynthia emphasized. The lessons are accompanied by live drumming, when possible with master drummers Jean-Marie or Fan Fan Damas, from the community.

The two women do this to see the culture continuing. Cynthia elaborates, “It’s very difficult for parents who don’t have much time or money. We work with them. We teach the children where they come from, the music; it’s a source of empowerment.”

Cynthia and Nadia are women in the trenches, sharing their heritage, teaching the kids of

working parents, providing recreation while preserving the culture. Feet of Rhythm is a registered non-profit 501 (c3). They can use and need your help, in any way and appreciate individuals, businesses, or groups, anybody who wants to help promote Haitian culture. Classes are available for any children who would like to take them.