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Abaco Life

AN ISLAND MAGAZINE

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ON THE COVER

Junkanoo Girl, from an original painting by Abaco artist Alton Lowe.

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26 Landlubbers rejoice! The road has been paved for five miles across the popular island of Green Turtle Cay, connecting historic New Plymouth to the beauty of the beaches, marinas and resorts.

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Above: Forest Heights Academy Junkanoo Group



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LOVE RUSH!

Abaco's Junkanoo Comes of Age

BY AMANDA DIEDRICK



*The younger set
leads the "Rush"
in New Plymouth.*

**"they comin!"
someone shouts.
"they comin!"**

Before you see anything, you hear it. The boom-boom-boom of taut goatskin drums; the shriek of whistles and the clanging of cowbells. A colourful wave of gyrating humanity rushes toward you. Beneath beaded crepe-paper costumes of pink, green, blue and every other tropical hue, dancers move, hips swaying. The cacophony swells and the ground vibrates as your heart beat is matched by the blare of tubas.

IT'S **JunkAnoo**, an intoxicating spectacle that envelopes viewers and leaves them bouncing to the brassy jubilation of trumpets and the "kalik-kalik" of cowbells.

"If you go to Junkanoo and don't move," jokes William Davis, chairman of the All Abaco Junkanoo and Cultural Committee, "there's something wrong with you!"

But for those who participate, or "rush" as it's known, Junkanoo is far more than just a high-spirited tourist attraction. And while the origin of the word itself remains the subject of ongoing debate, Junkanoo's iconic role within the Bahamian culture is indisputable. It is a unique and powerful expression of national identity, symbolizing resilience and what, as a people, Bahamians have overcome.

Perhaps the earliest-known reference to Junkanoo in the Bahamas is an 1811 diary entry by Methodist Minister Reverend W. Dawson, who wrote: "I never witnessed such a Christmas day. The Negroes have been beating their tambourines and dancing the whole day, and now between eight and nine o'clock, they are pursuing their sport as hotly as ever."

Junkanoo's roots extend much deeper, however. They wind through the fertile soil of cotton and tobacco plantations in the American south, and traverse the Atlantic Ocean to the west coast of Africa, where the Igbo and Ga tribes danced to commemorate a successful harvest, and the masked Yoruba people honoured their ancestors with music, song and dance.

Later, huddled in the dark holds of European ships, newly enslaved West Africans comforted themselves with the songs of their homelands. Stripped of their identities, denied their religious practices and unable to read or write, slaves preserved and passed down their histories through song and dance. And when, following the American Revolution, they boarded British Loyalist ships bound for Bermuda, the Caribbean and the Bahamas, they carried little with them but their customs and traditions.

By Bahamian law, slaves were given a three-day holiday over Christmas, during which they were at liberty to leave their plantations and do as they pleased. In masks and costumes made from newspaper, plants and burlap, and accompanied by drums improvised from rum casks and food containers, they celebrated with the songs,



Forest Heights Academy Junkanoo Group



The Green Turtle Cay Slammers in New Plymouth.



dances and ancient rhythms of their African homeland. Known as Junkanoo, these parades continued long after the 1834 abolition of slavery in the Bahamas. "The coloured people live a life apart, and have some curious customs," wrote L.D. Powles in his 1886 book, *Land of the Pink Pearl*. "About Christmas time they seem to march about day and night, with lanterns and bands of music, and they fire off crackers everywhere."

Though emancipated, former slaves and people of colour in the Bahamian capital of Nassau found themselves relegated to living and working in an area south of the city now known as "Over-the-Hill." Dissatisfied with the treatment and living conditions to which they were subjected, they turned to Junkanoo as a form of social activism. Protesting prejudice and racial inequality, they marched defiantly through Nassau's white business district and tourist center and paraded down Bay Street. With faces painted white, and costumes mocking white Bahamians and the English, they chanted cynical lyrics that were anything but festive.

In 1899, the Bahamian government attempted to suppress the demonstrations by passing the Street Nuisance Prohibition Act, which restricted the frequency and duration of parades. But official attitudes toward Junkanoo would soon change.

When Prohibition in the neighboring U.S. was enacted in the 1920s, it generated increased tourism in the Bahamas, and the Bahamas Development Board (BDB) recognized Junkanoo's potential as a unique visitor attraction. They set about commercializing the festival, and to placate white Bahamians who objected to the secular nature of Junkanoo on Christmas Day, the annual parade was moved to New Year's Day. To encourage more tourist-friendly costumes, the board offered Junkanoo performers cash prizes for the best and most original get-ups. Before long, the traditional sponge and newsprint Junkanoo costumes were replaced with elaborate, colourful affairs fashioned from wire, cardboard and fringed crepe paper.

By the late 1940s, having successfully rebranded Junkanoo as a charming and exotic island experience, the Bahamas Development Board began promoting the event through advertisements in American newspapers. Seventy years later, Nassau's Junkanoo endures as a much-loved holiday



(left) Anne Roberts Sawyer and Iva Lowe Scholtka, circa 1950 or so.
(above) New Years Junkanoo in Green Turtle Cay mid 20th century.

ritual. Early in the morning hours of Boxing Day and New Year's Day, groups of up to 1,000 performers with names such as Valley Boys, Saxons or Roots, rush along Bay Street, accompanied by old-style goatskin drums, whistles and cowbells as well as more modern brass instruments. Competition for cash prizes is fierce, and costumes – which weigh up to 100 pounds and can take a year to design and construct – remain carefully guarded secrets until parade day.

But while Nassau's parades remain the country's most prominent, residents of many Bahamian Out Islands, including Grand Bahama, Eleuthera, Bimini, Exuma and Abaco, also embrace the longstanding Junkanoo tradition.

On Abaco's Green Turtle Cay, residents have celebrated Bunce (pronounced "boonse") for nearly 150 years. Echoing their intertwined African and Loyalist roots, Bunce combines Junkanoo traditions with aspects of English theater.

"Three weeks before Christmas," says Green Turtle Cay artist and historian Alton Lowe, "in the early mornings and sometimes at night, people would walk around the New Plymouth settlement playing instruments and singing. In the morning they would 'knock up' their friends, waking them with loud rapping at the door. In the evenings, they disguised themselves in homemade costumes and used sign language to avoid revealing their

identities. They would stop at different homes and often be invited in and offered tea with cake or pie."

On New Year's Day, the festive season culminated in a colourful procession of crepe-paper-costumed figures that wound through New Plymouth's narrow streets, accompanied by string instruments and flutinas and, during Green Turtle Cay's more prosperous periods, two small brass bands.

Leading the procession was a tarp-draped wheelbarrow. And hidden beneath the canvas was "Bunce", ostensibly a wild man caught in the pine forests of the Abaco mainland. Those pushing the

wheelbarrow would stop in front of a house and pass around a hat, taking up a collection. They spun tall tales about the capture of this "violent beast" and cautioned that, if contributions did not meet their satisfaction, they would set him loose.

When it was determined that enough money had been collected, the wildly costumed Bunce would spring from the wheelbarrow, lunging fiercely toward local children and amusing the crowd with his antics. Eventually, Bunce was loaded back into the wheelbarrow, covered up and carted to another house, where the performance would be repeated.

Aside from Green Turtle Cay, however, most of Abaco's Junkanoo activities took place in Marsh Harbour. "Only a few centralized people had the know-how," explains William Davis, "and those who were really serious would go to Nassau to rush with groups there." Furthermore, he says, many of the smaller Abaco settlements lacked the necessary resources or expertise to stage a Junkanoo rush.

Before moving to Abaco in 1990, Davis lived in Nassau, where he was part of the Valley Boys Junkanoo group. "It was such a positive activity for the young people," he says. "We all wanted to go down to Bay Street over the holidays and rush."

Three or four months before Christmas, Davis and his friends gathered at a central clubhouse, known as a "shack",



Modern Day Bunce



Green Turtle Cay Slammers New Years' Day Junkanoo



GTC's Leon Reckley in Old Fashioned Newspaper Costume

where they decided on a theme. Then they designed and created costumes, and rehearsed music and choreography. "Junkanoo creates a real sense of community," says Davis. "And I wanted to see that in Abaco – to give Abaconians a way to experience it here at home."

In mid-2003, a group of local Junkanoo enthusiasts formed the All Abaco Junkanoo Steering Committee, precursor to today's All Abaco Junkanoo and Cultural Committee. "We had two main objectives," says Davis; "to bring more Junkanoo expertise to Abaco, and to pass it on to the young people so we could keep traditions alive."

To stimulate a greater interest in Junkanoo and pass on the essential skills to younger Abaconians, Junkanoo leaders in Abaco, including Colon Curry, Floyd Johnson, Churton Toote and Leslie McIntosh, visited schools and held workshops for students and teachers.

In Marsh Harbour that December, students from two Abaco high schools and nine primary schools competed in Abaco's first "Junior Junkanoo." Reviews for the fledgling program were overwhelmingly positive, with Bahamian Minister of Youth, Sports and Culture, the Hon. Neville Wisdom, declaring the Abaco students' performances to be on par with the long-established Junior Junkanoo program in Nassau. Green Turtle Cay's Annabelle Cross reported to the Abaconian newspaper that the students of Amy Roberts Primary School "now have Junkanoo fever and can't wait for Junior Junkanoo 2004!"

For the next few years, with the support and guidance of the All Abaco Junkanoo Committee, interest continued to grow. A mid-December Junior Junkanoo parade was also held in Marsh Harbour annually, and an increasing number of senior groups rushed each Boxing Day.

LOW FUNDS AND BAD WEATHER CHALLENGE ABACO'S JUNKANOO

In December 2007, a funding shortage forced the postponement of both the junior and senior Junkanoo events until February 21, 2008. That Thursday evening, eight school groups and six community groups competed in their respective categories, but the event was plagued by bad weather. Due to delays, the event began much later than



The Green Turtle Cay Slammers New Year's Day in New Plymouth.

planned which, combined with the sheer number of competitors, made for an extremely long evening. By the time senior groups began performing, it was well past midnight and many spectators had gone home. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, the newspaper quoted several spectators who agreed it was, "the best Junkanoo parade Abaco has ever had."

The Abaco Junkanoo committee realized they might be on to something. Holding the event in February meant no longer competing with Nassau and Grand Bahama events for performers. Abaconians who wanted to rush in Nassau's Junkanoo could still do so, using the knowledge they gained to benefit groups in Abaco. Furthermore, with Nassau and Grand Bahama's Junkanoo events finished by New Year's Day, experienced performers from those cities could help organize the Abaco event.

And though showcasing both junior and senior groups in one evening created a parade too lengthy for all but the most dedicated Junkanoo fans, the organizing committee recognized that scheduling the events close together had attracted many more spectators. "It was a more unified event," says Davis, "which made it that much more of a draw."

The February date also meant that government officials, whose schedules were

taken up with Nassau's Junkanoo during the Christmas season, were able to attend. Then-Minister of State for Culture, the Honourable Charles Maynard, participated in the February 21, 2008 event, as did delegates from the Ministry of Education, Youth, Sports and Culture, who visited schools to promote Junkanoo in Abaco, and presented a half-day seminar for judges.

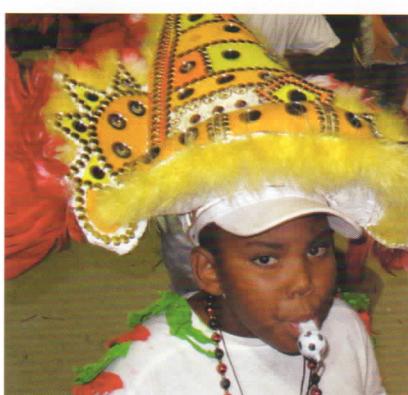
Despite the many arguments in favour of a February Junkanoo in Abaco, not everyone was supportive. "In the Bahamas, Junkanoo is traditionally a Christmas event," explains Wynsome Ferguson, Manager of the Ministry of Tourism's Abaco office. "A lot of people didn't think anyone would come."

Event organizers, however, believed they could make it work. "We knew that Junkanoo is more than a parade," says Davis. "It's a move-

ment. If you're Bahamian, Junkanoo is in you. A great many Bahamians eat, sleep and breathe it all year round. Wherever and whenever you hold Junkanoo, they'll come."

And while it wouldn't earn the name "Love Rush" until 2010, Abaco's inaugural two-day Junkanoo festival took place over the weekend of February 20-21, 2009. While just two Junior Junkanoo groups performed on the Friday night and five senior groups on Saturday evening, spectators noted a marked improvement in the costumes, choreography and overall performances. David Ralph, editor of the *Abaconian* at the time, described the weekend as, "the most flamboyant and colourful of Abaco's many events."

Since then, the Love Rush has become an Abaco tradition, attracting performers from Grand Cay, Cooper's Town, Fox Town, Green Turtle Cay, Marsh Harbour, Murphy Town, Hope Town, Crossing Rocks, Sandy Point, Cherokee Sound and Moore's Island, among other communities. Several new senior groups have formed, and Junior Junkanoo has expanded to include a pre-school category. The Bahamas Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture provides seed money for each group, and funds Junkanoo workshops for Abaco students and teachers, while the Ministry of Tourism lends promotional support.



recruiting judges is a challenge

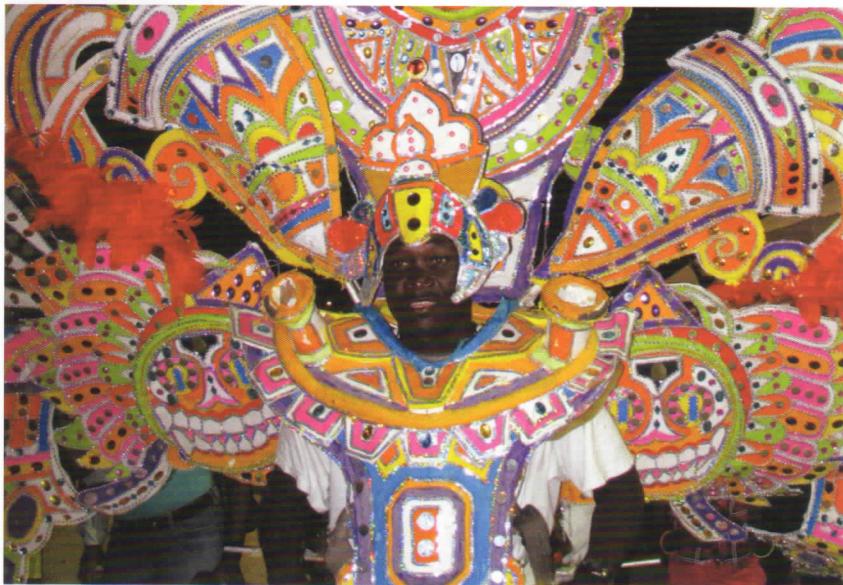
Much attention is paid to ensuring that judges – usually community volunteers – are properly trained. “If a judge is an artist, for example, he might know what looks good from that standpoint,” says Davis. “But we adhere to national Junkanoo rules, and they must judge strictly on that basis. How is the costume constructed? Does it have too much fringe? Those sorts of technical things.”

“There was an interest in the Love Rush from the very beginning,” says Lori Thompson, a teacher at Marsh Harbour’s Forest Heights Academy. In 2011, Thompson, her sister and fellow FHA teacher Alana Carroll founded the school’s extracurricular Junkanoo program. And today, under Thompson’s leadership, 70 Forest Heights students learn music, choreography and costume construction through the program. A number of FHA teachers pitch in, says Thompson, doing everything from making and organizing costumes to applying makeup, serving as parade marshals or assisting with transportation on parade days. “We’re also fortunate to have parents help out every year,” she adds, “and members of the community who assist us with teaching music and costumes.”

Thanks in large part to the support they receive both within the school and from the broader community, the Forest Heights Falcons have won first place in Abaco’s Junior Junkanoo a record three times. And in 2014, they went on to compete in Nassau’s Junior Junkanoo, where they marched away with the national title as well.

William Davis says Abaco’s senior Junkanoo groups also enjoy vigorous community support. “In Nassau,” he says, “members of the Saxons, or the Valley Boys – they come from all over the island. But in Abaco, you have your Treasure Cay group, your Murphy Town group, your Green Turtle Cay group, and so on. Communities here really come together and rally around their Junkanoo groups.”

Not only does the Love Rush weekend unite individual settlements, it unifies all of Abaco, says tourism’s Wynsome Ferguson. “From Grand Cay in the far north to Moore’s Island in the south, Abaconians join together in a spirit of friendly competition. Not that the competition isn’t intense during the event, but everyone is friends afterward.”



tourism gets a Big BOOST

Ferguson adds that the Love Rush also boosts Abaco's economy. "February used to be pretty quiet from a tourism perspective," she explains. "Now, during Love Rush weekend, everything is busy. Hotels are full, restaurants are full. You can't get a car rental at all. And there's a buzz throughout the entire community." An estimated 3,500 domestic and international tourists – roughly half the permanent population of Marsh Harbour – attend each festival.

"People who travel from Nassau or Grand Bahama to participate often bring family members and friends," says William Davis. "Sometimes, they'll bring 15 or 20 people. And many second homeowners now schedule their trips specifically so they can be here for Love Rush weekend."

Though the Love Rush is centered in Marsh Harbour, other parts of Abaco benefit as well. "People from Grand Bahama take the ferry to Crown Haven," says Davis. "From there, they take taxis, they rent cars, they stop at restaurants and bars on the way to Marsh Harbour. It's the same in the south, where they arrive by ferry at Sandy Point." And, since both the junior and senior Junkanoo events take place in the evenings, many spectators spend their days exploring other parts of the Abaco mainland and the cays.

Despite its success, the Love Rush still faces some growing pains. The number of groups participating and the quality of each group's presentation is directly related to funding, says Davis, and fundraising remains a challenge, particularly in the smaller communities.

"The Ministry of Culture donates a couple thousand dollars of seed money for each group," he says, "but it costs between \$20,000 and \$60,000 to get a group together. In Nassau, groups have corporate sponsors who kick in \$10,000, \$20,000, even \$30,000 to offset their costs. We have some support in Abaco from BTC and Burns House/Kalik, who sponsor Junkanoo nationally. But we need more local sponsorship. We need to prove to Abaco organizations and businesses that sponsoring Junkanoo is a worthwhile investment."

Funding challenges notwithstanding, Davis says that Junkanoo in Abaco is more robust than ever. And with many Junior Junkanoo participants moving up to join –

and even form – senior groups, it appears that Abaconians are well-equipped to preserve and hand down this essential aspect of their national identity.

Today, says Williams, Abaco's Junkanoo is second only to Nassau. "It used to be that Nassau Junkanoo was seen as the best, Grand Bahama was second-best, and Abaco and the other islands had to compete for third place and beyond. But when Grand Bahama's Junkanoo organizing committee attended the Love Rush, even they admitted that, in

terms of number of participants, crowd participation and overall organization, Abaco's Junkanoo is more spectacular than theirs."

"I knew we had made it when the top members of Nassau's Junkanoo groups came," says Davis. "When the legendary leaders of the Saxons, the Valley Boys and other major Nassau groups took time out of their schedules to come to Abaco and attend the Love Rush...that's when I knew Abaco Junkanoo had come of age." ☺



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