

Mash it up

Vidyaratha Kissoon explains that controversy is part of the formula for Guyana's Mashramani

Mash in Guyana, people going crazy / Moving left to right, and shaking up their bodies . . ." The lyrics of Rudy Grant's song often start off articles about Mashramani, Guyana's Republic Day celebrations. Sometimes described as Guyana's Carnival, Mashramani has its roots in the Independence festival organised by the Jaycees of the mining town of Linden in 1966. In 1970, when Guyana declared itself a republic, the Jaycees decided to create a three-day celebration. The name is an Arawak word meaning "celebration after hard work." When the Forbes Burnham government nationalised the event, Mashramani became an annual spectacle with all the colour, vibrancy, and controversy symbolic of life in Guyana.

The Mash season usually starts in January with different competitions — chutney, calypso, soca, steelband. There might be one or two "mega-concerts" and other parties, and those who seek intellectual stimulation in addition to the "wining up" can attend the Republic lecture series, art exhibitions, and cultural workshops.

While Trinidadians have J'Ouvert to start off their Carnival, Guyanese revellers begin the big day — 23 February — contemplating the state of the Republic at the flag-raising ceremony held near the Parliament Buildings. A few hours later, the costume and float parade — or Road March — gets under way. Guyana's Road March features diverse participants: political parties, big companies advertising their products, government ministries marketing development messages, religious groups marketing salvation, NGOs with healthy messages, privately organised Mash bands making money — even, in recent years, the highly anticipated Commercial Sex Workers Band. The music is played on big sets and the dancing is, well, free-spirited.

Not everyone approves. A few years ago, the Guyanese Indian Heritage Association said what many people feel about the celebrations, describing Republic Day as "consumed by . . . obscenities and vulgarities." On the other hand, at the launch of



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Mashramani 2013, culture minister Frank Anthony called it "the greatest festival of Guyanese creativity . . . It is a festival that promotes Guyanese pride and patriotism."

So Mashramani, as a very Guyanese thing, is not immune to political and other controversies. These often spice up the festivities. In 2002, after a tense election period, the main opposition party organised its own celebrations, boycotting the "government's events." In 2012, it seemed possible that the Youth Coalition for Transformation — a socio-political group which emerged after the 2011 elections — might do something similar. The nation held its breath, but the YTC did participate in the end, saying, "It provides ample opportunity to embrace our culture, showcase our talent, and highlight true Guyanese unity and pride." The thousands of people who enjoy different aspects of Mashramani probably agree. ■



For details of the 2013 Mashramani schedule, visit the website of Guyana's Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports: <http://www.mcys.gov.gy>