



Cerene Abramson competes in the 2006 Miss St. John pageant, above; Queen contestants perform for the crowd, opposite page.



Don't Stop the FESTIVAL

Written by Andrea Milam
A collection of photographs from the past



Photo by E.D. Farrell



Photo by Adam Lynch

It's about the colors. It's about the food. It's about the music. But above everything else that defines today's St. John Festival, this half-century-old celebration is about coming together as a family, and as a community.

Locals and tourists alike look forward each year to the festivities, which begin in early June and include events such as the Food Fair and the Miss St. John and St. John Princess and Prince pageants. It's a time to see old friends, enjoy delicious native foods that can only be found during this time of year and revel in the bright colors and diversity of the nearly 40 troupes at the celebration's climax, the Fourth of July parade.

It's hard to believe such a huge celebration has its roots in a simple one-day gathering of friends. St. John Festival began in 1954 as a small get-together on July 4th, when everyone had the day off, in what is now Frank Powell Park. Native St. Johnian and long-standing St. John Festival and Cultural Organization member Jane Johannes fondly recalls the celebration's beginnings.

"It started out as people just coming together and bringing food," says Johannes, who speaks of her native island's celebration with a great deal of pride. "People would come by boat or by donkey. It was like a big family reunion from all over the world."

At this family reunion of sorts, islanders were entertained by string bands and drums, and they enjoyed dancing in the park.

"That's why it is called 'festival,'" Johannes explains matter-of-factly. "Everybody was in the park eating and dancing. This is our culture, and every year it's getting better and better."

The first July 4th parade consisted of just three troupes, who donned traditional African-themed costumes, similar to the ones worn by the modern-day Shaka Zulu troupe. Today, most troupes are decked out in sequined, brightly-colored costumes, and many dance down Cruz Bay streets to high-energy calypso and soca music, which is blasted through loud speakers mounted on trucks. The parade also features a bevy of baton twirling majorette troupes and steel pan bands, who perform high atop double-decker trucks, swaying back and forth in time with the music.

Left Top: A mocko jumbie shows off her flexibility and balancing skills.

Left Bottom: Young mocko jumbies decked out in vibrant colors.

Opposite Page (clockwise from top left): The Westin Resort troupe dances through the streets of Cruz Bay; George Lewis displays his colorful costume; Latifah Lanclos plays steel pan with the Love City Pan Dragons during Food Fair; Moremi Aderohunmu is crowned Miss St. John in 2006.



St. John Festival became what it is today after the original small gathering of close friends and family continued to grow in popularity.

“It started out with just a few troupes and it grew more and more as people got interested,” says Johannes. “People all over the world look forward to it.”

And those people give the local economy a big boost, filling Love City’s hotel rooms, eating out at local restaurants and supporting the native celebration.

“We bring a lot of tourists here to the island of St. John,” said St. John Festival and Cultural Organization President Leona Smith. “It’s becoming really big, and all the hotels fill up during St. John Festival. We get tourists from overseas and a lot from the

mainland. It really helps the St. John economy, and it means a lot to the people here.”

While the celebration is much different today than it was 54 years ago, the old-timers still can’t help but feel moved by the high-energy beat of calypso music that permeates St. John Festival at live performances, and especially in the July 4th parade.

“I have two bad knees so I can’t jump up and dance like I’d like to, but when those bands are passing in the parade, I stay in my booth and dance,” says Ruth Powell, who sells popular local dishes such as conch and whelks, mutton and saltfish from her booth in Festival Village — a makeshift village of food vendors which is open nightly during St. John Festival

in the Customs parking lot in town. “I don’t know a word of the music today but it does get me moving. When you hear the music, you just have to move. It makes me forget all my pains and troubles.”

The one thing that has remained constant through the decades is the sense of community you’ll find at this celebration, even as more and more events were added to the St. John Festival schedule, and the number of attendees grew from less than 100 to thousands.

“I like the gathering of the people,” says Powell. “I see family and friends who come from off island. Every year there are more people.”

“To me, it’s a big family reunion,” adds Johannes. “You get to see every-



Locals of all ages enjoy taking part in the Fourth of July parade.



Photo by Eliza Magro

one, whether it's a blood relative or a stateside person. Every year, you look forward to these people coming."

Carnivals are common throughout the Caribbean, but St. John Festival has a charm like no other. Although the celebration has grown significantly from its modest roots, its small-town ambience remains. St. John Festival may be small compared to other carnivals in the region, but there are some areas where those other islands just can't compete.

"St. John is known for having the best food, and none of the other islands can touch St. John music," says Johannes. "It might be small, but we put on a beautiful show."

"A lot of people are saying our July 4th is getting better than St. Thomas," adds Powell, referring to St. Thomas Carnival, which takes place each year in April. "It has more of a special meaning, and a more friendly environment."

Adding to that friendly environment are women like Johannes and Powell, who happily cook up their favorite Caribbean dishes, eager to share the local food with tourists.

"I just love to cook and share," says Johannes, who makes flavorful native foods such as conch in butter sauce and sour-

Above: Shurwayne Winchester, one of Trinidad & Tobago's most popular soca artists, entertains in festival village.

sop and tamarind juices to sell from her booth in Festival Village.

"The tourists want a taste," says Powell. "They like the local pepper sauce, and they like to try the local food, so we make it for them."

A lot of hard work is involved in putting on the yearly celebration. There are numerous events to coordinate, and, of course, plenty of food to cook. But at the end of the day, members of the non-profit St. John Festival and Cultural Organization can sit back and take pride in the fact that their hard work is not in vain.

"We put in endless hours to make everyone happy," says Johannes. "We are natives, and this is our celebration. It's a lot of work, but lots of people look forward to it."

Powell is eager to share the celebration with everyone, she explains.

"It's real busy but it's a lot of fun," says Powell. "I get a happy feeling, and I know it really is worth it. St. John Festival is a blast. Everyone must come down and enjoy themselves. Don't let anything keep you from coming and enjoying the friendly people, the food and just having a good time."

"Come to St. John," adds Johannes. "It's the smallest island, and people are loving. When you come to Festival, there's lots of music and lots of fun, so come and enjoy yourself." [SJM](#)

Don't Stop John & Sue Brandi

Two local residents addicted to St. John Festival

They were addicted after just one time. That's all it took — one chance encounter with Festival Village in the mid-1990s, and John and Sue Brandi were hooked. The couple, vacationing on St. John at the time, happened upon a live performance in the village by Virgin Islands soca group Jam Band, and instantly fell in love with the music and its infectious nature.

"Man oh man, it just struck me," says John. "The music went right into my bones. I said, 'This is it and I don't ever want to leave.' We stayed in the village that night until the wee hours of the morning. And the next night, we were right back down there."

It wasn't just the music that caught the Brandis' attention. The couple was mesmerized by the bright costumes and high energy performances put on by troupes in the July 4th parade.

"I'd never seen anything like that," declares Sue. "Oh, what fun! We stood there from beginning to end, and when we wanted to see a particular troupe or band again, we'd walk a bit to catch up with them. The bands on the trucks were amazing. It just grabbed me."

The Brandis continued vacationing on St. John, ensuring that each subsequent trip coincided with St. John Festival. Their eventual decision to move to the island in 1998 was not a difficult one. Since the couple's honeymoon in Barbados many years earlier, Sue had pestered John daily — even three to four times a day in the winter — about living in the tropics.

The couple, both from Long Island, lived in Marblehead, Massachusetts, for nearly 25 years before beginning a new chapter in their life on St. John.

"I grew up on Long Island, and even though it's an island, I always wanted to live on a real island," says Sue. "Summer is the only season as far as I'm concerned."

Once the Brandis decided to take



Sue and John Brandi pose for a festival photo.

the plunge, there was no looking back. Since their move to Love City nearly 10 years ago, the couple's infatuation with St. John Festival has only increased. Their love for the celebration became so apparent, they were asked to judge the troupes in 2006.

"Out of the clear blue sky, Sue was asked if she wanted to be a judge, and I said, 'Do you need two?'" says John.

The Brandis happily took their perch in the judges' stand next to the Governor and other dignitaries, where they enjoyed everything from the amenities — shade, a seat, lunch and cold drinks — to the performances put on by the troupes.

"I felt so important," says Sue. "It was an honor."

"The best part is the troupes stop right in front of you, and you have the show of shows right there," John adds.

With the couple still riding high from their 2006 judging experience, they were asked yet again to be a part of St. John Festival — this time in an even bigger and better way than they ever could have imagined. They were asked by their favorite local band, Cool Sessions Brass, to join the Cool Sessions troupe in the 2007 July 4th parade.

"I remember standing there watching the troupes go by, saying, 'Wouldn't it be fun being in one of them, dancing in the street, having a good time,' all the while knowing we'd never have that chance," says John.

If you were at the 2007 July 4th parade, you no doubt saw the couple — she, a petite brunette and he, with a head full of white hair — dancing jubilantly in the streets, with permanent smiles on their faces.

"The troupes are always out there having so much fun, and I always wanted to have all that fun," says Sue. "And we did it. I was so excited. You could not take that smile off my face; I was thrilled."

The couple are just as thrilled to have been asked to come back and join the Cool Sessions troupe for the 2008 parade, and don't think they could ever go back to simply being spectators at the July 4th event.

"The way I describe watching the parade is like going to Disney World and not going on any rides," says John.

"The music just grabs you and you have to move something — I try to do that 'winning,'" says Sue of the way islanders dance to calypso music, winding their waists in time with the rhythm. "I can't wait. It's the one time of year my jobs know they have to give me days off."

And it's the one time of year you'll see the Brandis out in full party mode, every night at Festival Village and all the other St. John Festival events. Once the festivities are over, the couple retreats back to their home "like turtles," according to John, and prepares for the following year's Festival.

So come on out to St. John Festival and make sure you say hello to the Brandis. But be warned — you could become addicted too. [SJM](#)

— Andrea Milam



Fireworks light Cruz Bay Harbor at the conclusion of St. John Festival.