

JOSHUA JELLY-SCHAPIRO

## REFLECTIONS OF JACMEL

ARCADE FIRE WINS GRAMMYS, AND SELLS OUT STADIUMS ALL OVER THE WORLD. IN HAITI, THOUGH, THEY ARE STILL THE OPENING ACT. SO WHY TRAVEL THERE?

DISCUSSED: *Tendrils of Topsoil*, *Black Orpheus*, *Tattooed Roadies*, François “Papa Doc” Duvalier, *A Crumbling Pile of Atmosphere*, *French Soap Operas*, *The Changing Music Industry*, *An Epic Fucking Bassline*, *An Auteur for the Vimeo Age*, *Hens and Goblins*, *The Internal Dynamics of a Band or a Marriage*, *Flickering with the Oil Lamps*, *The Happiest Seventeen-Year-Old Boys*

I.

**O**ut the dusty window of a little Russian-built prop plane, it looked like Nevada or Iraq. Port-au-Prince—a city of ten thousand cooking fires smoldering on the floor of a broad canyon between the ancient ridges of Haiti’s southern mountains—was all browns and grays. Four years after the 2010 earthquake, our little turquoise Sol Air charter rattled over a city still full of people living in tents, UN trucks rolling through the rubble, and the kinds of corruption that none of the missionaries in shorts could



salve. The only sign that we were flying over a once-lush Caribbean nation was the encircling sea. Its own aqua sheen was sullied only by the muddy mouth of the Rivière Momance, which pushed the hazy beige tendrils of Haiti’s topsoil,

like floating smoke, out to sea.

From above Haiti looks like the place that has long occupied the world’s mind. Even before the most recent major temblor, this country has served as an icon of our planet’s bleak future and brutal past. As this planeload of right-minded visitors knew, though, the view from the ground suggests a different tale. The poverty can astonish, of course. But so, too, can the riches of a culture born from

the country's proud but awful history as the New World's only nation founded by its slaves. Those slaves—some two-thirds of whom, in 1791, were African-born—rose up to kill their owners and then founded a sovereign nation where “no white-man [sic] of whatever nation he may be, shall put his foot on this territory with the title of master...” One aftershock of that event, for a nation long shunned by its neighbors and saddled by unpayable debts, was its legacy of poverty. Another was the ravishing color and depth of its people's vodou religion, Saint Soleil paintings, and performative arts.

This weekend, the beautiful southern city of Jacmel was hosting its famed yearly carnival. And it was to Jacmel, renowned for the masks its people craft from papier-mâché, that I was flying with a band of friendly Canadians who had cited this event as an inspiration for their latest hugely popular record, whose reception (rapt, mostly), in the early months of 2014, was as big a thing as was happening in world pop.

The band was Arcade Fire. The loose record was their chart-topping *Reflektor*, an eclectic yet cogent suite of baroquely textured dance-rock whose typically dense array of thematic nods included Kierkegaard's essays and the myth of Orpheus, that lute-bearing god of song who forayed into the underworld to retrieve his love, Eurydice. The tale was restaged at Brazil's carnival by the French cineast Marcel Camus, from whose classic 1959 film, *Black Orpheus*, *Reflektor* quoted lyrics and scenes. The most notable nod, though, was to Haiti, where the band has long

been engaged. For years, Arcade Fire has donated a dollar from each concert ticket to Partners in Health, one of Haiti's leading nonprofits. Frontwoman Régine Chassagne has family roots here, and she and Win Butler, her partner in music and life, have visited the country frequently, lending the band's support to a range of Haitian groups they admire.

Until *Reflektor*, they had largely kept their art and activist affinities separate (their early song “Haiti” excepted). But now they'd released an album whose promo art evoked the *vévé* drawings of Haitian vodou. And this weekend, for the first time, all six of Arcade Fire's core members were going to attend Haitian carnival together. Besides Régine and Win, the band's permanent lineup includes Win's brother, Will (who plays keyboards, and much else), guitarist and multi-instrumentalist Richard Parry, and rhythm-section minders Tim Kingsbury (who plays mostly bass) and Jeremy Gara. Arriving with a full complement of touring violinists and friends, they were going to perform a free show in Jacmel's main square with some of Haiti's leading acts.

Jacmel is only fifty miles from the capital, but the drive on winding roads and through steep peaks can take hours. Our Haitian pilot eased his trusty Ilyushin over the mountains' palm-fringed southern slope, and, bumping aground on a sunbaked airstrip, whirred to a stop by Jacmel's little terminal.

Inside, tattooed roadies lugged duffel bags past Scott Rodger, the band's manager. His presence here (Rodger also manages Paul

McCartney and Pharrell; he doesn't travel to shows unless they're special) signaled this trip's importance to the band of smiling Montrealers with cooler-than-average haircuts who watched three Haitian men playing guitars in the cement-block air terminal. The trio's *twoubadou* rendition of “Haiti Chérie” sounded a lot like Cuban *son*, from just across the sea. Régine, dressed in something typically stylish and bright, swayed along—she much prefers dancing to talking, one quickly learns—while Win, wearing black high-tops and as tall and broad as Régine is small, did what I quickly learned *he* prefers: engaging everyone, all the time.

There are some people whose physiognomy matches how they traverse the world. Arcade Fire's frontman, a six-foot-five sponge whose will to fill each space he's in is constant, is one such person. “Thanks so much for being here,” he welcomed us warmly. Hugging a photographer he knew and introducing himself to those he didn't, Win briefed us on the status of this complex operation (the LA-based film crew they were flying in to shoot tonight's show was stranded in Philadelphia on account of snow) and urged us to eat, pointing to aluminum-trays laden with food (“Try the spicy coleslaw; amazing”). The welcome trio stopped playing. Win led the applause. And our hosts and minders for the weekend—a crew of delightful students and recent grads from the Ciné Institute, a local film school the band supports—proclaimed how happy they were to have Arcade Fire here to play a concert, which would take place that night,



*The view from the airplane, near the outskirts of Jacmel. Photo by Mirissa Neff.*

and whose name was printed on their shirts Kreyol, the French-derived lingua franca of Haiti's streets: JAKMEL JOURBAR'N (roughly: "Jacmel till the break of dawn").

**J**acmel was once among the Caribbean's greatest ports. During the frenzied decades of avarice when France's prize Antillean property of Sainte Domingue became the Americas' most lucrative plantation colony, the island's vaunted sugar industry—the engine that brought a million Africans here as slaves—was centered on its northern plains. Its southern mountains, by contrast, were ideal for growing the super-alkaline beans that made

Jacmel's bay a key node in the world coffee trade that was just then taking off. After Saint-Domingue was reborn as Haiti, the coffee companies' new owners—now buying beans from local farmers, not foreign slave owners—built grand homes whose cast-iron columns and gracious balconies resembled those of their cousins in New Orleans.

Along gently sloping streets, the coffee barons' prize *ville* now exuded a crumbling grandeur as we walked past head-kerchiefed women sitting by piles of rice and second-hand T-shirts. In front of Jacmel's city hall, with its portico sign proclaiming LIBERTÉ, EGALITÉ, FRATERNITÉ, a temporary stage stood ready for

tonight's show. Crossing the square and turning down a steep stone staircase pocked with treacherous holes that looked like they went to the center of the earth, we strolled down a shaded street near the sea and found the Hotel Florita.

Built in one of the grander houses on Jacmel's Rue du Commerce, the Florita was one of the town's few historic buildings to escape unscathed from the pair of temblors that struck southern Haiti on the afternoon of January 12, 2010. The clock face on the town's cathedral is stuck at 5:37, when the second temblor struck and a mini-tsunami pushed all the water from Jacmel's bay out to sea. Hundreds died; thousands were hurt.



*The Hotel Florita in Jacmel. Photo by Mirissa Neff.*

Many of Jacmel's flimsier concrete homes were turned to rubble. The Florita's iron columns, though, stood strong. And it was with real gusto that Win Butler showed me and a couple other first-time visitors around its airy rooms filled with paintings whose colors vibrated with vodou allusions and piquant symbologies, with which Win ("The rooster there is Aristide") was quite versed.

Back in the Florita's bar, the word was that the film crew had at last boarded their plane in Philly. They still wouldn't be here for some hours, though. When the concert would actually start was anyone's guess. The band and its attachés settled into the darkened cool of the bar, which was

built into the brick store-house where the Florita's old owners kept their coffee—and where a motley assortment of aid workers and curious locals gathered around a palm tree that grew up through a hole in the sheet-metal roof. The bar was well stocked with squat bottles of local Prestige beer. Here, at Jacmel's version of Rick's place in *Casablanca*, I could ask Win and Régine about the source of their band's Haitian bonds.

In the 1960s, Régine's parents fled the dark reign of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier, the United States-backed dictator whose fearsome personal militia, the Tontons Macoutes, terrorized Haiti's people from 1957 till 1986, when Duvalier's son, Baby

Doc, was finally deposed. After some of Régine's cousins were killed in one of Papa Doc's purges, her parents moved to the Montreal suburb where Régine grew up. Shortly after Win and Régine married, Win's parents gave them a book. ("I think they heard about it on NPR," he said.) The book was *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World*, by Tracy Kidder. The writer's best-selling portrait recounts how Dr. Farmer, a Harvard medical professor, sought to cure a community of Haitian peasants of the scourges of TB and AIDS by battling the larger ills—poverty, hunger, his patients' obstacles to seeking care—that helped pathogens root.

Farmer's story and ideas changed these young musicians' lives.

In 2004, when their little art-school rock band first blew up, and after the rent was paid, they played a triumphant sold-out show in Montreal and sent Partners in Health a check for the night's whole take. When Arcade Fire passed through Boston, Dr. Farmer came to see them live. The band's friendship with the doctor, and their funding of his work, deepened from there. It was Farmer who served as their Virgil during their first trip to Haiti, in 2006. What Régine found during that visit to Cange, the village in Haiti's central plateau where Partners in Health is based, was uncanny. "It felt very familiar somehow," she said, "even though I'd never set foot there." This was a place for which her feeling only deepened after the earthquake, when she cofounded her own organization, Kanpe ("stand up" in Kreyol), to support the rebuilding efforts of Haitian-led groups. In 2012, six years after their first visit, she and Win went to Jacmel for the first time. The idea was "just to experience another side of Haiti."

It wasn't their first experience of Haitian music in context. By then they had become friendly with leading Haitian bands like RAM, whose regular Thursday-night gig in the capital's Hotel Oloffson (a crumbling pile of atmosphere that's home to the ghosts of Graham Greene's *Comedians*) is presided over by Richard A. Morse, a remarkable figure who, apart from leading RAM (the band is named for his initials), also runs the Oloffson. RAM's potent brand of *mizik rasin* (as in the French *racine*: roots

music) melds electric guitars with the hand-drummed polyrhythms used in vodou to summon the *lwa* (gods) who rule Haitian life. During their visits Arcade Fire's members had become regular attendees of RAM's Thursday bacchanals; they'd jammed with *twoubadou* players and *konpa* lovers in the country. But experiencing carnival in Jacmel, the town teeming with color and roving *rara* bands whose music is known as "vodou in the streets," was, Win said, "completely mind-blowing."

Riding on the back of a float, dodging power lines while drunk on *rara* and rum—it didn't take long before they wanted to engage with all of this more deeply, and reflect it as art. "It's hard as a musician to be surrounded by such a deep music experience," Win said, "and not want to participate in some way." For Régine, who'd been advocating for their new album to have a more dance-able feel ("I'm always pushing for rhythm"), it meant maybe even more: "The experience of carnival just consolidated everything for me, and I knew what kind of album we were going to do."

The band's work on *Reflektor*, which occupied the remainder of 2012 and 2013, had been marked by a couple of weeks spent in Louisiana, in a studio across the Gulf from Haiti, "just working on rhythm" with a pair of RAM's drummers. And now they were touring with those drummers (one of them, TiWill Duprate, was sipping a Prestige nearby) to promote a record that, Régine said, "is almost like an homage to carnival." Though they were footing the bill for tonight's free show, they purposely weren't

headlining. That spot on the bill was RAM's: "It's their crowd." Win said he was excited to see how and when they could get this crowd, who might not know even a Beatles or a Rolling Stones song, to connect with their music. Régine agreed: "Where do we fit in? I don't know, really—we're just celebrating, and offering what we have. We're going to play music."

**I**t was a good question: where would their music fit into this local lineup and scene? Approaching the town square after dark, as a percussive ensemble played something whose beats per minute doubled those of any Arcade Fire song, I wasn't sure.

In Haiti, as in all the places in the Americas where West African slaves met Catholic rulers and spectacular pre-Lenten carnivals resulted (Brazil, Trinidad, New Orleans), the cultural economy of music and the calendar guiding its use are unique. For those of us tied to a secular calendar, the ways that musicians seek to get their music heard haven't changed much since the birth of electronic recording. They involve a mix of winning radio playtime (by means legitimate or not), getting the music into stores (real or virtual), and touring. If you're Arcade Fire, you can also launch a guerrilla marketing campaign, like the one that saw their *vévé*-evolving *Reflektor* logo mysteriously appear on buildings from New York City to San Francisco. The scale and specifics may differ, and technology is changing things, but this is the drill, no matter who you are or which season your record appears. In Haiti, this economy is different, and



Arcade Fire onstage with Symbi Roots in Jacmel. Photo by Mirissa Neff.

not just because, as in many poor places, music still exists here as lived experience more than as product.

All year round in Haiti, on the radio and at country markets, one can hear the lilting *konpa* tunes whose Kreyol lyrics, laid over Dominican merengue-flavored beats, score the downs and ups of daily life. But during the several weeks before Lent, when the Catholic world bids “farewell to the flesh” (*carne vale*, in Latin), a few records win greater weight in Haiti’s soundscape. Released in the run-up to Fat Tuesday’s excesses, most of a given year’s carnival songs earn their success—or failure—based on how well they get roiling masses of people,

absorbing them at painfully loud volume, to dance in the streets. Carnival season in Haiti, as in most places, is also a time for national reckoning.

Haiti’s current president, Michel Martelly, began his public life as a *konpa* crooner. In the 1990s, he scored a carnival hit, “Prezidan,” which urged Haitians to elect a singer as president. Since Martelly’s 2011 election, his blend of hard-charging neoconservatism and old-fashioned corruption had drawn increasing disquiet. It wasn’t hard to predict that a few of this year’s carnival songs, played on streets that had recently been filled with anti-Martelly protests, would tra-  
duce his rule. RAM’s Richard Morse

(incidentally, Martelly’s cousin) had parted from his post at the Ministry of Culture after growing disillusioned by Martelly’s lies. The target of RAM’s carnival song for 2014 was plain. “Se Pa Sa’w Te Di” was its Kreyol title: “That’s Not What You Said.”

RAM are favorites of Haiti’s literate classes and peasants alike; the band, though, is perhaps more the Arcade Fire than the Beyoncé of Haiti’s pop soundscape. Among the half dozen acts to precede the headliners onstage were figures like J-Perry and the band Kreyol La. The former is a Drake-like Port-au-Prince playboy whose 2012 carnival smash, “Dekole,” incorporated some motifs



A Haitian boy watches carnival through a lattice fence. Photo by Mirissa Neff.

from Brazil, where it became a novelty hit. In Jacmel, J-Perry performed with just a mic and a canned backing track; the kids still went nuts. Kreyol La's dozen-plus members, who have been champion makers of carnival *konpas* for years, came onstage wearing red T-shirts touting the band's name and that of their sponsor, Valvoline motor oil. Their lead singer strutted through a medley of brisk *konpa* hits and urged the already-convolving crowd to *balanse* (sway) and *souke* (shake). These are key carnival directives. There is another, though—*gouye*: to grind your hips in a circle, just so—that's perhaps most key in winning the ladies' love. Judging by

how said ladies danced and screamed throughout their set, Kreyol La have it down pat.

The best word to describe the applause as the emcee introduced Arcade Fire is *polite*. Win was dressed in black pants with white eyes printed on them, Régine in a fluorescent dress with bright streamers trailing from her wrists. The band launched into the song that is usually their show-closer. In the VIP stands at the back of the Place l'Ouverture, the aid workers and embassy types sang along to the slow-building march of "Wake Up." Up front, a couple thousand Haitians went along for the ride—these towering *blans* and their antic dancing were

worthy of curiosity at least. But farther back, young people were directing much more of their energy at each other, whether looking for make-out partners or picking fights. Then something happened.

One moment it looked like there was barely space to move. Then everyone moved at once. In three or four seconds, there was a circle forty feet across. What had happened was unclear: a punch thrown or a threat yelled. This upset was replayed a couple times and hovered over the jittery square. But the band played on. And during a joyous rendition of "Here Comes the Night Time," the only song on Reflektor that briefly employs a Haitian beat, the band

was joined onstage by the twenty-odd members of a local group who'd performed earlier.

Symbi Roots is an all-female *rara* group whom Win and Régine had first heard on Jacmel's carnival street. Their fast, driving sound—a poly-rhythmic hop played on *guiro* gourds, shakers, and monophonic *vaksen* horns—was one we'd hear throughout the weekend. *Rara* bands have their own historic role in Haiti's Lenten season: during Holy Week (the week before Easter) they visit the homes of prominent citizens to pay respects and beg coins. These days, *rara* fills the streets for all of carnival. "Nobody can stop *rara*," Win murmured repeatedly into the mic, staccato style, as the women of Symbi Roots twirled and played along in red-and-blue skirts and as Arcade Fire stretched out the *rara* portion of their song to conclude their set. Then their looming frontman thanked the crowd for hosting "the greatest carnival in the world," and urged all to stay put. "*Merci*, Jacmel, *merci à Haiti!*" he said. "We're so fucking excited to watch RAM play."

That was the plan. It was near 3 a.m., though, when RAM's battery of drummers took the stage. Arcade Fire's day had begun twenty-odd hours before, in another country. To their credit, some members managed a few minutes of dancing by the stage their largesse had built. But then we piled back into the vans by the Florita, to roll onto a dark road leading toward the beach outside of town where, bumping through a set of wooden gates gaily painted with HOTEL L'AMITIÉ, we entered our rooms sometime past 4 a.m. to sleep.

## II.

**M**orning in Jacmel dawned bright and clear. So I presumed, anyway, when I stumbled from my room near midday and into the blinding light outside L'Amitié's pretty little lobby. Inside, the staff of soft-spoken young women huddled around an old TV airing French soaps. During breaks in the action, they delivered plates of scrambled eggs and toasted hot dog buns to patrons on the beach. Luckily, Jacmel's coffee is world-class, cacao-dark and smooth, and with a half thermos of that in my system, I walked out onto the beach. Passing quiet vendors peddling little wooden animals to the few tourists here, and young Haitians lazily down on the shore, I jumped into the world's best hangover-helper: warm salt water.

Scott Rodger was floating nearby. Jim, the soundman, like Rodger a middle-aged Brit with lots of rock-tour life behind him, was bobbing in the waves with Will Butler, wet-haired and looking none the wearier for the night's exertions. Jim recounted how he'd experienced the second crowd stampede ("It was fucking mad! I was walking toward the sound booth, and then everyone was running toward me") and then enjoined a postmortem from Will about what had worked and what hadn't. Artist and soundman agreed that the band's set had sounded pretty damn good, considering that they'd foregone lots of their usual whistles and bells and instrument changes. Then a big wave knocked us down. "It really worked,"

Jim said, coming up gulping for air, "all stripped down."

This may have been the first time anyone anywhere had ever used the phrase *stripped down* in connection with Arcade Fire, who from the moment they shot to prominence, in 2004, with their first full album, *Funeral*, had been playing polished, crescendo-heavy songs that sounded ready-made to fill the arenas they now do. The choral sing-along quality of their 2007 follow-up, *Neon Bible*, was even more pronounced, and their ascent reached its peak with *The Suburbs* (2010), whose subtler attention to textured song-sequencing and narrative beats gave the album's arc the feel of a tight novella: you could hear the thought in it.

*The Suburbs* won the Album of the Year Grammy that year, and in the context of an imploding music industry, the win seemed to signal how the band's approach, to its peers, served as a map for navigating a fast-changing musical landscape. While signed to an independent label, Merge Records, they retained ownership of their own masters (they licensed the music back to the label), but gave big corporate monsters exclusive rights to distribute it. "We wanted to figure out a way to sell a million records," Scott Rodger put it, "but get paid like we sold four million."

This is what they did. And they'd do it again with *Reflektor*, an album that sounded less like the old church in rural Quebec where they'd recorded previously than the fancy New York studio where David Bowie stopped in one afternoon ("The last time I was here," he said, "I was recording 'Fame' with John Lennon") to warble a few bars for these



young friends now foreswearing their hurdy-gurdies for disco beats. *Reflektor*'s propulsive songs—often stretching to six and seven minutes—sounded less like radio-ready hits than 12-inch dance mixes that their new producer, James Murphy of LCD Soundsystem, could spin in a club.

The response among the most perfervid critics and fans had been predictable. (Pitchfork's reviewer took the tack of quoting fans' live tweets—"this bassline is fucking epic"—during their first listens.) Except when it wasn't. A shrill pan in the *Washington Post* (ARCADE FIRE'S *REFLEKTOR*: STILL DEVOID OF WIT, SUBTLETY, AND DANGER, NOW WITH BONGOS) suggested the dissenters' thrust. Taste is one thing: this band's detractors have long noted how in the idiom of rock, the slide from dynamic drama into bathos can be slick. But the group's new percussionists and Haiti-style masks had prompted many blogging academics and others to reach for the old lexicon of "appropriation" in pop. Here was a rock band rooted as much in the traditions of European art music as the blues, touting their sound's ties to the New World's blackest nation. What to make of their claim that their latest album was as informed by vodou drumming as by Ravel and New Order?

That many seemed so perturbed by this was a story in its own right. Why shouldn't a group of serious musicians who are open to the world enrich themselves and their sound with whatever influences they please? The bent notes and heavy downbeats of Southern blues—the basic source material for this and every rock

band on the planet—derives much from the string-instrument traditions of Africa's Senegambia region, from which many slaves landing at Charleston and New Orleans hailed. But the rhythms ringing out of nearby Cuba and Hispaniola have a deeper complexity and drive. Those islands received many more Africans from the forests of Congo and Dahomey, whose musical lives were built around banging out polyrhythms with one's hands on stretched animal skins. And it was those traditions, as reborn in *rara* and hailed by RAM's drummers, to which Arcade Fire was drawn.

But the thing was, those polyrhythms were rare on *Reflektor*. In that Louisiana studio where they had jammed with TiWill and friends, the band had worked at playing the more complex cadences of vodou drumming. In those sessions they may have gained a feel for those tricky beats, but you wouldn't know it from listening to the album. When Arcade Fire decided they wanted to make a "dance-ier record," they turned less to Jacmel's streets than to Studio 54. On *Reflektor*, audible Haitian influence was nearly nil.

But nonetheless, its Haiti-inspired aspects had raised questions. And that afternoon those questions hovered and trailed us as the band headed toward the Ciné Institute, just down the coast, to meet with students and perhaps shoot a video.

**S**ituated atop beautiful coral cliffs, the school was founded by the New York-born filmmaker David Belle in 2008. Its manifesto (in Kreyol) reads, in part: "We

create simple local stories set in popular life," "We use natural light," "We are active and we work together to create a better reality for us all." Here, I met Win to talk to him about *Reflektor*'s critics. "For us, these connections [to Haiti] have always been there," he said. "But now that we're pointing to them, we get criticized." I could tell, though, that the flak hadn't come as a surprise. He'd attended college at a time when Ry Cooder's *Buena Vista Social Club* was the biggest record on the planet, and also when the reflexive critique of such projects—of aging gringos re-juicing their cool with tropical greats—still echoed. Arcade Fire was no Cooder. Arcade Fire were a younger act, at the height of their popularity. But for that reason, it was perhaps all the more crucial that they not appear to be using the third world as a mere backdrop or accoutrement, to first-world cool.

And now, as the sun fell lower in the sky, the film crew's cameras were coming out as their director, a slight thirty-something fellow named Kahlil Joseph, looked on. This was the same Kahlil whose arresting short film *Black Up* I'd been sent by a friend some months before. The film's rhythmic collaging of green nature and black life was set to the burbling sounds of Seattle hip-hop troupe Shabazz Palaces. Few new video artists had attracted such raves as this auteur for the Vimeo age. The shoot for which Joseph and the band were most excited was to occur tomorrow in the midst of carnival. But as the golden hour approached at Ciné Institute, it seemed silly not to shoot something here, too. Gear and



Arcade Fire plays for the cameras at Ciné Institute in Jacmel. Photo by Mirissa Neff.

instruments were set up. The band, backed by the aqua sea and yellow light on cottony clouds, began to play the sing-along chords and wordless chorus of “Haiti.” A few students from the school wore goblin masks. They were joined by a half dozen of their friends, who had coated their exposed torsos and faces with powdered coal and chained themselves together like chattel. The symbolism was plain; we’d see many crews of boys similarly adorned tomorrow. “Carnival is a celebration of history,” as Edwidge Danticat has written; the defining experience of modern Haiti’s deeper history most certainly is in the mix.

Context is everything: this is still true in music-video-making as in much else. But there atop the school’s coral cliffs, the music sounded beautiful. And as the sun dipped toward the sea and night fell along with a gentle drizzle, I heard a happy shriek. Up ahead by the vans, Régine was hugging a pair of teenage boys. They had appeared as if from nowhere. Their names were Derby and Hubert. They were students from the school run by Partners in Health, in Haiti’s central plateau; Win and Régine had met them in Cange years before. The students had heard that their favorite band was in town, and had made the journey from their home all the

way to Jacmel, by *tap tap* trucks and moto and however else. “These guys are amazing,” said Win, slapping them five. “When we met them in Cange, they played us Neil Young songs they’d learned off the internet.”

Our party headed down to the shore. On the beachfront where David Belle lives, fifty or so people supped on simple ziti with sauce and local Barbancourt rum. A spectacular *rara* band, audible over the waves, approached down the beach, their *vaksin* horns heralding their arrival. Their leader, a short man walking backward at their helm, gestured vigorously. The women sang, the men drummed, and the entire crew circled



Zebras at Jacmel's carnival parade. Photo by Mirissa Neff.

our party and enjoined everyone to dance, summoning spirits whose identity I couldn't know, and then shuffled off into the night.

### III.

**H**ubert and Derby bunked in someone's extra bed at L'Amitié. At breakfast they were a splendid sight, dressed in matching orange T-shirts reading FIRE FLAME. This was the name of their band, they explained, though they had neither instruments nor songs yet. It was a name with a distinct relation to these Canucks whose complete discography they knew by heart.

Hubert and Derby's inchoate group had other influences (two: Coldplay and Neil Young), but their great aspiration, they told me, was to be Arcade Fire's "Haitian flame."

In town, many thousands of revelers were already crowding the Avenue Barranquilla beneath the scalding sun. Later that night, this main drag would teem with drunk young men and women hopping and *balanse*-ing behind huge flatbeds loaded with speaker towers blasting *konpa* hits (and some local hip-hop and dance hall, too). While daylight reigned, though, rattling *rara* bands would provide the acoustic score and Jacmel's streets would be owned by great

troupes of paraders in papier-mâché.

While Rio's samba queens design bikini-based costumes from feathers and beads, and Trinidad's *mas* men craft getups of cantilevered chiffon, Jacmel's artisans work with scraps of cardboard and paste in alleys and ateliers around the city. Once hardened and painted in vivid colors, many of the masks are man-sized and larger. They depict creatures imagined and real—flamingos and monkeys, dragons and ghouls, *lwa* and historical figures who can, at times, be the same thing. We hopped from the vans at the edge of downtown and waded through the crowd to the covered roof of a restaurant on the main

parade route, where we would spend the afternoon. Standing by the railing, I took in the scene.

Even if one was prepared for it, the explosion of color and wit could not help but amaze. A pack of assorted giraffes and gazelles, robins and cheetahs, was passing beneath us. Behind them, a coven of a dozen hens, six feet tall and just as wide, shuffled down the street and then clucked in concert. Costumes of animals real and mythical predominated—all carrying their own resonance in Haiti’s animist traditions or human history or both. But there were also many human figures whose roots in the country’s past were more explicit. A trio of *Chaloskas*, their sculpted mouths big and chattering, invoked Charles-Oscar Etienne, an infamous police chief from the era when the US Marines invaded Haiti, in 1915. There was no shortage of costumed figures in the black-and-white garb of Baron Samedi’s *guédé* family of spirits: the messenger gods who carry the dead to the underworld. Perhaps my favorite figure from those first hours was a solitary young man, coated in coal like the students from the day before. He was hunched over, weaving through the crowd—and dribbling a basketball. The hens and goblins were no competition for him as he spun and then performed a little juke, shook past a big Baron Samedi, and shot off down the lane.

It was an astonishing show. One troupe after another passed by; there seemed no end. I understood why many of Jacmel’s citizens—along with better-off Haitians here for the

weekend and aid workers—chose to watch from rooftops. The rails of viewing booths, knocked together with wood, overhung the street for many blocks. But carnival is a folk performance “that does not know footlights,” as its most-quoted theorizer, Mikhail Bakhtin, said. The true experience is being in its midst.

Earlier in the day, when there was enough space in the parade, weaving through the crowd for a few blocks was comfortable; hearing the *rara* up close and the rhythm of people’s feet was a joy. As the afternoon wore on and the crowd thickened, the feeling changed. Soon the masks would disappear. In *After the Dance: A Walk Through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti*, Edwidge Danticat recalls how as a young girl, her uncle forbade her from going anywhere near carnival. He said, “People always hurt themselves during carnival, and it’s their fault.” Now I understood where her uncle was coming from. This was the kind of crowd whose density and force meant that one had to abandon some measure of control over one’s body and will. If the crowd was moving one way, that’s where you went: this was the danger and the thrill. When I met the eye of a young man I felt searching my pockets (there was nothing there) he only smiled with a shrug. Returning to our perch atop the restaurant, I found Will Butler marveling at a mask that took the prize for the day’s biggest: “It’s a life-size *tap tap!*” he exclaimed, pointing to the sculpted figures hanging off the back of a papier-mâché truck. Its hood bore a painted image of Justin Bieber’s face. “I thought it was the real thing. Amazing.”

Everyone in the band was enjoying the spectacle. Will, though, seemed especially jazzed to parse its figures in light of the reading he’s done on “all the ways that Haiti is an American legacy, from our sending the Marines in 1915 to our backing Duvalier.” A one-time Slavic Studies major (he was a senior at Northwestern when *Funeral* dropped), Will told me he was thinking of doing a year at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government during the band’s next break from touring. “That struggle just to create the possibility for a reasonable life here is the thorniest policy problem we have,” he said, before we chatted of Harry Belafonte’s recent autobiography. The story of northern pop’s entwining with tropical cultures was nothing new. Belafonte’s 1956 *Calypso* was the first LP in history to sell a million copies. Will and Win’s grandmother had been a pop bandleader on network TV in those years and had loved “La Bamba.”

Will told me that the band’s next stop was LA: their score for Spike Jonze’s new film was up for an Oscar. For now, though, there was still business here. I could see his brother talking to the film crew. Win’s black hoodie was accented with glowing skeleton bones; it evoked both *Black Orpheus* and many *guédé* masks here.

Their tentative plan for the evening was to shoot the band atop a carnival float, playing their songs in Jacmel’s streets. The optics would have been crazy. It was a cool idea; also a tricky one. “I think the only song we can do and not get shot is ‘Here Comes the Night Time,’” Win

mused. A more prosaic concern had to do with the prospect of actually mounting a big truck with piles of cameras and gear in the chaos of a street already swirling with quasi-mélées. The band gathered around a table to decide what to do.

The internal dynamics of a band, like those of a marriage, are unknowable from the outside. Though this is true of all groups, it's perhaps especially true of one built around an actual marriage, whose onstage show and craft are tied to the gypsy-democracy effect of every member playing every instrument but whose success is also dependent on the performative gifts and impulses of its frontman. Win Butler's interest in celebrity as an experience and public persona have helped Arcade Fire's cause. This division of labor works: it allows the others to focus on music-making, which takes a lot of work (they'd begun the winnowing process for *Reflektor* with sixty songs). But the band looked content as they wandered back to the railing. They'd decided not to mount any floats tonight. The street was heaving as darkness began to fall.

"Real experience is the point," remarked Richard Parry before we dove back into the roiling crowd, following Win's hulking frame onto a muddy side street lit only by the stars. We landed at the Florita once more. Richie and Tim Kingsbury and I peeled off to return to the square; it had looked so magical in the darkness as we crossed it, flickering with the oil lamps of men standing over homey roulette and craps tables made from painted wood. "*Bonne chance!*" one table's proprietor cried at us, as the

band emptied their pockets of crumpled small bills and he rolled home-made die. He suggested that Tim lay down his half-empty Prestige, too, before we left with a laugh. We got back to the Florita to find Will pulling a guitar over his shoulder. Strumming loudly as he entered the barroom, he led the bar through a rousing chorus of "La Bamba." The Fire Flame boys, playing a pair of their heroes' guitars, jammed along haltingly. Then Hubert found the right chord. I couldn't recall ever seeing a pair of seventeen-year-olds look so happy in my life.

One by one, Arcade Fire's other members picked up instruments that their crew had placed around the Florita bar. Over the next forty minutes, the songs they played ran the gamut from the Clash and the Buzzcocks to "Helter Skelter." Régine pogoed through an exultant rendition of "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" while pounding on a tom-tom. It was past midnight. These were musicians having fun. A few costumed revelers trickled in: a group of men wearing black coats with red epaulets, others in women's wigs. The vibe was suddenly right for the cameras. Kahlil Joseph and his crew moved quickly. Making final adjustments ("Anyone with a cigarette, light it!"), they strapped on camera harnesses and hydraulic arms and told the band to play a song of their own.

Will was standing on the bar now; Jeremy was by the indoor palm. The drums started slow; the strings hit quick. Joseph had his steady-cam shooter start on the street. The camera was to enter the bar like a dazed

dancer happening on the scene before sidling up to the players. Richie played hard chords. Tim's bass shook. Régine banged her drum. Win exhaled, "Hey, Eurydice! Can you see me?" in his *guédé* hoodie. The camera crew captured it all. "I think that's the first time I've ever played drunk," I heard Jeremy say the next day. The remark confirmed that these weren't your usual rock stars; it also connoted concern about how they'd played. He needn't have worried. His groove was tight. "Orpheus" had sounded viscous and deep, filling the Florita's walls. And they'd gotten their video, or so it seemed.

What would become of those images was impossible to know. But as we staggered out the Florita's open door and into the starlit street, there was a whole lot of joy among a band who'd shared a great day and a lot else this carnival Sunday. Soon we would all board that old aqua plane for Port-au-Prince and the world beyond. The band would head from Haiti's stars to LA's flashing lights, and then, over the next many months, around the world. The tour would raise crucial funds for a country whose people might not know who Arcade Fire are but to whose cultural riches the band's attachments were only growing.

As we rolled out of town, many of the crew nodded off. Dawn wasn't far away. I could hear the chest-quaking pulse from those huge trucks on the Avenue de la Liberté still shaking the warm air of Jacmel's streets. Our trip might have been finished. Carnival in Haiti, though, was just beginning. ★