



Ronald Alfred and his son Ronaldo, perform the game at the Victoria Square Traditional Mas competition.



The final stage of the whip preparation is the burning off stray rope fibre.



The lash plant, which Alfred dries to weave into the business end of the band's whips.



Some of the potions that the Alfred family has created over the years to treat bruises and fortify courage before the game.

The whip cracks

Story & Photos
BY MARK LYNDERSAY

Ronald Alfred whirls the massive whip above his head with deceptive ease. The rope is heavy and more than an inch thick at the grip, but it fluently follows the circuit of his arm and the deft twists of his wrist.

The whip makes a slow arc above his head, then just before a full circle is complete, he pulls it back over itself, the force of his upper arm doubling and the finely woven end of the length of rope speeds up, eventually moving so fast that it exceeds 1,230 feet per second, creating a vacuum that results in a sonic boom, the sharp sound of a whip well cracked.

Anyone can crack a whip, given a little practice. It's even possible to do it with a wet towel, but few people can create the kind of thunderclap explosion that Alfred does, a sound that even from several feet away, you feel as well as hear, the pressure of displaced air pushing against your eardrum insistently.

It's just as well that Alfred is a massive bear of a man, his arms the size of a model's legs his shoulders and chest thick with a working man's muscles.

It also helps that he has been doing this since he was a child, the third generation of the Alfred Brothers' Couva Jab Jab band and the oldest continuously practicing masters of the tradition of pure Jab Jab masquerade.

The band is small, but Alfred's reputation is large. He is the go-to man for this isolated branch of Trinidad and Tobago's culture, and he's travelled widely cracking his whip in the service of his country.

But the whip's mighty crack and the jingling of the bells are only the surface of this mas. There is also the aspect of the mas that Alfred describes as 'the game.'

Two jab jabs will begin to circle each other, each angling the mirrors on their chests to dazzle each other before whaling away at each other with shorter, fighting whips. They wear no padding, and sometimes, when they confront other jabs, no shirt or mask either.

In a video captured at this year's stickfighting finals the Original Whipmasters meet an opposing team who challenge them then steadily back off. Alfred ends up facing his son, Ronaldo, barebacked and sweating, standing still while his son hits him repeatedly.

"The blood was in my head," he answers after I ask him why he did nothing. "If I had raise my hand against him, I might have lost control."

Alfred's mastery of his craft and generosity in sharing his knowledge has led to the creation of other new jab jab bands, but few challenge the band to the game, and nobody wants to fight Ronald.

"Men will come up to me, look me in the eye, hold my whip and say, we challenging the band, but we not challenging you."

JAB IS PAIN



Jab Jab masks await repainting on a worktable at Alfred's Couva home.



Ronaldo Alfred and Andy Grant work on the mirrored detail of the costume.



Fine weaving the tip of the rope whip.



The Alfred family await their turn to perform at Victoria Square.



Shalima Alfred organises the costumes for this year's band.

Four generations of a family's mas

The band is gathering at Picadilly Greens for Sunday morning's traditional mas parade.

The smaller performing group, which shrinks to as few as three, father, mother and son, the group who paraded at individuals at Victoria Square just a few nights earlier, has grown to two dozen masqueraders, most portraying Jab Jabs, some in American Indian costumes.

Shalima, Alfred's wife, has shed her previous roles as mother, seamstress and jab jab to lead the growing contingent of befeathered masqueraders in the band. Sixty masqueraders will fill out the ranks of the band for Carnival, including three Dames Lorraine and three Midnight Robbers.

"It isn't what we usually do," Ronald Alfred explains, "but people want to play with us."

It's all made possible by quiet strength that his wife of 16 years brings to the band, stitching together more than the delicate materials of their colourful costumes.

Shalima Buckreede moved to the quiet agricultural Couva area where the Alfred family has lived so long that there's a

"Whip Master Avenue."

She might have caught Ronald's eye, but the life of the jab had caught hers.

She pestered Ronald's father, Winston Alfred, then the king of the band until he finally relented. The king finally told her on the Wednesday before Carnival, that she could play if she had a costume. Winston underestimated the quiet determination of Shalima, who had already made her costume.

From that Carnival, the all-male Alfred brothers band would include at least one woman and Shalima would become a key part of the band's growth and success.

Her influence is everywhere, in the neat detailing of the costumes and in the familial warmth of the band when they gather. Other women play now as well, but none of them cracks a whip like Shalima. Her son with Ronald, Ronaldo is an accomplished whipmaster himself, often cracking two whips simultaneously and their youngest boy trains with vigour.

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Ronaldo Alfred (second from left) helps players prepare for the band's appearance at The Old Yard, at UWI.



Shalima Alfred prepares her husband's cape. She created this new costume for his 2012 appearances, and it was introduced at the Victoria Square competition.



Ronald Alfred leads his band on the Sunday morning parade from Picadilly Square.



Band members pose for a portrait before the band's performance at The Old Yard.



Ronaldo Alfred takes a photo of the band's masqueraders.