

# TOULOULOU TIME

## CARNIVAL IN FRENCH GUIANA



Photos, from top: Touloulou ladies wait to dance. Carnival in street on day when men dress as brides and women as grooms. Fortune Mecene, founder and leader of Les Mecenes. A lovely Touloulou masquerader.

Y

ou must come to French Guiana for Carnival and see the Touloulou, they told me. "During Carnival, all of the girls cover their entire bodies with costume and mask, you have no idea who they are. And if they ask you to dance you must oblige. They may keep you for one song or they may keep you all night."

Sound pretty intriguing? Well, it is. I spent the last eight days of Carnival in French Guiana and this Touloulou thing was quite fascinating.

I had first seen the band Les Mecenes at last year's Festival International in Lafayette, Louisiana, and they were fantastic. It was like hearing Carnival music played by a philharmonic orchestra. They had told me I must come see them during carnival and I was looking forward to hearing them play in their own yard, and play they did. "We start at 10 but come around one, that's when we start to warm up," I was told. They were pretty hot when I got there at 11. The first night I saw them in the city of Kourou. The band sounded great and all of the women were Touloulou.

The next night I saw Les Mecenes in Cayenne at the club/dance hall, Polina, with 4,000 other people. Again they started promptly at 10, played nonstop—without any breaks, not pausing between songs—straight through until six the next morning. Incredible as it sounds, this is their normal set during Carnival. The band is composed of 20 or so musicians and they have been around for almost 20 years.

The second night I found myself trying to get more of a handle on this Touloulou thing. It's very odd looking at someone of the opposite sex and not having anything to assess. The dress is costume, and except for size which can be somewhat deceiving with costume there was nothing else showing. The ladies even wore gloves.

I would later take a three-hour bus ride with the band to the city of St. Laurent du Maroni, right across the river from Suriname, to watch them play in a much smaller but thoroughly enjoyable club.

Around 3 in the morning as I was sitting outside the main dance hall, I became aware that I was looking at the shoes of the Touloulou. I realized that my brain was still looking for something to assess. I also realized that it was time to get some much-needed sleep for the next day would be Carnival in the streets of Cayenne. Carnival in the streets would turn into a three-day affair, starting mid-afternoon and ending around eight in the evening.

The first day all the men dressed as brides and all of the women as grooms—more gender confusion, but much fun. Brazil, which shares a border with French Guiana, was well represented by a few troupes. All in all Carnival in Cayenne was wonderful, orderly, exciting and fun. ★

**STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY ROBERT SMITH**