

# Asta Williams: Storyteller, Masquerader, STX Culture Bearer

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Asta Williams is a St. Croix treasure known for many decades as a master storyteller, masquerader director, dancer and culture bearer. And now she is on the cover of the Viya V.I. phone book.

Williams lives her culture all the time, not only when she is performing as a masquerader, or telling stories to the children, or playing squash with “Bully and the Kafooners,” but always, she said.

“I am Virgin Islands culture – Virgin Islands culture is who I am,” she said.

“I wasn’t always aware of my Virgin Islands history, like Queen Mary and D. Hamilton Jackson, or even Ludvig Harrigan – the name of the housing complex where I live,” Williams said. She learned a lot of that when she went to night school, she said. “I was raised by my parents to know about my culture when it came to food and clothing and music and all of our local customs – all that we do and live and thrive on as Virgin Islanders – specifically our Crucian culture.”

Asta Williams as a masquerader. (Photo by Chalana Brown)

As a young girl, Williams was in the Girl Scouts and in school plays and later took dance and sang in the glee club. For kindergarten through sixth grade, she went to the Danish School, which was the public grammar school. The Athalie Petersen Public Library in Frederiksted served as class for seventh to ninth grade high school.

“We learned needlework and crochet and learned the maypole and had queen pageants as extra curricula there,” she said.

In 10th through 12th grade, she took the bus from Frederiksted to Christiansted to the buildings on Hospital Street where the Department of Education is now housed, she said.

“Amy Mackay was a great teacher. She taught us how to sew freehand. She made a pattern for your body. So there was no going to the store for a commercial pattern. We sewed to the pattern she made,” she said.

While St. Croix divides into east and west; Christiansted and Frederiksted, Williams is at home throughout the island.

“I know both towns – I was born in Concordia West and grew up mainly on the west side of the island, but I began working in Christiansted as a young adult and learned all parts of both towns,” she said.

Her husband died at a very young age and she was left to raise six children with the help of her mother.

“I was not interested in remarrying, and I felt comfortable in being my own person and speaking for myself,” Williams said.

“My husband was a dedicated fisherman and he always took our children out to sea and would toss them overboard so they would have to swim back to shore. They became excellent swimmers. ... But not me,” Williams said. “I would stay on the sand and wait for them to swim ashore. I don’t have gills so I knew the sea was not for me,” she said with a chuckle.

She said her strong belief in God and the universe kept her going to raise her children and help them in raising their own children.

“I’ve worked at many occupations to thrive as a parent. I was a food handler at Claude O. Markoe and learned many areas of that job – like climbing the ladder – but didn’t find it necessary to climb all the way up,” Williams said.

But she wanted to do other things.

“I went back to Central High School at night to get my diploma. It was a wonderful occasion when I graduated from 12th grade. It was the same month, the same year that my youngest son Craig graduated from high school, as well. We danced and celebrated together.”

Asta Williams (Photo by Chalana Brown)

Williams said she was going to pat herself on the back and tell some of the early ideas she had for the children of the community. She said she started a summer program in her housing community.

“I bought crayons and coloring books and read stories to the children. Most of it was done without pay,” she said.

Soon afterward, the Department of Housing took it over and extended it to all of the community and it pushed her out.

“That was a good thing because it involved the entire community, so I have no regrets.”

She said she began going to daycare and after-school programs telling stories and teaching arts and crafts and mask making.

“I was bringing our culture to our children,” she said.

She has worked for years with Bully Petersen.

“Bully Petersen and I would entertain the children at the Moravian School by teaching quadrille, making baskets and drums. We went to several different schools, Williams said.

Petersen taught young children to play instruments on Saturdays at the Harrigan Court building.

"I would go along as a chaperone and he and I became good buddies during those years."

Her experience as a masquerader goes back about 25 years, Williams said.

"I began dancing with Amy Gill when she had an issue with her foot and had to stop dancing. I took it over and I have been masquerading ever since. It is an art – you have to feel it, love it," she said.

Many people came to dance and masquerade with her but later left. She feels the full covering of the costumes played a role, while the trend has been to show more skin.

"Masqueraders should be fully clothed – it's in the history of the dance. It's similar to the moko jumbie. Your body should be fully covered and your face should be covered with a mask," she said. "We use a hat for the headdress. Many people like to show their skin wearing very little clothing, but that's not the culture."

She said masqueraders wear bright and colorful garments adorned with assorted accessories including mirrors, ribbons and whips.

"The mask is crucial and no one must know who is behind the mask. The purpose of the dance is to pay respect to the ancestors and it is a cultural means of communication," she said.

The drums and other percussion instruments are of African origin and also represent a cultural means of communication, according to Williams. While the dances are performed mostly at Christmas festivals nowadays, they are a vivid reminder of the history and culture of the Caribbean, she believes.

"Gill's masqueraders wore long pants and hats with feathers and were called the 'Wild Indians.' They originally wore burlap bags or 'crocus sacks' to cover their bodies, but they were much too hot," Williams said.

When Williams started as the director, they changed to long sleeve shirts and colorful strips of fabric, calling their group "Pitchy Patchy."

Williams joined the Bully and the Kafooners band about 20 years ago.

"I wasn't very good at first because I was just learning to play the squash," she recalled. "I was the only woman in the band. I realized that people were of the notion that women were not supposed to do that."

As she broke that barrier, the same men who left the band gave her a hard time for taking up the slack they left.

"I refused to give up and stuck in there and practiced and learned to play the squash really well. I am still with the band today," Williams said.

Recently, Williams said she has learned a lot more working as a tour guide for the Crucian Heritage Nature Tourism organization when there are cruise ships in port.

"I am up on my history of the architecture and the people and all of the history when doing the walking tours and the bus tours. I stopped the tours for almost two years now that I'm doing storytelling at the Whim Museum on Wednesday afternoons."

"The stories I tell are mostly Anansi stories – which they love because he's so full of mischief. I love him, as well. I also tell stories I learned from my parents as a child, those with good life lessons that teach the youngsters a good moral code," Williams said.

She also shares some of what they did as children, "like when it rained, we took off our clothes and ran outside and bathed in the rain – or when we made paper boats and sailed them down the gut in the rain."

Williams said she was proud of her culture and wants everyone to know it and be proud as well.

"I'll share it as long as I can. I'm like the Energizer Bunny – I just keep going and going," she said.

Williams said she was surprised when Chalana Brown asked to do a photo shoot for the Viya Telephone Directory.

"She took so many photos and she said they wanted to honor me as an elder in the community. Of course, I said yes and I was very excited and honored by it all." Williams said.

Previously the phone book cover displayed generic images. The chief executive officer of Viya has always been a person from the mainland and has usually been a man, Brown said. The current CEO is the first woman and she is also from the Caribbean diaspora. CEO Geraldine Pitt wanted a phone book cover that reflected the people of the V.I. – the grandma, the auntie – someone who uplifts the community, Brown said.

Pitt put a call out for photographers to submit their work for the cover and Brown's work was chosen, thus the photo shoot with Williams.

Brown also works as a reporter and producer at TV2, a Viya subsidiary. Her three programs are "Griot," "Foodie Insider" and "In the Mix" – an entertainment show.