

Backgrounder on Sound Session's Mas Camp and Parade

“Parades are the essence of emancipation”

*-Earl Lovelace
Trinidadian Writer and Scholar*

In the fall of 2004, following the success of the first Sound Session, Black Rep Artistic/Executive Director Donald King explored different ways he might expand the scope of the organization's flagship summer event while paying homage to the cultures that birthed such celebrated fetes as Trinidad's Carnival and New Orleans' Mardi Gras. Thinking back to his experiences with David Alexis, a Trinidadian national who has worked at Black Rep since the organization's early days. King began to imagine the possibility of translating the Trinidadian celebration of J'Ourvet (French for “day open”) that marks the beginning of Brooklyn's yearly festivities, for a New England audience.

Held in the predawn hours of Carnival Monday, J'Ouvert evolved from 19th century Canboulay festivals, or nighttime celebrations where ex-slaves gathered to masquerade, sing, and dance in commemoration of their emancipation. The J'Ouvert has been called by Trinidadian novelist Earl Lovelace the essence of “Emancipation spirit.”

Being a native son of Providence and knowing full well how difficult it would be to get New Englanders to celebrate in the wee hours of a Monday morning, King decided to incorporate an after-dark parade into the Saturday evening festivities that would close Sound Session. The parade would be both structured and participatory, just like the one King had seen on Flatbush Ave. years before.

But why try and transpose a “West Indian” tradition in a city with residents from Cambodia, Cape Verde, and The Dominican Republic and of Italian, Irish and Native American and African American heritage? Carnival and Mardi Gras are essentially celebrations of liberation and freedom. It is fitting that in a city so marked by the history of slavery, as articulated in the recent Brown University Report on Slavery and Justice, that such a celebration would resonate with residents. The traditions that have evolved in many Catholic countries to accompany the religious observance of Lent are ones that value the voices of people that often remain voiceless. Carnival puts them at the center of civic life, even if it is for one glorious party.

Right now Providence's city center is witnessing a renaissance of massive proportions. Do the neighborhoods of our city feel like they are a part of this process? Black Rep's Sound Session Education and Community Engagement initiatives use the tools of Carnival celebrations to empower the diverse communities in all of Providence's neighborhoods, bringing residents from Olneyville, the South Side, the East Side and the West Side together in the city center, just across from the statehouse, to process in costume and “play Mas.” Playing Mas not only gives Providence residents a venue to lampoon the Ocean State's sordid history, it also cultivates in them a sense of civic pride-pride in their neighborhoods, city and state.

Black Rep aims to provide young people who work with other non profits and attend summer programs at community centers around the city with the same Masquerade tools it gives to youth in its own summer Education workshops. Caribbean scholar David Alexis and costume designer Caitlin Beck will offer a two-part workshop highlighting the history of Mas and its importance today as a force promoting civic engagement and nonviolence. They will also demonstrate the wire-bending techniques needed to create traditional masquerade costumes.

These workshops will be offered at a minimal fee for any community organization interested in playing Mas.

King believes that the Masquerade and Parade components of Sound Session could soon become traditions that city residents take part in planning for all year round. “Our carnival will be radically different from Brazil. We’re not imitating, but bringing in the Creole elements of our own diverse local culture: Cuban Rumba, Dominican Jazz Horns, Trinidadian and Brazilian Costuming, and West African drumming enmeshed with the aesthetics of North American Soul, R&B and Hip Hop. It all makes sense in the context of **Divine Providence.**”

When and How Can I Learn To Play Mas and Purchase a Costume?

This year Black’s Mas Camp Managers and a team of designers will work with Xxodus Café patrons to take part in the organization’s Masquerade Camp throughout the month of July. The Mas Camp will be open during Black Rep’s public programs six nights a week (check Black Rep website for times and hours).

Participants in Black Rep’s Mas Camp can pay between \$25 and \$50 for custom-designed costumes, or make their own. All are invited to prepare for the parade at FREE open Rumba schools featuring drumming and horn sections, Rumba classes and informational sessions about the history of Mas Camp. It all happens on Saturdays, June 30, July 7 and July 14 between 7 and 10pm.

More on “Divine Providence”

Year after year, season after season, the sea that surrounds us casts up its treasures: the broken blade of an oar, the shredded nets of fishermen tied to the cork that once held them bobbing on the waves, the splintered mast of a boat called “Divine Providence.” Full of seaweed and shells, these treasures speak of adventure and storm, discovery and courage. Among this flotsam there is a glorious collage of stories. They tell of sea monsters, Calypso’s sirens, and the brave sailors who will one day return to the Ocean State. Let us greet them, as they come ashore.

SECTIONS

1. Sirens/Calypso (hotlinked to pop ups of respective designs)
2. The Sea Serpent
3. Eyes of The Storm
4. Fishers of Men (hotlinked to popup of design)
5. Dancing Waves
6. The Ship “Divine Providence”
8. Sea Warriors

Contact Info

To find out more about costuming, Mas, and the parade, contact Sound Session’s director of Neighborhood and Community Programming, Tonya Harris at 401-351-0353 x116 or tonya@blackrep.org

Useful Articles On Mas and Parade Traditions:

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3732/is_199907/ai_n8857062