



Backgrounder on Sound Session's Carnival Mas Camp and Parade

Since its inception in 2004, Providence Sound Session has grown from a two-day music festival to a seven-day, citywide celebration of music and culture, attracting a diverse audience of 50,000 people from around the world. Today, it has become a cultural turning point, a moment where our diverse communities come together to honor our past, celebrate our present, and experience, if only for a moment, the dream of what Providence can become.

Following the success of Sound Session's inaugural year, Black Rep's Artistic/Executive Director Donald W. King began exploring different ways to expand this summer event while paying homage to the cultures that birthed such celebrated fetes as Trinidad's Carnival and New Orleans' Mardi Gras. Inspired by the memories of his Carnival experiences in Brooklyn, and under the guidance of long-time friend and Trinidadian national David Alexis, King planted the seed for what would soon become Sound Session's flagship event: the Carnival Parade. 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 a participatory after-dark parade into the Saturday evening festivities, signaling the culmination of the week-long event.

But why transpose a "West Indian" tradition to a city like Providence, whose population represents a broad range of heritages including Cambodian, Cape Verdean, Dominican, Irish, Italian, Native American, and African American? 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. Carnival puts them at the center of civic life, even if it is for one glorious party.

The Carnival Parade uses these cultural traditions to empower the diverse communities in all of Providence's neighborhoods, bringing its residents—African American to Native American, East Side to South Side—together in the city center 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 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. But Black Rep's Carnival will be radically different from its historic predecessors; we do not seek to imitate but rather reinterpret, bringing in the Creole elements of our own diverse local culture together to create a growing tradition entirely unique to the city of Providence.

The 2009 Carnival Theme: Native Tribes of New England

In 1636, after being banished from the Puritan colony of Massachusetts, Roger Williams traveled south, crossing the Seekonk River in search of a refuge for persecuted religious dissenters. According to the legend, he eventually landed on a large slate rock in present day Providence where he was greeted by local Narragansetts, one of whom uttered the historic greeting: “What Cheer, netop.” Today, native Rhode Islanders take pride in recounting this tale, touting Rhode Island history’s as a haven for artists, an incubator for environmental action, and quite literally a sanctuary for refugees fleeing persecution, poverty and violence. But in the retelling, we often forget to acknowledge that this land was once—and still is—the home to hundreds of Native Americans.

Sound Session dedicates the 2009 Carnival Parade to the Native tribes of New England. We are honored to provide the Native American community with a vehicle in which to perpetuate their cultural, historic, and artistic contributions and hope that their leadership and participation in this year’s festivities will add a new component that will continue to grow and evolve as an essential part this annual event.

Beneath the surface of apparent bacchanal and revelry, Carnival is a time to celebrate with friends, family and loved ones. A time as much for the renewal of the spirit as it is for irreverence, But most importantly, it is a time when we can express pride in our collective rebelliousness and honor of all our brothers and sisters, be they new arrivals, descendents of the first outcast settlers, or the progeny of the indigenous tribes of this sacred land.