

## Backgrounder on Sound Session's Carnival 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, with the support of Alexis and board member Jaime D'Oliviera, 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 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. Black Rep's carnival will be radically different from that of Brazil. We're not imitating, but bringing in the Creole elements of our own diverse local culture together. It all makes sense in the context of **Divine Providence: Eternal Sanctuary.**

### **The 2008 Carnival Theme: “Divine Providence: Eternal Sanctuary”**

Roger Williams chartered Rhode Island in 1644 as a safe haven for religious outcasts. From the inception of the state as we know it, providing sanctuary for the persecuted and dispossessed was a central tenant. Today Rhode Island is a haven for artists, an incubator for environmental action and quite literally a sanctuary for refugees fleeing persecution, poverty and violence in Southeast Asia, Russia and Africa. Express your pride in our collective rebelliousness and your commitment to the dignity of all our immigrant brothers and sisters (be they new arrivals or decedents of the first outcast settlers) by “playing Mas” with us or with your own group of friends!

### **How do I “Play Mas?” Can my friends and I form a group? Can we dress however we please?**

- We strongly encourage everybody to come together with a group of friends, a civic or religious group, a sports team or their family for the parade.
- There are absolutely no rules governing your costuming or participation in the parade apart from that you respect the safety protocols set out by the Providence Sound Session parade marshals.
- You can create your own characters inspired by our theme, or simply dress all in one color. The Carnival is all about diversity, so come as you are, or better yet, as you wish you were!

### **I want to “Play Mas” with Black Rep. When and how can I purchase a costume?**

Black’s Mas Camp Managers and a team of designers work with Black Rep patrons and friends to take part in the organization’s Masquerade Camp.

Participants in Black Rep’s Mas Camp can pay between \$25 and \$50 for gorgeous costumes custom-designed by master Trinidadian Mas-maker, Terry Eveyln. They will be available for purchase in the Xxodus Café during Public Programs throughout the month of June.

### **Contact Info**

To find out general information on participating in the Carnival Parade contact Parade Manager Lori Meadows at 401-935-0782 or [Lori@blackrep.org](mailto:Lori@blackrep.org).

To find out more about Mas and the Black Rep’s section Carnival Parade, contact Sound Session’s Mas Camp Manager, Nicole Moraldo, at 857-344-1427 or [nickybeck25@yahoo.com](mailto:nickybeck25@yahoo.com).

Contact Sales Manager Beatriz Oliveira for more information on Black Rep costume pricing: 508-441-8082 or [be@trizstudio.com](mailto:be@trizstudio.com)