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Sesame Flyers International*

BY MOLLY GARFINKEL

Labor Day morning is always a *busy* time at the Sesame Flyers' Church Avenue headquarters. Starting around dawn, a small army of staff and volunteers set about organizing and distributing refreshments and fantastically feathered and sequined costumes to members of the Flyers' West Indian American Day Carnival mas band. Even in the early hours, soca (soul-calypso) blares from exterior wall-mounted speakers, invigorating the upwards of a thousand band members, who, throughout the course of the morning, will fill not only the Sesame Flyers storefront, but the entire length of sidewalk outside before departing for the parade entrance along Eastern Parkway. Those waiting in the fresh morning air move to the music, as they slowly migrate indoors, greeting crowds of friends and neighbors as they go. Once inside, paper plates are filled with porridge, salt fish, and bagels; hot coffee and cold water fortify paraders and spectators alike for the midday march to the parade grounds. Women take turns at makeshift makeup and hair stations near the entrance, while along the side walls, plastic organizers full of bobby pins and self-adhesive Velcro tabs are carefully circulated to enable last-minute adjustments to bodices, bikini tops, plumages, and headdresses.

Founded in East Flatbush in 1983, Sesame Flyers International has been a mainstay in Brooklyn's Carnival for over a quarter of a century, but their work is not limited to Labor Day weekend, or even the summer Carnival season. The Flyers, a multi-service nonprofit organization, provide Flatbush and Canarsie residents with year-round social and cultural programs, which range from educational and recreational programs

to family counseling to steel pan and Afro-Caribbean dance classes. The Flyers' diverse programs reach over 5,000 individuals annually, and there are very few aspects of Brooklyn's Caribbean community that they do not touch.

A mission to preserve Caribbean culture and tradition underscores all of the Flyers' work. Nowhere is their commitment to cultural conservation more evident than in their participation in Brooklyn's West Indian American Day parade. As Curtis Nelson, the Sesame Flyers' executive director, puts it, "We have a year-round structure, so

we're planning for culture year-round. But the last three months before Carnival—June, July, August—whew, we do ramp up the amount of activities and the operations, most certainly!"

Carnival season begins with Caribbean Heritage Month in June, when the Flyers and other mas (short for "masquerade") camps each launch their band's theme and associated costumes for the year's Carnival. "We showcase the costumes the first time in June, on the stage with models. It's an important cultural showcase," Nelson says. In recent years, Brooklyn Carnival has



Sesame Flyers' Queen on Eastern Parkway during Brooklyn's West Indian American Day Carnival, 2015. All photos in this article by Molly Garfinkel.



Sesame Flyers' participants in the West Indian American Day Carnival Association's Kiddie Parade, 2015.

included between 30 and 40 mas camps, whose theme-based costumes are inspired by anything from politics and current events to history, mythology, fantasy, and popular culture. Early Sesame Carnival revelers wore printed T-shirts and sailor caps, but by 1992, Trinidad-based designer Steven Lee Young produced 1,000 costumes for the Flyers around the concept of “Excerpts of the New World.” (<www.sesamecarnival.com>).

In 2015, the “Egyptian Royale” motif offered participants a choice of 10 costume sections, each with a distinct color combination, and designs ranging from elaborate to skimpy. Participants

paid anywhere from \$250 to \$1,500 for a costume, with some individuals dedicating over \$5,000 for a queen or king option. Even the children’s costumes for the Kiddie Parade follow the theme, and infant outfits cost up to \$150. While adult ensembles are typically assembled elsewhere, most of the children’s costumes are made in the Sesame Flyers’ headquarters by Sesame Flyers’ staff and volunteers, as well as by summer youth volunteers who are interested in learning the intricate sewing skills. Coordinating and producing costumes is expensive and time consuming, but spectacular regalia is integral to the Carnival celebration and parade.

Six hundred costumed masqueraders were recruited to “play” in Egyptian Royale in 2015. Historically, the Flyers’ band has fluctuated between 300 and 1,200 participants per Carnival. Nelson notes, “Different mas camps in the community attract and recruit masqueraders every year. Some masqueraders go from band to band, and some masqueraders have been playing with us for 10, 15 years. We’re lucky because they’re very loyal. More than a majority of the band are folks who return.”

Band and overall Carnival numbers depend on not only the popularity of themes, but also on the health of the

economy. The 2008 recession curtailed event subscription, but now enrollment is almost back to pre-crash levels, for the Flyers and for the Carnival, as a whole. Participation has increased correspondingly at other annual Carnival weekend events, including evening concerts, the steel pan Panorama Competition, the king and queen costume competition, and the Kiddie Parade, all of which have taken place behind the Brooklyn Museum since the Brooklyn Carnival's official inception in 1971.

For many, Brooklyn's Eastern Parkway is nearly synonymous with Carnival, but New York City's earliest Carnival parade dates back to 1947, when two nostalgic Trinidadians, Rufus Gorin and Jesse Wattle, obtained a permit for a Carnival parade on Lenox Avenue in Harlem. For the next decade, the Harlem Carnival featured elected officials, community leaders, beauty queens, floats, fancy costumed dancers, American-style marching bands, and Trinidadian brass and steel calypso bands. After the media overplayed minor scuffles at the 1961 and 1964 events, the Lenox Avenue permit was revoked. Gorin moved to Brooklyn and reestablished the tradition in Crown Heights' rapidly growing Caribbean community. What started in the late 1960s as block parties and informal parades grew into a small formal procession down Prospect Park West by 1970. The following year, Gorin's successor, Carlos Lezama, head of the nascent West Indian American Day Carnival Association (WIADCA), organized the first official parade along Eastern Parkway (Kasinitz 1997).

According to Dr. Ray Allen, professor of music at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center, the first Eastern Parkway parade probably included half a dozen steel and mas bands. From there it grew, as Brooklyn's Caribbean community swelled in the wake of the 1965 immigration reforms. By the late 1970s, Brooklyn Carnival's participation numbered in the hundreds of thousands, and by the 1990s, it was the largest outdoor ethnic event in North America. Today, Brooklyn is home to the largest West Indian community outside of

the Caribbean, and the WIADCA draws close to two million participants annually to the largest Carnival in the United States and Canada.

In the early 1970s, most of the Carnival's music was produced by live steel bands. Some played attached to a formal mas camp, while others played independently and found themselves suddenly surrounded by a spontaneous collection of celebrants. "That music was the center of the parade," Allen says. Simultaneously, soca, a new Trinidadian popular style that melded traditional calypso singing with elements of black American soul and disco music, was on the rise. By the end of the decade, in Trinidad and in Caribbean communities across the globe, soca's heavy sound and deep bass began to displace light, lilting, lyrics-oriented calypso as the party music of choice for group celebrations. By the 1990s, steel bands had more or less disappeared from Eastern Parkway, replaced by DJs on sound trucks spinning the latest soca hits.

Happily, steel pan is alive and well at WIADCA's Labor Day Panorama contest, which has been a vital component of Brooklyn Carnival since the first Panorama in the early '70s. It also holds court at Monday's J'Ouvert daybreak procession. J'Ouvert has signaled the opening of Trinidad's Carnival

since the early 20th century. In the late 1980s, steel bands revitalized the J'Ouvert tradition in Brooklyn, so that pan playing could be preserved as part of Carnival festivities.

Brooklyn's Carnival is modeled on Trinidadian Carnival, the three distinguishing features of which are mas bands, steel pan, and calypso/soca. According to Allen, while other English-speaking Caribbean islands developed Carnival celebrations, nowhere does it exist on the scale of Trinidad, where the event captures the imagination of an entire country for a month and draws tourists to boot. Other Caribbean Carnival traditions include New Orleans' Mardi Gras or Brazil's Rio, which all involve costuming, parading, and African-derived music. But R&B and samba, respectively, dominate these other soundtracks; each has its own separate, local take on the music and masquerading.

Trinidadian Carnival, in turn, is based on mid-winter, pre-Lenten celebrations brought to the Caribbean by the French and Spanish. Despite its roots in Trinidad, WIADCA has always promoted Brooklyn Carnival as an event for celebrating pan-West Indian heritage. Trinidadian traditions have dominated the activities, but there is representation from immigrants from other English-speaking countries of the region,



Early morning parade preparation at the Sesame Flyers' Church Avenue headquarters, 2015.

as well as from the French- and Spanish-speaking Caribbean, including places that do not necessarily have a Carnival tradition. Although Lezama and WIADCA explicitly aimed to unite all West Indian people in New York under the banner of Carnival, tensions have existed around the parade and national identity. For example, by the late 1980s, Jamaicans constituted the largest Caribbean community in New York, with the Trinidadians as second. “Lezama always wanted the Jamaicans to participate,” Allen says. “He tried to integrate reggae into the Brooklyn Museum Labor Day concerts. But there was tension, and in the early years, steel bands and calypso trucks on the Parkway competed with giant reggae sound systems, which were set up on the sidewalks lining the route.”

Today, Sesame Flyers and other mas bands often feature well-known musicians from around the Caribbean. Nelson recalls, “From Trinidad, from Barbados; from all different islands. In the past they came and they played for us, on the road, live. We used to have *live* shows, with individual artists as well as bands who had hits in the Caribbean carnivals. We used to even hire two live bands. One for one truck, and one for the other.” Today, they work with DJs and artists who sing with recorded tracks. Hiring live bands is too expensive to be profitable, a significant consideration at a central community event that, unlike its Trinidadian counterpart, does not receive significant corporate or public funding. The lack of support sometimes spells financial loss for coordinating entities like the Sesame Flyers.

Carnival floats and costumes can be costly, and many bands have come and gone as a result; happily, the Sesame Flyers have managed to keep their floats afloat since 1983. Unofficially, Sesame Flyers began in Trinidad, where, as the story goes, the founders’ children played together in a small, secluded alley nicknamed “Sesame Street” after the popular television show. When the families moved to the United States, they hoped to recreate a place like their Sesame Street, where their children could play, learn about their heritage—about

the steel band and about Caribbean dance—and where they could receive community-based mentorship. So they organized a volunteer association in a rented space on East Flatbush’s Church Avenue. Fundraisers helped to pay the rent, and on Saturdays the volunteers offered tutoring, as well as steel pan and West Indian dance and cooking classes. Eventually they raised enough to buy the storefront and establish an official homegrown community center. When the collective went to the State Department to incorporate as the Sesame Street Flyers (as members often flew back and forth between New York and Trinidad), they were advised to choose another moniker. Ultimately, they organized under the banner of “Sesame Flyers International,” in recognition of the community’s ties to homes old and new.

The Flyers’ longevity is at least partially due to their open participation policy. “We cater to all Caribbeans who want to play in a quality band,” Nelson says. “Our roots are in Trinidad and we do attract a lot of people from Trinidad, certainly, but a lot of folks are not particular about what nationality the band originated from, but rather, they are concerned with how nice the costumes are or how nice the music is. Or how familiar the experience is. Because, you know, we pride ourselves in having a consistent quality experience.” The Flyers have both displayed and inspired loyalty by winning Band of the Year 12 consecutive times.

The organization is also still literally and figuratively on the scene because they are lucky enough to own their original Church Avenue community center. New York’s Carnival has, to some degree, always been threatened by lasting stigma from the incidents in the 1960s, as well as long-standing racial tensions in Crown Heights. Today, concerns also include gentrification in East Flatbush. It is increasingly difficult to find space for mas camps and steel bands, as Central Brooklyn gentrifies. Empty lots where bands once practiced have turned into condos, and monthly storefront rental fees are skyrocketing. Many steel and mas bands are being forced out of the neighborhood; East New York is now home to pan yards

formerly located in Flatbush. Pan yards and mas camps have always been sites for community coalescence, for congregating and socializing. As the bands are being pushed out, the future of the community may look more diffuse.

For now, Caribbean culture is strong on Church Avenue. As Nelson notes, “I wouldn’t say that it’s the heart of the Caribbean community in Brooklyn or New York. This is the heart of the Caribbean community in the entire country. This is the mecca of Caribbean culture. Brooklyn, New York. East Flatbush.” ▼

*Author’s Note

For the preparation of the article, I interviewed Curtis Nelson, executive director of the Sesame Flyers International on November 11, 2015, and Ray Allen, professor of music at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center, on February 6, 2016.

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