Performance Forum on VI Music and Dance Traditions

There is an African saying, musician and music historian Dimitri Copemann notes: "When a griot dies in Africa, you lose a whole library."

Copemann has a Virgin Islands version: "When a quelle flute player dies, you lose a set of encyclopedias."

The Performance Forum on Virgin Islands Music and Dance Traditions held on July 1, 2005, at the Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School Auditorium was another presentation of the Alton Augustus Adams Music Research Institute and its parent agency, the Center for Black Music Research, Columbia College Chicago. The forum featured an address by retired educator, historian, and writer Ruth Moolenaar. Dr. Lois Hassell-Habtes, music master and school administrator, was organizer and master of ceremonies for the evening. The event highlighted Virgin Islands words and music, as have the performances, summits, and workshops held in the past by AMRI and CBMR on St. Croix, St. John, and St. Thomas.

Habtes, together with Dr. Rosita Sands, Director of the CBMR, recently completed co-teaching a weeklong workshop for teachers aimed at integrating music into the curriculum. The forum was a concluding demonstration to the energy, enthusiasm, and information that was created and spread among a group of teachers who willingly gave up an early week of summer freedom for the sake of furthering their knowledge of Virgin Islands music.

The program's musical offerings began with Alton Adams Sr.'s "The Virgin Islands March," performed by Milo's Kings and the Caribbean Chorale. The Caribbean Chorale performed an arrangement of "Brown Girl in the Ring," Habtes' theme for the evening, evocative of the relationship of traditional music to VI society and history. The St. Thomas Heritage Dancers, accompanied by a tireless Milo's Kings, demonstrated Figures 1 and 2 of a quadrille and a schottische, a stylized round dance. Yvette Finch, AMRI Advisory Committee member, and the Honorable Shawn-Michael Malone, VI Senator, performed as members of the Heritage Dancers. Following the performance, Senator Malone offered brief remarks.

Alton Adams Jr. introduced Moolenaar, mentioning several of her (continued on 2)
Forum (continued from 1)

Project Introspection publications, which are so vital to VI cultural history. Moolenaar posed two questions to the audience. First, she asked the importance of passing on the cultural tradition to youth, and second, she asked if cultural tradition should be part of the school curriculum. In answer, she argued that bands are ambassadors of VI music that allow us to step back in time. She presented her case, bolstered by the words of Hollis “Chalkdust” Liverpool, Richard Schrader, and Hugo Bornn and by examples of the works of Antonio Jarvis, Gerald Guirty, Lezmore Emanuel, and Harold Willocks. Traditional songs have been tied to all the historical social events in the islands, she said, for example “Clear de Road” with the 1848 slave rebellion and “Queen Mary” with the 1878 Fireburn Rebellion. She said that, generally, St. Croix folk songs relate to historical events and St. Thomas songs to social issues. She concluded her discussion by observing that the purpose of schools is to teach youth to live in a society. If we lose queble, calypso, and folk songs, she said, “we lose part of ourselves.”

The Lockhart Elementary School Dancers followed Moolenaar with their rendition of the game song “Brown Girl in the Ring” and several quadrille dance figures. Watching closely, one could see that their strong-voiced quadrille caller was at the same time one of the dancers. Throughout the program, Milo’s Kings provided entertainment for the eye as well as the ear. And at the program’s end, they began playing for a “Quadrille Line,” which wound around the stage and front of the auditorium for quite some time. The listeners’ feet, which had been itching to move throughout the program, now had free rein, and the quadrille dancers—adults and children—danced until the music stopped.

Accomplished musicians directed all of the performing groups: Liston Sewer, music teacher at Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School, for the Boschulte Blazers; assistant director Yvonne Francis for the Caribbean Chorale; Ira Meyers for Milo’s Kings; Edwin Davis for the Heritage Dancers; and Sandra Reed for the Lockhart School Dancers. The Blazers and Milo’s Kings were onstage all evening, and the dancers moved in and out around the musicians, sharing the space.

During the program, a special presentation was made to AMRI of an enlarged, framed photograph of the St. Thomas Community Band, led by bandmaster David Monsanto, passing the Moravian Church in Charlotte Amalie, circa the 1960s. The reproduction was a gift of the David Monsanto Family and was presented on-stage to Alton Adams Jr. and Rosita Sands by Mrs. Esonia Hassell and Dr. Lois Hassell-Habtes. The bandstand in the Emancipation Garden, Charlotte Amalie, is named in Monsanto’s honor. The photo will be displayed at AMRI.

Dr. Sands noted that this forum was special because it was the first of the programs in which children demonstrated. Together with agencies that contributed funding to this and earlier AMRI events—the Virgin Islands Humanities Council, the Virgin Islands Council on the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts—AMRI and CBMR are working to ensure that Virgin Islands history does not lose its traditional treasures of music and song.

The Bertha C. Boschulte Burning Blazers performed a lively, energetic arrangement of “There’s a Brown Girl in the Ring” on tenor, alto, cello, guitar, and bass panels.


CBMR Rockefeller Resident Fellows for 2005–06

The CBMR Rockefeller Resident Fellows for 2005–06 will be Yvonne Daniel and Ivor Miller. Dr. Miller will be in residence at AMRI in the fall of this year, and Dr. Daniel, next spring. During their stay at AMRI, each will present a lecture/demonstration that will be free to the public. Watch for news about these events in the coming months.

Yvonne Daniel is Professor Emerita of Dance and Afro-American Studies at Smith College. She has taught dance and anthropology and is a specialist in Caribbean societies, cross-cultural dance and performance, and social inequality. Her books include Rumba: Dance and Social Change in Contemporary Cuba (Indiana University Press, 1995), Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in the African Diaspora (University of Illinois Press, forthcoming), and Dances of Pride, Passion, and Productivity: Case Studies in the Caribbean, Latin America and the “Barrio” (collection in progress). She has published many articles, reviews, and encyclopedia entries and has contributed several chapters to the works of other scholars. She presents public presentations in both academic and community settings. She has been a Ford Foundation Fellow (1991–92) and a visiting scholar at the Women’s Leadership Institute of Mills College (1999–2000). Daniel has performed with the Conjunto Folklorico Nacional de Cuba, as a guest artist for several Latin American dance companies, and as a soloist in many of her own choreographies. Over the years, she has choreographed and staged over thirty concert works that reflect her dance anthropology research, using professional dancers, traditional dance specialists, and student performers. Daniel’s fellowship project examines the dance and music of the Caribbean Bélie Complex as a means to better understand historical processes and the development of Africanized European dance forms from the seventeenth century to the present.

Ivor Miller is a cultural historian specializing in the African Diaspora in the Caribbean and the Americas. His publications include articles in African Studies Review, TDR: A Journal of Performance Studies, and Contours as well as two books: Ifa Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yoruba Culture in West Africa and the Diaspora (AIM Books, 1997), coauthored with Wande Abimbola, and Aerosol Kingdom: Subway Painters of New York City (University Press of Mississippi, 2002). The latter book documents and interprets the creation of hip hop culture in New York City from its beginnings in the late 1960s until the present, focusing on the Afro-Caribbean and African-American contributions resulting from twentieth-century migrations. Based on interviews with major painters and musicians of this movement from 1988 to 2002, this book examines issues such as the creation of multi-ethnic, racial, and gender cultural practices; naming traditions; the train as metaphor in the African Diaspora; the subversion and reinvention of language; cooptation by, and resistance to, big business; the global expansion of hip hop; and the tensions of race and class conflict in this movement. Miller’s work has been supported by fellowships from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library; the Cuban Exchange Program at Johns Hopkins University; the Institute for Research in the African Diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean (IRADAC) at the City College of New York (CUNY); the Amherst College Copeland Fellows Program; and the West African Research Association (WARA). Miller’s fellowship project documents the little-known history of the Cuban Abakuá, a mutual-aid society derived from the Cross River region of Nigeria.

Yvonne Daniel

Ivor Miller
March 2005 Lecture and Summit

On March 5, 2005, the Alton Augustus Adams Music Research Institute (AMRI) presented a lecture by CBMR Rockefeller Resident Fellow Rebecca Sager and a Summit on St. John Music Traditions. The program was co-presented and hosted by the St. John School of the Arts, Ruth C. H. Frank, Executive Director. This was the second event on which AMRI and the School of the Arts collaborated. The first event, held in June 2004, attracted an enthusiastic standing-room-only audience, and all indications were that the March 2005 event would be similarly well attended. Expectations were exceeded when the overflow crowd spilled across the outside gallery, down the stairs, and into the parking lot.

The evening began with Sager's lecture titled "Music and Movement: Rhythmic Identity in Caribbean Dance," which summarized her field research, explored new ethnomusicological theories and research methodologies, and examined ways in which cultural identities are embodied in the dance rhythms of Haitian konpa, Dominican merengue, and French Antillean zouk. Her presentation included video footage demonstrating motion-capture technologies that she is employing to measure and analyze body movement.

The remainder of the program featured live interviews and spontaneous performances by four practitioners of music traditions in St. John. Those honored included guitarist Louis Jackson, age 72; Theodora "Tuts" Moorehead, age 61, who plays maracas; banjoist Randolph "Randy" Thomas, age 74; and Rudolph "Pimpy" Thomas Jr., age 64, who is a calypsonian and pannist. The four musicians were interviewed by Gilbert Sprauve, who also served as the event's emcee. Following the interviews, several local musical traditions were celebrated with performances by guitarist John Sewer and calypsonian "The Mighty Groover" (Chester Brady). The event closed with a reception and a major set performed by
the scratch band Koko (Mahlon Pickering) and the Sunshine Band.

Since 2002, a total of thirty-five Virgin Islands tradition bearers have been featured in AMRI public programs consisting of on-stage interviews, performances, special recognitions, documentation projects, and posthumous tributes.

The Rockefeller Lecture was supported in part with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation. The Summit on St. John Music Traditions was supported in part by grants from the Virgin Islands Humanities Council, the Virgin Islands Council on the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Letter of Appreciation

Dear Cariso!

Well, [AMRI], you did it again! Our second “Summit on St. John Music Traditions” was outstanding! The island is buzzing with compliments. The honorees are beaming with pride, the performers are ecstatic, and the audience continues to rave. Everyone on the street repeats “next year!” “It’s old St. John,” “We miss the wonderful dancing—just like the old-time fish fries!”

You cannot imagine what this event does for our morale. We, daily, fight the trucks and traffic and long for the peace and quiet of the early St. John. The old-times rhythms and the elder musical statesmen bring back the memories of a community when we greeted everyone as we passed on the street.

Rebecca Sager’s lecture on “Music and Movement” was well presented and enjoyed by the audience.

The tradition bearers’ introduction reminded us of the determination of the young people of the early days who taught themselves to play a musical instrument. It is both inspirational and highly amusing to hear their stories.

John Sewer, who now teaches Willis Fahy, brought down the house with their guitar duet. You have given him a new life!

KoKo and the Sunshine Band topped the evening’s entertainment, bringing the serious dancers out on the floor.

We can never thank you enough for all that you and the Alton Adams Music Research Institute have given to St. John. The St. John School of the Arts is honored to have assisted in the planning of this event.

We look forward to programs in the future.

Sincere best wishes,

Sis Frank
Director
St. John School of the Arts
St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands
AMRI Holds First Workshop for Teachers

DURING JUNE 28–JULY 1 at the Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School, a small group of teachers from St. Thomas and St. Croix participated in AMRI’s first professional development workshop for teachers, “Passing on the Culture: Integrating Virgin Islands Culture into the Educational Curriculum.” The workshop, which was free of charge and open to teachers of all levels by advance application, addressed the topics of VI choral/vocal music traditions, children’s game songs, storytelling, quadrille, and quelbe and provided participants with both a forum for discussing these cultural traditions and their relevance to specific areas of the academic curriculum and an opportunity to gain practical experience in the performance of the music and dance traditions. Other important goals of the workshop were to demonstrate how research on VI music and dance could be used in the design of instructional or curriculum materials and how national and local standards in the arts and social studies could be addressed by incorporating aspects of VI and Caribbean culture as curriculum content.

Dr. Lois Hassell-Habtes, Assistant Principal of Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School and AMRI Advisory Committee member, and Dr. Rosita M. Sands, CBMR/AMRI Director, served as the primary workshop instructors. Dr. Habtes delivered the vocal and choral music content, leading the discussion of the social, historical, and cultural background of the songs and accompanying the singing on guitar and keyboard. Dr. Sands assumed primary responsibility for leading the discussion of national, regional, and local curriculum standards in the arts and social studies and other pedagogical issues such as detailed lesson-plan guidelines. In keeping with AMRI’s established practice of calling on local experts and practitioners for their expertise and knowledge, community scholar and musician Dimitri Copemann of St. Croix presented an outstanding lecture on quelbe music and provided the workshop participants with a number of handouts related to his research. Shirley Lincoln, AMRI Resource Center Manager, gave a presentation on existing resources for study of music and dance. Observers during the workshop included Levi Farrell and Annette Morales of the Historic Preservation Office; Winston Adams, AMRI Advisory Committee member; and Professor Austin Venzen of the University of the Virgin Islands, who served as the VI Humanities Council Outside Evaluator.

A broad spectrum of teachers participated in
the workshop, including individuals with teaching responsibilities in the subject areas of geography, history, visual arts, music, English, speech, and cultural dance, spanning levels of instruction from elementary to high school. Workshop participants were Dionne Donadelle of Eudora Kean High School; Hariyah Aisha dan-Fodio of IQRA Academy in St. Croix; Edney Freeman and Jennifer Toussaint of Charlotte Amalie High School; Christine Garrett-Davis of Boschulte Middle School; Denise Goodings of Peace Corps Elementary School; and Odgen Noland of Lockhart Elementary School.

One of the workshop highlights was a special session on quadrille presented by workshop participant Jennifer Toussaint, an experienced quadrille dancer and member of the Mungo Niles Cultural Dancers. Ms. Toussaint presented a lecture-demonstration on the history and distinctive characteristics of the quadrille and discussed various components of the attire worn by the female dancers. As part of her lecture-demonstration, Ms. Toussaint taught the group two quadrille figures—a mazurka and a two-step. This hands-on learning component of the workshop was thoroughly enjoyed by the participants, many of whom were learning the dance steps for the first time. It was clearly a hit with workshop participants, as was a session led by Dr. Habtes on storytelling and a session led by Dr. Sands on children’s game songs. During the game song presentation, teachers and several observers participated in the performance of multiple versions of children’s game songs from the Virgin Islands, other Caribbean cultures, and the United States—such as “Four White Horses” and “Head to Shoulders”—all of which involved intricate hand-clapping patterns, complex rhythms, and movement.

Each workshop participant was provided with a sample of research and curriculum materials and a bibliography of resources relevant to the workshop content. For a final project, each participant will submit a detailed lesson plan, unit plan, or other curriculum project that focuses on a particular genre of the music or dance or on a particular historical, social, or cultural topic related to the music or dance of the Virgin Islands.

Workshop participants earned a stipend for successfully completing the workshop and will receive an additional stipend upon submission of their final projects.

Workshop participants performed children’s game songs from the Virgin Islands, other Caribbean cultures, and the United States, which use intricate hand-clapping patterns and complex rhythms.

Copies of the completed curriculum projects will be housed in the AMRI Resource Center and in the CBMR Library and Archives in Chicago, making them available to an even wider and international audience. AMRI will also provide copies of the projects to the Enid Baa Library and curriculum centers of the VI Department of Education. The workshop was funded in part by grants from the Virgin Islands Humanities Council, the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands, and the ICC Prosser Foundation. In-kind contributions of the workshop space and equipment were provided by the Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School.

The “Performance Forum on Virgin Islands Music and Dance Traditions,” which presented demonstrations of the music and dance traditions discussed during the workshop, served as a culminating event for the workshop (see article on page 1). All of the workshop participants were acknowledged during the public program.
Family of the “Duke of Iron” Donates Instrument to the People of the Virgin Islands

A SPIRITED TRIBUTE to Caribbean culture and music took place at Government House in Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, during April 2005, and the Alton Augustus Adams Music Research Institute was a part of it. The ballroom was filled with Virgin Islands residents in “Carnival elegance” dress who attended an evening of celebration, nostalgia, and good music.

The occasion was a donation of a quattro (or cuatro, as the instrument is called in its native Venezuela) by the family of Cecil Anderson, known as the “Duke of Iron,” an early calypsonian who flourished from the 1930s through the 1960s. Discovered when his two daughters were preparing a family home for sale, the instrument had been well used throughout the Duke’s playing career, which included frequent visits to St. Thomas. The instrument, made by Federico Gil in Venezuela, is described in the event’s program booklet as showing “much evidence of long and enthusiastic use, such as a patch on the side where a hole was probably . . . repaired. There is a crack on the face and marks of wear where Duke strummed.”

The evening event was a potpourri of the best of Caribbean and Virgin Islands music and musicians. Glenn “Kwabena” Davis presented musical opening remarks that he penned and sang himself. Virgin Islands culture bearers Elmo D. Roebuck Sr. and Kenneth “Blakie” Blake played a medley of the Duke’s songs. The Duke’s daughter Velma presented a memoir of him. And the event’s main address was a calypso about the honoree, composed and sung by Hollis “Chalkdust” Liverpool, a noted calypsonian in both Trinidad and the Virgin Islands, accompanied by VI calypsonian Ashley “Ashanti” George.

The audience included old-timers who remembered the rainy Carnival in the 1950s, when the Duke came down from the hills despite the rain falling on the Carnival parade and danced and sang with his entourage, thus encouraging St. Thomians to keep the Carnival going up Main Street. A highlight of the evening came when performers sang “Rain Don’t Stop the Carnival,” which was created during that Carnival. Every time the chorus came up, more and more audience members softly sang along. The audience at the event also included young people, including the current Carnival queen and her entourage and Carnival prince and princess—who turned out
to learn why the Virgin Islands was honoring this particular calypsonian.

The Duke’s daughters, Velma Anderson and Joan Berliner, know that the Duke loved St. Thomas: he visited frequently to perform at the Virgin Isle Hotel nightspot, spent winters on St. Thomas, and at one point moved family members permanently to the island. So they felt it was appropriate that the newly discovered instrument come to St. Thomas and keep the memories alive of the Duke of Iron. A glass and mahogany case has been built to house the instrument, which will be temporarily housed at the AMRI until the Fort Christian Museum is renovated. The Institute is pleased to help preserve a visible and important link in Virgin Islands cultural memory.

**Upcoming AMRI Events**

*The Alan Lomax Collection*

**Thursday, November 10**

7 p.m., Harbor Room I
Marriott Frenchman’s Reef, St. Thomas

Public is invited

AMRI will present a public program commemorating the acquisition of the Alan Lomax Collection of Caribbean Music Field Recordings. AMRI has been designated as the Caribbean repository of the entire set of recordings made by Alan Lomax during his fieldwork throughout the Caribbean from April to August 1962 and will be the only Caribbean-based research institute to hold the entire set of materials that Lomax recorded during this fieldwork. The Institute has also been designated as the distributor of copies of the materials to the respective islands from where they were collected. The program will include a presentation by Lomax’s daughter, Anna Lomax Wood, and remarks by Dr. Warrick Carter, President of Columbia College, and Dr. Samuel Floyd, Director Emeritus of the Center for Black Music Research. There will also be a performance/demonstration representative of the cultures that Lomax documented in the Caribbean.

Funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, Lomax recorded indigenous music in natural settings—such as schoolyards and homes—on twelve different islands, including Trinidad, Tobago, Dominica, Grenada, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Carriacou, St. Lucia, St. Barthelemy, Anguilla, St. Kitts, and Nevis. He recorded both secular and religious music forms, providing a broad representation of the various functions that the music served in the customs, traditions, and everyday life activities of the cultures examined. The collection ranges from “baby minding tunes,” lullabies, clapping games, and jump rope tunes to songs for funeral rituals and wakes. Also included are hymns, wedding songs, chanties, and different variants of work songs—including “rice planting songs” and “rowing songs” recorded on a boat in Nevis, with notes indicating that the performers sang while performing the motions of rowing. Lomax also collected an amazing assortment of children’s game songs, many recorded on more than one island—for example, the well-known “Brown Girl in the Ring,” collected in Trinidad and Anguilla, and “Little Sally Water,” collected in Nevis. Also included in the collection are examples of such dances as quadrille, reel dance, bele, kalinda, and contradance.

*The Cuban Abakuá*

**Saturday, November 12**

2 p.m., Chase Auditorium, Business Building, Lower Level, Room B-110
University of the Virgin Islands, St. Thomas

Public is invited

Rockefeller Fellow Ivor Miller will present a lecture about the little-known history of the Cuban Abakuá, a mutual-aid society derived from the Cross River region of Nigeria, and the musical culture associated with it, including drum construction, masquerades, chants, and specific rhythmic structures.
“Brown Girl in the Ring”  
and Other Game Songs of the  
U.S. Virgin Islands

**During the summer** of 2005, I had a chance to review several Virgin Islands folk song collections in preparation for the teachers workshop held at the Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School and sponsored by the Alton Augustus Adams Music Research Institute (see article on page 6). These collections are now out of print, so they have become precious, particularly to musicians and music educators who want to continue playing the music for generations.

Because the workshop’s culminating event, the Performance Forum on Virgin Island Music and Dance Traditions, included students from the Lockhart Elementary School and the Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School, I felt it was necessary to include a popular folk song of “ole” that they would enjoy. From the Hugo Bornn collection (1969), I selected “Brown Girl in the Ring,” a circle game song, which I taught to the Lockhart Elementary School Quadrille Dancers.

It begins with movement around a circle of alternating boys and girls. One girl runs into the center of the circle, which re-forms around her. As I sang the verses, the children answered with “tra-la-las” and performed the different movements as sung: Now, Cross the Ocean; Now, Show Me Your Motion; Now Make Up Your Cat Back; Now Choose a Partner; Now Dance a Ring Ding [with a partner]. What an absolute joy to work with this children’s group, filled with energy and a zest for learning! I offer commendations to the dancers’ director and all of those involved in their educational experiences and activities.

I requested that the Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School Steel Band, The Burning Blazers, perform the popular Trinidadian version of “There’s a Brown Girl in the Ring,” which was recorded in the Alan Lomax collection of Caribbean folk songs (Lomax, Edler, and Hawes 1997). This version has been recorded by various local groups, and the Burning Blazers performed a lively, energetic arrangement on tenor, alto, cello, guitar, and bass pans. Every time I hear the Blazers perform, I find it difficult to keep still—my feet and body want to move to the rhythm of the students’ hands and bodies, as well as to their director’s gyrations of calypso rhythms and dance.

As a former director of the Caribbean Chorale, I was aware of the Hugo Bornn/Mark Williams arrangements of Virgin Islands folk songs. Associate Director Yvonne Williams conducted the Chorale in a moving arrangement of “Brown Girl in the Ring” specifically written for the Chorale. In this arrangement, all voices have the melody at different times.

One of the questions often asked about the circle game is whether or not it is for girls only. The last verse contains the words: “the brown girl in the ring is sweeter than sugar and plum, but the brown boy in the ring is richer than silver and gold.”

Not to be forgotten is the quelbe arrangement performed by Milo’s Kings. They picked up whatever key I played on the guitar with the Lockhart Elementary Quadrille Dancers and immediately launched into a rhythmic and harmonic variation of the folk song as discussed by Wilbur “Bill” La Motta in his collection Virgin Islands Folk Songs (La Motta and La Motta 1980). Milo’s Kings are masters of the music, and they continue to chart the legacy left by Emile “Milo” Francis. Hats off to their continuing work on the traditional music of the Virgin Islands.

There are other game songs that students might enjoy, such as (continued on next page)
Stanley and the Ten Sleepless Knights in Whirlwind Tour in Denmark

In mid-August, Stanley and the Ten Sleepless Knights departed St. Croix for a two-week tour of Denmark. The quelbe band of talented musicians are ambassadors, presenting the territory's official music to Denmark.

Since the group's creation in 1969, Stanley Jacobs and his fellow musicians have played Crucian music in St. Croix, St. Thomas, Tortola, Virgin Gorda, other Caribbean islands, and, according to Jacobs, "New Orleans and Miami, too." But they have never before played in Europe.

Acting as guides for Stanley and the Ten Sleepless Knights will be the Polcalypso Band of Denmark, which originated in 1988 when a bandleader heard and liked Caribbean music and formed a group to play it. They have visited the Virgin Islands four times, according to Jacobs, and tradition bearer and guitarist Jamesie Brewster recorded with them during his visits to Denmark.

The tour will involve twelve concerts in fourteen days. Among the venues are Jonstrup Jazz Festival, Harbour Festival Bissrup, Folk Music House, Long John Silver and Etnorama in Copenhagen, National Festival Week, and the famed Tivoli Gardens.

Band members traveling are Jacobs, Eldred Christian, Tino Francis, Gilbert Hendricks, Kendall Henry, Carmelo Peña, Olaf Hendricks, Lauren Larsen, Lloyd Thomas, and Christian Thompson. Their instruments include steel, squash, guitar, banjo, flute, keyboard, and cowbells.

The trip is part of a cultural exchange initiated by the VI Tourism Department, and Tourism Commissioner Pamela Richards launched the band on the tour with brochures, T-shirts, and other promotional items. A Danish band is expected to perform at St. Croix's Island Center in early 2006.

"Brown Girl" (continued from previous page)

"Bru Matty Bru," which is included in the Hugo Bornn collection of folk songs (1969). The music is also on the CD Zoop Zoop Zoop: Traditional Music and Folklore of St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John (New World Records 80427-2), which was provided to all educators at the workshop. And, as we batten down here in the islands against hurricanes, one of the most popular game songs is "Thunder Rolling," which includes hand game movements for the thunder rolling and lightning flashing, as well as singing, clapping, and marching.

It is imperative if this music is to continue that we ensure that our students in our schools know about their heritage and culture. Congratulations to the Alton Adams Music Research Institute for sponsoring the workshop for educators and for hosting a performance forum that included the students who will keep the culture going. What a way to pass it on!

References

Localize it (continued from 16)

existing local musics and idioms like calypso. Other bands, such as The Orange Sky, feel that Trinidadian rock will never be accepted at home until it has gained acclaim elsewhere. They are, therefore, concentrating their efforts on achieving international success. Bands like Incert Coin, for their part, believe that rock music in Trinidad is always already local simply by virtue of the fact that its artists and fans are Trinidadians. And it is this general agreement about the need to fight for recognition, an agreement growing out of the scene’s marginal position, that allows me to talk, at least in general terms, about “the scene.”

Another reason why the marginal character of the rock scene interests me is that the demographics of the scene are unique within Trinidadian musical culture. Participation by various ethnic groups is extremely broad, and artists and fans of mixed, Syrian, and Chinese heritage represent a far larger bloc at rock events than one would ordinarily expect to find at calypso or chutney shows. Is it possible that the rock scene, bubbling along at the peripheries of national culture, has something to offer the nation in terms of race relations, a gift that could only have been prepared within this marginal space?

It is with these ideas in mind that I would like to offer a few reflections on themes related to musical ownership and the racial imagination in Trinidad. I am interested in these themes not least because, in direct contradistinction to calypso, soca, and chutney (styles that are claimed quite passionately as either Afro-creole or Indo-Trinidadian), rock music remains relatively free from these types of claims to ownership. In fact, open to all, and indeed playing host to a very broad cross section of Trinidadians, the rock scene permits me to suggest an intriguing idea—put somewhat bluntly, and counterintuitive as it may at first appear, I suggest that rock music may well be better equipped to promote racial unity among Trinidadians than any other genre currently circulating in Trinidad.

Sociocultural Trends in Trinidad

According to the most recent census data available (2000), today there are some 1.1 million people living in Trinidad. Of these, roughly 41 percent are Indo-Trinidian and 40 percent are Afro-creole. Roughly 18 percent are mixed, less than 1 percent are white, and another fraction of a percent or so are Chinese. Other ethnicities, including citizens of Syrian and Lebanese heritage, for example, are also represented, but in such small numbers as to remain confined to the category “other.” We should, of course, keep in mind that these figures reflect people’s self-identifications and are, accordingly, undoubtedly subject to reporting anomalies.

These figures do, nevertheless, offer us a general shape of contemporary Trinidadian society—a multiethnic and complex shape with which each successive government since independence (1962) has necessarily had to contend in order to forge a sense of unity and vision for the nation. Dr. Eric Williams, Trinidad’s first prime minister, knew that he needed to find a way of uniting Trinidadians toward the common goal of nation-building and attempted to do so in a now-famous address in which he argued that:

There can be no Mother India, for those whose ancestors came from India . . . there can be no Mother Africa, for those of African origin, and the Trinidad and Tobago society is living a lie and heading for trouble if it seeks to create the impression, or to allow others to act under the delusion, that Trinidad and Tobago is an African society. There can be no Mother England and no dual loyalties. . . . There can be no Mother China, even if one could agree on which China is the Mother; and there can be no Mother Syria or no Mother Lebanon. A nation, like an individual, can have only one Mother. The only Mother we recognise is Mother Trinidad and Tobago, and Mother cannot discriminate between her children. (Williams 1993)

Beautiful! Poetic! Inspiring! And yet, this attempt at rhetorically unifying a society splintered along ethnic fault lines failed in large part because the cultural productions that were “actually” institutionalized by the government in subsequent years were, almost without fail, of
Afro-creole extraction. Thus, calypso, steel pan, and carnival continued to perform into silence cultural forms such as tan-singing, tassa drumming, and chutney.

It was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s, in fact, that chutney began to find its way into the national imagination in Trinidad. So, while Dr. Williams's address posited Mother Trinidad as the only mother for all Trinidadians, the terms of inclusion into the nation did not change appreciably for Indo-Trinidadians. To recognize Mother Trinidad, thus, still meant entering into what amounted to an Afro-creole national culture. It should come as no surprise that this state of affairs caused its fair share of discontent and concern within the Indo-Trinidadian community.

Added to this political dimension of interethnic relations in Trinidad has been the increasing economic success of Indo-Trinidadians, whose growing economic power has been traced elsewhere by scholars such as Selwin Ryan, but suffice it to say here that Afro-creoles found themselves economically increasingly outstripped by Indo-Trinidadians, whether in small business ventures or in terms of employment and employability. By the mid-1980s, this growing economic power had translated to political power, and in the 1990s, Indo-Trinidadians succeeded literally in turning the political tables on Afro-creoles, electing Basdeo Panday prime minister in 1995.

These statements are intended mainly to indicate that both groups have, historically, felt justified in claiming to be variously dispossessed, displaced, and/or disregarded at the hands of the other. And it is in this sociopolitical climate that musical styles came to carry an extra measure of weight as expressions of particular identities and subject positions within the nation. Philip Bohlman and Ronald Radano (2000, 36) put this as follows: "The power of musical ownership that is so essential to the racial imagination has an extraordinary global presence. In the most universal sense, the condition whose presence is the most global is that of authenticity, the assertion that a particular music is ineluctably bound to a given group or a given place."

Accordingly, styles such as calypso and soca continue to be tied to the Afro-creole community in Trinidad, whereas chutney and tan-singing are understood as "authentically" Indo-Trinadadian forms of expression. And while there were artists and fans who broke through these categories of ownership to explore mixtures or simply in order to sing or participate in a different style, these artists were the exception rather than the rule. It was, furthermore, rather predictable that these artists were often soundly criticized for their breaches of artistic propriety.

Two examples should suffice to illustrate my point here. In the early 1970s, Lord Shorty experimented extensively with Indo-Trinidadian elements in his early soca compositions (The Love Man album, for example) but was largely unsuccessful in selling the results to calypso fans or to Indo-Trinidadians. Afro-creoles could not understand the need to incorporate Indo-Trinadadian materials into an Afro-creole performance space, and Indo-Trinidadians, for their part, were irritated that their culture was being appropriated, even championed, by an Afro-creole artist. Not surprisingly, when Shorty moved away from the overt use of Indo-Trinidadian materials and focused instead on incorporating soul and R&B into his soca sound, he found increasing success. There are undoubtedly other factors involved in this story, but racial politics most certainly play an important, constitutive role here.

Consider another brief example. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, controversy raged within the Indo-Trinidadian community over artists like the Indo-Trinadadian Drupatee, who had dared to sing a hybrid style called chutney-soca. That controversy only deepened when chutney-soca artists grew popular enough to be included in the soca monarch competition, for this arrangement was not taken lightly by Afro-creoles or Indo-Trinidadians. Chutney-soca found itself spinning at the heart of a national controversy, a controversy that eventually led to a convenient compromise. In order to satisfy both groups involved, a new category for competition, cleverly called the "Chutney-Soca Monarchy," was created in 1996. This move, while certainly serving to (continued on 14)
Localize it (continued from 13)

make the job of judging the soca competition more clear-cut (a happy development for Afro-creoles), also, in effect, continued to legitimize and further institutionalize the “separate but equal” policies for which Indo-Trinidadian leaders had been pushing. 

With these ideas and examples as context, I would like to suggest that rock music functions in direct contradiction to calypso and chutney by providing an alternative space that has not yet been claimed in the same way by an ethnic group and which actually offers some sense of freedom and relief from these interethnic struggles. While local whites, as they are called in Trinidad, constitute a significant demographic group within the scene, mixed, Chinese, Syrian, and Lebanese Trinidadians, are also quite heavily represented. Indo-Trinidadians and Afro-creoles are, of course, also participants in the scene, with the former outnumbering the latter by a significant margin. But the proportions indicate a very different pattern of ethnic representation within the rock scene than is the case in either soca or chutney, a pattern revealing a much higher level of participation by these minority groups than is the case within the other genres.¹

Rock Music as an Alternative Space?

What I find quite fascinating about this state of affairs is that it becomes reasonable to argue that Dr. Williams’s vision of a single mother—of a Mother Trinidad—is best exemplified socially in a musical scene that most would consider culturally nonlocal.² So, a music that is considered nonlocal by most offers the greatest freedom from “local” claims upon style by ethnic groups, opening the scene to broad participation and fostering a sense of unity not easily achieved within more entrenched musical styles.

And yet, rock music remains a double-edged sword. Within the scene, artists and fans are bound by their shared sense of community and by their marginal position within the nation. Outside the scene, however, the artists who perform rock are not generally considered creative participants in the cultural life of the nation. This dilemma might be expressed as follows: on the one hand, rock musicians and their fans are participating in a style that sidesteps the interethnic conflict in their country, a style that actually allows them to exemplify Dr. Williams’s “Mother Trinidad”; but on the other hand, performing in and identifying with this style means that they themselves step beyond the bounds of conventionally agreed-upon Trinididian cultural productions. Rock musicians and their fans are, then, cleverly instantiating Mother Trinidad socially but stand guilty before the nation of a concomitant rejection of that very same Mother in terms of their expression of culture. This is not, of course, how the artists themselves see the situation but is rather a product of the general perception of rock music within the nation-at-large.

This dilemma really touches ground when it is connected to the current debate over local airplay in Trinidad, a debate that includes artists of all genres. Artists have, for some time now, been demanding of radio and television stations a formula that would guarantee a fair percentage of airtime for local music relative to nonlocal materials. An excerpt from an interview with Incert Coin by Erline Andrews of the Trinidad Guardian (2002) puts the rock musician’s role in this struggle into perspective: “‘Many reject rock as devil music and don’t consider it local.’ As [Bernard] Abreau reflects on this [kind of] thinking, he bitterly remembers marching in heavy rain last year with other artistes in support of 50 per cent local music on the airwaves. ‘Yet still, TUCO will not look at my thing as Trinidad culture,’ he says. ‘If Incert Coin was being played on the

¹. In her dissertation, Robin Balliger (2001) argues that the rock scene in Trinidad is a perfect example of social fragmentation in that Indo-Trinidadians and local whites are able to eschew the normative expectations of their respective communities within Trinidadian social life. My playful suggestion that the rock scene may actually provide for a different way of approaching unity is, in this light, revealed as the exploration of other possibilities that it is, and I should be quick to caution that this essay is meant as a reflection on ideas rather than a statement of fact.

². I am, of course, using the terms “social” and “cultural” here merely as a shorthand for indicating the difference between people and the music/art/customs that they hold dear and with which they choose to identify themselves.
radio all day long they will still say that is foreign thing.”

So, even though Bernard is himself a local musician and although he marches in support of all local musicians, including soca and chutney artists, his own contributions to local music will, he fears, never be recognized as such by the media or the government. And this dilemma is as old as rock music’s presence in Trinidad. Even as early as the mid-1980s, people were recognizing rock as marginal to but also quite different from the general musical culture in Trinidad.

The following comment, from a letter to the editor of the Trinidad Guardian about a show by the band Touchdown, is particularly revealing in that it places in direct relationship to one another questions of both ethnicity and style:

As soon as “Touchdown” started playing, one couldn’t help but wonder why is it that these guys are not heard much on our media—is it that they are white or not black? Or is it that they are not into soca? . . .

This concert just goes to show that however some may try to “Socarise or Africanise” the music and culture of all of Trinidad and Tobago, there will always be forces like myself who will be utterly against them. (Rock Fan 1991; italics mine)

While this comment certainly concerns itself with the question of local musicians and airplay, it also illustrates the prevailing sense that the government and media were, in fact, quite happy to continue fostering Mother Trinidad as an Afro-creole cultural space. Rock, standing as it does outside these specifically racial politics, remains at once socially open and culturally closed and these in opposite directions. Anyone can participate, but the vast majority of the nation refuses to recognize as locally valid the music that is produced within the scene.

Conclusions

I am convinced that the rock scene offers possibilities for the relationship between style and identity that are simply not possible in genres like soca and chutney. The spaces opened up by performing in a style that is at least relatively free from claims to ownership by ethnic groups in Trinidad afford rock musicians and rock fans the chance to constitute a very different Trinidad from the one they see all around them from day to day. That the bands are often at odds about exactly how to shape this space is, in my view, only a healthy by-product of creative and invested artists and fans.

I would like to take this line of argument one step farther and suggest that identifying one’s self with rock signals a commitment to this “other” Trinidad, a commitment that is reinforced through participation in the scene. I also find it particularly interesting that the rock scene actively embraces artists of all types of music throughout Trinidad as partners in the struggle for more recognition. It is not insignificant, in my view, that those artists least likely to profit from a change in media and governmental stances toward local music are participating heavily in the cause on behalf of their fellow artists.

The rock scene is not, then, about a withdrawal from the nation, but rather about the possibility of re-thinking what it might or could mean to be Trinidadian. And it is in this sense, at least, that rock music is local, for it is being used to imagine what national and individual identities can include. And this process continues in spite of—or perhaps thanks to—the continued marginality of the scene in Trinidad.

References


Localize It

Some Reflections on Rock Music in Trinidad

BY TIMOTHY ROMMEN

The musicians are pounding out a classic Pat Benatar tune and turning Club 51° into a retro-room—a retro-room located in the heart of Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. The local band ripping through “Heartbreaker” is called Blue Six, and they are masterfully channeling the nostalgia generated by their choice of repertory. For this hour, at least, Blue Six owns the room.

The musicians enjoy these gigs, but as is the case with many cover bands, the band’s members are also all variously working with other groups or on their own solo projects—Blue Six simply helps them pay the bills. And yet, beyond the band’s purely economic function, there is a sense in which the members of Blue Six also enact a link with the past each time they get on stage.

During the 1970s and 1980s, cover bands with names like Touchdown and Paradise represented just about the only opportunity to hear live rock music in Trinidad. There was simply no market for original music as such, and if they wanted to attract an audience, rock musicians had no choice but to master material that people already knew and loved. Bands like Touchdown became extremely good at what they did, eventually drawing very large audiences based on a repertory of carefully selected cover songs. Blue Six thus participates in this heritage even as its members seek to stake out other ground for themselves.

As it turns out, changes in the government’s stance toward telecommunications—including the granting of private radio licenses and the arrival of cable in the late 1980s and early 1990s, respectively—have made it possible for artists and fans to envision rock in a multitude of different ways in contemporary Trinidad. So, for example, although cover bands like Blue Six are still in demand, most bands are now playing original material. In fact, the scene has grown tremendously since the early 1990s and now supports some forty actively gigging bands, an annual pop/rock competition, a weekly “totally local” radio program on 95.1 FM, and several concert series dedicated to original rock music. In spite of this growth, however, rock music remains entirely marginal to the musical life of the nation, with very few Trinidadians considering rock a local musical style.

Rock’s Position in the Music Scene

This marginality is interesting to me for at least a couple of reasons. The rock scene is, itself; quite varied in terms of musical style (including metal, alternative, roots, grunge, punk, etc.), and this diversity, not surprisingly, often leads to highly divergent ways of approaching questions about what rock might or should mean in Trinidad. In spite of these broad differences, however, the bands are all interested, to some degree at least, in legitimizing rock as an artform within Trinidad. Even this takes different shapes, but the overall goal is the same. So, for example, a band like jointpop hopes to see rock localized in and through its interaction with (continued on 12)