Christmas with the Ancestors

Jonkonnu and Related Festivities in Jamaica

BY DR. KENNETH BILBY

IN MANY PARTS OF JAMAICA, music and dance serve as a means of establishing and maintaining contact with ancestors. In the more clearly African-derived religious traditions, such as Kumina and the Kromanti religion of the Maroons, specific songs and drum rhythms can be used to call the spirits of family members, who remain a part of the community even after physical death.

Throughout Jamaica, Christmas is a time of merriment and celebration. In some communities, it is also a time for paying respects to ancestors, who may be invited to join in the festivities. Two festival traditions associated with Christmas in Jamaica are Jonkonnu and Buru. Jonkonnu, the better known of the two, was once practiced on slave plantations and in towns across the island and goes back at least to the eighteenth century. Involving feasting, parading, masking, drumming, singing, and dancing, Jonkonnu was the closest thing in Jamaica to the pre-Lenten carnival held in predominantly Catholic parts of the Americas, such as Trinidad, Brazil, and Louisiana. The lesser-known tradition called Buru appears to be historically related to Jonkonnu. It too features drumming, dancing, singing, street processions, and in some cases, masking.

Both traditions have played an important role in the island's cultural life in recent times—Jonkonnu because it has been promoted by the Jamaican government as a symbol of national identity and Buru because its drumming (which is distinct from that of Jonkonnu) was one of the main sources of Nyabinghi, a new genre of Rastafarian traditional music that emerged in the middle of the twentieth century. Through the work of Bob Marley and other influential Rastafarian musicians, Nyabinghi contributed heavily to the development of urban popular music in Jamaica. Today, like reggae, it is played by Rastafarians around the world (continued on 2)
Jonkonnu (continued from 1)
as an expression of pan-African identity.

Both Jonkonnu and Buru are widely seen as “secular” festival traditions. Most of those who have written about them state that they are devoid of religious or spiritual meaning. Indeed, most practitioners of these traditions deny that their Christmas observances have anything to do with gods, ancestors, or other spiritual entities. Contemporary Jonkonnu participants typically represent their performances as mere “jollification,” without any spiritual significance. The same is true of Buru. In fact, one of the reasons that early Rastafarians are thought to have selected Buru drumming as the basis for their new liturgical music is that, although it was clearly African-derived and could serve as an effective symbol of African identity, it seemed to have no prior religious associations or meanings that might conflict with the radical reinterpretation of Christianity preached by the early Rasta prophets. Following Biblical scripture, most Rastafarians rejected the focus on ancestral spirits that remained at the heart of older African-Jamaican religions such as Kumina. The type of Buru encountered by Rastafarians on the fringes of Kingston appeared to lack this focus on ancestors, and so this urbanized variant appealed to the early Rastas who were in search of their own African-oriented music.

Despite the common view of Jonkonnu as a secular form of masquerading, a few historians and other scholars have argued that it is derived from traditional African religious rites that were originally tied to agricultural cycles and centered on ancestors and that it survived in modified form on slave plantations in Jamaica. Over time, scholars reason, the festival lost most of its spiritual meanings—much like the Christian holiday of Christmas itself, which is now treated by many as a secular celebration. This argument is not just of historical interest, because it raises certain existential questions that continue to resonate in the contemporary Caribbean. In the ongoing debates about what aspects of the African past have remained alive in the Americas, the question of meaning is critical. How are Jonkonnu and Buru, both of which are clearly derived in large part from African practices, to be understood in the present? Should they be seen as extensions of a process in which deep cultural meanings were retained in the passage from Africa to Jamaica? Or can they be reduced to mere trappings, which soon after arrival were emptied of deeper meanings?

In the past few years, a number of previously undocumented local variants of Jonkonnu and Buru have come to light. In my own research on Jamaican Christmas traditions, I have paid particular attention to such understudied varieties. These newly uncovered variants clearly represent the oldest surviving and best preserved forms of these traditions yet to be documented. Until recently, they remained isolated from competing varieties; and, unlike most versions of Jonkonnu or Buru practiced in Jamaica today, they have not been

Figure 2. House headdress worn in Jonkonnu festivities in St. Elizabeth, Jamaica. Photo courtesy of Kenneth Bibby.
significantly altered by the intervention of government agencies concerned with the management of folk or traditional culture. Through these older, more conservative varieties, which survive in only a few communities, we can gain a better understanding of ancestral practices and meanings that at one time were probably more widely shared among Jonkonnu and Buru practitioners. A quick glance at the way that Christmas is celebrated in these communities will give an idea of the spiritual depth of these older forms.

In a few rural parts of St. Elizabeth parish, the Christmas season is celebrated with a form of Jonkonnu that differs in many ways from what is known as Jonkonnu elsewhere in Jamaica. It is clear that most of the features that set this local version apart were more common in the past, because they are often mentioned in written descriptions of Jonkonnu from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For instance, this variant in St. Elizabeth features a distinctive kind of square frame drum played with the hands, known as gumbay (see Fig. 1); mixed choirs in which women typically play a leading role; and a remarkable, elaborately decorated headdress worn by a male dancer, which is shaped like a house and is itself called Jonkonnu (see Fig. 2). All of these were widely reported in connection with Jonkonnu festivities during the slavery era. In contrast, these features, once typical of the tradition, are entirely lacking in present-day Jonkonnu performances elsewhere on the island, which are characterized instead by fif-and-drum ensembles (in which the drumming is done with sticks), a complete absence of vocals, participation exclusively by males, and troupes of masked and costumed dancers who play a number of stock characters (e.g., pitchy-patchy, the devil, police-man, belly-woman, and so forth). Noticeably missing from this contemporary cast of characters is the house headdress once central to Jonkonnu.

The evidence strongly suggests that the isolated variant of Jonkonnu practiced in rural St. Elizabeth is closer than any other surviving Christmas festivities to what was known as Jonkonnu in past centuries, whereas the more common masquerade traditions almost universally identified with Jonkonnu in Jamaica today, although historically related, represent something quite different. The historical forces that led to the overshadowing of the older, original form of Jonkonnu by a different kind of masquerading were complex and varied. Particularly influential was the increasing patronage of masquerade bands by local businesses, the press, and the government during the twentieth century. As the involvement of such official sponsors grew, a varied assortment of masquerade traditions in Jamaica became lumped together under a single label, “Jonkonnu” (or “John Canoe”), and certain variants—most likely those that were least obviously in conflict with colonial values and least liable to the stigmatization from which all forms of African religiosity still suffered—were projected as the ideal. In fact, Jonkonnu and related Christmas festival traditions were already on the verge of dying out when Jamaica’s main newspaper, The Daily Gleaner, launched the first major “John Canoe” competitions in the early 1950s. Official sponsorship of this kind not only helped revive these waning Christmas traditions but also helped to redefine them by imposing a standardized set of criteria by which performances would be judged from then on. By the time of independence in 1962, official representations had crystallized into an image of Jonkonnu as a “secular” festival embodying the nation’s identity. In the process, Yuletide folk customs that had not previously been considered part of Jonkonnu, some of which were more clearly related to European than to African traditions—for instance, “horse-head” maskers and “fancy dress” masquerade troupes—were absorbed into what was now seen as a single national festival. Over the course of the twentieth century, the face of Jonkonnu had changed considerably.

For one who is unfamiliar with nineteenth-century descriptions of Jonkonnu and whose understanding is based solely on the kinds of government-supported masquerade performances that are the norm in Jamaica today, the older Christmas festivities that are still practiced in a few areas (continued on 4)
in St. Elizabeth are hardly recognizable as “Jonkonnu.” What sets them apart most fundamentally from typical modern Jonkonnu performances is their clearly religious quality. Indeed, almost every aspect of this older, local version of Jonkonnu carries spiritual meaning. Jonkonnu in this area is not a simple one- or two-day “jollification” limited to Christmas, Boxing Day, or New Year’s Day. Rather, it forms the year-end component of a larger community religion that is practiced year-round. Throughout the year, as the need arises, local ancestors are called by the gumbay drum and the old myal (spirit) songs to come and help the living tackle the problems of daily life. Most often, these ceremonies are held for the purpose of healing ailments with a spiritual cause. At Christmas time, the focus shifts from healing to feasting, celebration, and Jonkonnu dancing, and the ancestors are very much a part of these holiday observances as well. Construction and decoration of the Jonkonnu house headdress that is central to these festivities typically begins a month or more before Christmas. The builder of the headdress—known as the “master” of the Jonkonnu—often also serves as a myal dancer, or spirit medium; he typically belongs to a spiritual lineage of Jonkonnu builders going back three or more generations. Jonkonnu builders and myal dancers of previous generations, who are buried in local cemeteries, are remembered and revered by the living. As people prepare for the festivities during the weeks before Christmas, the watchful presence of these ancestors is felt by all who take part. The high point of the celebration occurs on Christmas Eve, when a major gumbay dance is held, and the new house headdress is unveiled before the community. At the two main family graveyards, the ancestral spirits are fed with white rice, the blood of a chicken, and a specially prepared concoction known as “egg punch” (a drink that was closely associated with Christmas festivities in Jamaica during the nineteenth century). At the dancing ground, the presiding myal dancer and his assistants remove the sheet that had previously concealed the Jonkonnu (as the headdress itself is known) and carry it out into the open for all to see. Shortly before dawn, the Jonkonnu dancer, with the help of his assistants, hoists the headdress onto his head and proceeds to a number of local cemeteries, where he dances and displays his creation so that its beauty can be enjoyed by the entire community of ancestors. Deceased members of the community are invited to join the festivities with songs such as the following.

you wheel in-oh, deat'-oh [“deat” here meaning “ancestral spirit”]
wheel in-oh,
come in-oh, deat'-oh,
wheel in-oh

After daybreak, the crowd moves out onto the road, marching along with the musicians and the main Jonkonnu dancer through the different sections of the community while singing other songs. Only after December 25 does the Jonkonnu ensemble from this area perform in other communities. Sometime in January, when the Christmas spirit has begun to fade away, the ancestors provide indications that the time has come to destroy the house headdress. An all-night gumbay dance must be held, during which the headdress is brought out and displayed for the last time. The “master” of the Jonkonnu headdress carries it on his head to the local cemeteries, where he performs a final dance for the ancestors. Once the headdress has been destroyed and the cycle completed, thoughts of Jonkonnu need no longer occupy the community until the following Christmas season.

In rural St. Catherine parish, one of the strongholds of the Buru tradition in Jamaica, Christmas is similarly celebrated with neo-African drumming, singing, dancing, parading, and in at least one community, offerings to local ancestors. In this community, Buru is a spiritual tradition that has been consciously handed down from one generation to the next. Until recently, the Christmas processions associated with this variant of Buru also featured masked dancers. Each
current “Buru leader,” as the primary drummer is called in this tradition, chooses and trains a successor who will be both musically and spiritually fit to take his place upon his death. If the successor fails to keep up the tradition, the spirits of former Buru practitioners, angered by neglect, are likely to strike him with illness. The only way to assure recovery in such a case is to make amends with the ancestors.

Although Buru gatherings may occur any time of the year in this community, the largest and most important Buru performance takes place on December 25, which participants call “Buru Day.” Beginning on Christmas Eve, performers and family members assemble at the original “Buru Yard”—the place where the oldest-remembered Buru practitioners are buried—and offerings of food and drink are prepared for their spirits. Early on Christmas morning, the performers begin what they call their “march around the ancestors.” Drumming, singing, and splashing offerings of rum as they circle around the graves of the elders, they honor these past performers with traditional Buru songs, inviting them by name to join in the Christmas revelries:

**Chorus**
Happy-oh, happy morning
[keeps repeating]

Dis ya morning a Christmas morning
[“this morning is Christmas morning”],
Dis ya morning a Buru morning,
Dis ya morning a Hubert morning
[“this morning is Hubert’s (an ancestor) morning”],
Dis ya morning a Jerry morning,
Dis ya morning a Gustus morning,
Bawl, you fe bawl out, happy morning-oh,
Dis ya morning a Buru-man morning

Another song always performed for this occasion reminds the Buru ancestors that the drums being played—and particularly the time-keeping *funde* at the center of the three-piece Buru drum ensemble—belong as much to them as to the living members of the community:

**Chorus**
ol’ sumaadi [“old people,” i.e., ancestors] [keeps repeating]

Call them, call them,
Me seh, Gustus funde,
Me seh, Hubert funde,
What kind of funde?
Oh, Jerry, you funde,
And a Hubert, you funde,
You no know you funde?
You talk pon de funde,
Oh, oh, ol’ sumaadi

From here, the performers head out onto the streets and lanes of the community, marching from house to house, picking up crowds of participants and appreciative spectators as they go. At each yard where a former practitioner is known to be buried, the celebrants stop to honor the spirit of the deceased “Buru-man” or “Buru-woman” with music and offerings of rum. The festivities continue through Christmas and Boxing Day. If the ancestors are satisfied with the performances, they will show their appreciation by offering the Buru people their protection from harm or misfortune through the following year.

These older, spiritually charged versions of Jonkonnu and Buru suggest the need for alternative histories of both traditions—histories that rely less on written documents left by outside observers, most of whom had little understanding of what they were describing—and more on the traces of the past to be found in the everyday practices of people whose spiritual lives have remained close to those of their ancestors. Only by listening to the few remaining practitioners of these older forms can we gain access to a world of meaning that was largely hidden from the Europeans who left written records of life on Jamaican slave plantations. These last holdouts in the present are uniquely positioned to help us understand what complex Afro-Creole performances such as Jonkonnu and Buru really were—which is to say, what they meant—to those who practiced and cherished them in earlier times. And (continued on 9)
St. John People Love and Honor Their Elder Musicians

The music and memories of St. John’s elder musicians held an overflow audience spellbound at the St. John School of the Arts on June 3, 2004. The evening’s Summit on St. John Music Traditions was sponsored by AMRI and its parent organization, the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College Chicago. Earlier summits to honor tradition bearers of music have been held on St. Thomas and on St. Croix.

Master of ceremonies Dr. Gilbert Sprauve set the mood as he reminisced, along with Elroy Sprauve, about the occasion in 1948 when the Coast Guard buoy tender Sagebrush came to Cruz Bay to carry everyone interested to Emancipation Garden on St. Thomas for the ceremony celebrating a hundred years of emancipation from slavery on the islands.

The audience listened intently as five St. John tradition bearers reminisced about playing music on St. John in the 1940s and 1950s and spoke about how they had learned to play.

First to speak was Godfrey Smallis, who said that he began on clarinet at about age 17. It took him two weeks to figure out how to play a scale, so he switched to saxophone.

Next up was Jimmy Boynes, who started his music career at age 8 in 1920, when he made a papaya-stem flute and listened to musicians. “You learn to play,” he said, “then you are a musician.”

Warren Smallis learned to play the mouth organ because that was what his mother played. Then he borrowed his father’s piccolo to practice on—until his father finally gave it to him. He played clarinet, saxophone, and a sardine-can ukulele for 15 years with an early band at Caneel Bay. He later surfaced in New York with a band; an audience member later identified the band as Tropicana, which was based in New Jersey.

Oscar James recalled that John Sewer was his teacher and mentor. When Sewer was asked how he learned to play music, he replied that he watched others play, and when they put down their instruments, he picked them up and practiced. One musician commented that Sewer played better than he himself did and handed Sewer a guitar, telling him, “This is for you, not for me.” When Sewer was 15 or 16, he enrolled in a course through the U.S. School of Music but dropped out three months short of completing the two-year program. He explained that he was making a little money with his music, and it kept him busy. He traveled, but found he did not enjoy it, so he settled in New York City to play for five years, then returned to St. John. Sewer identified the 1975 inauguration of Gov. Cyril E. King as the last time he played in public. After answering questions, he picked up his guitar and held the audience spellbound with his playing—his

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fingers flew, and the sound never faltered. It was a rare, unexpected treat for the audience.

After the tradition bearers spoke, AMRI Director Rosita Sands presented plaques to the five panelists and to musicians Steadwin Frett, Vernon Parsons, Jens Pickering, Melbourne “Mello” Thomas, and Randolph Thomas. Then family members came forward to accept certificates for posthumous tributes to Wilmot Blackwood, Loredon Boynes, Basil Harley, Emile Jurgen, Eustace Richards, Herman Sprauve, and Ludwig Sprauve. Program organizer Sis Frank commented, “You have no idea how many months it took to get all these people to promise to appear.”

Then, along with food, the listeners were treated to performances by Chester “The Mighty Groover” Brady, Koko (Mahlon Pickering) and the Sunshine Band, and Rudolph “Pimp” Thomas.

St. Croix Colloquium

**CARIBBEAN PEOPLE** keep moving, and they keep the music and the dance moving. This common thread was emphasized over and over—for different islands, different peoples, different researchers, from art historians to linguists—at a research colloquium held on St. Croix in March 2004.

Sponsored by AMRI and its parent, the CBMR, the event opened with a colloquium of visiting scholar presentations and discussions, followed by a free public event titled “Summit on Researching Music in the Circum-Caribbean: Focus on Quadrille,” the third summit presented by AMRI.

**Symposium Session**

The opening session featured presentations by musicologist Dr. Michael Largey (Michigan State University) on street dancing and bands in Haiti; by Dr. Gilbert Sprauve (the Virgin Islands’ resident linguist and retired University of the Virgin Islands humanities professor) on the treatment of Caribbean music in poetry and other literary works; by dance scholar Cheryl Ryman (University of the West Indies, Mona) on jounkonu and dancehall in Jamaica and the continuing transformations within and beyond them; and by art historian Judith Bettelheim (San Francisco State University), a specialist in the performing arts, particularly in Cuba since the mid-1980s. Discussants included CBMR Director Dr. Rosita Sands; Rockefeller Fellows Dr. Dominique Cyrille and Dr. Kenneth Bilby; and UWI Vice Chancellor Dr. Rex Nettleford.

Dr. Largey set the stage with a discussion of Haitian *rara* (“a Lenten procestional tradition associated with Vodou religious activity, musical competition, political patronage, and militarism”) in Léogâne, Haiti, the development of local radio broadcasting and the commercial recording of this music for global distribution, and the impact of both on the development of the music itself. One aspect of live performances of *rara* is competition between street bands and the desire to drown out the sound of the opposing band in order to win the competition, formal or informal. Dr. Nettleford observed that steel bands rose to prominence in Trinidad for this reason, and Dr. Largey explained that throughout the Caribbean, and in New Orleans as well, there has been interest in this kind of competition. In St. Thomas, competition between musical groups can be seen in the clashing of bands at Carnival’s *jouvert* and the battle of voices in the traditional Challenge of the Carols.

Dr. Sprauve quoted two V.I. poets—St. Croix’s Marvin Williams and St. Thomas’s Clement White—to illustrate two reactions to traditional music: contempt toward the “relief” music and its refusal to update (berating a band for playing a waltz) and remembrance and nostalgia for the “old.” Sprauve mentioned the Junior Calypso Competition, mentored by older calypsonians, from St. Thomas’s Carnival as a move to keep traditional culture going.

Dr. Ryman explained that the culture of dancehall queens (such as Carleen, Hotty Hotty Cherry, White (continued on 8)

Thanks to Sis Frank

Sis Frank and the staff of the St. John School of the Arts, particularly Kim Wild and Kazumi Schaub, were the perfect hosts for the June 3, 2004, AMRI Summit of Tradition Bearers. The event, which was co-sponsored by the school, attracted a packed auditorium of enthusiastic attendees and participants. Sis also was instrumental in planning the program. AMRI and the CBMR would like to extend to her our most sincere thanks for all her efforts in making this evening a success.
Welcome, Joy

Ms. Joy Aird has joined the Adams Institute staff as office manager. She’s an educator in the fields of mathematics and computer applications, retired after 31 years in the V.I. Education Department. With a minor in music in her own educational background, she has been active in St. Thomas musical groups, singing with the Caribbean Chorale and a madrigal group, and in musical presentations at the university’s Little Theatre.

Conquorium (continued from 7)

Medusa) and the dancers’ styles of clothing and related attitudes of wearing them are developments of traditional jonkonnu.

Traditional jonkonnu featured the clash of two selectors (DJs): dancehall, on the other hand, uses a single selector/narrator but incorporates the familiar “call and response” in the dialogue between dancers.

Dr. Bettelheim presented a series of slides showing the pageantry and drama that are involved in representations of the devil in Cuba. In the process, she drew a parallel to the rara described by Largey.

In summary of the discussion, Nettleford noted that there are always changes within music as it develops, and scholars need to discuss how changes enter the mainstream.

On the second day, the two Rockefeller Fellows gave presentations on their research: Dr. Cyrille on French contredanse and quadrille and Dr. Bilby on junkanoo/jonkonnu traditions.

Summit on Researching Music in the Circum-Caribbean

Caribbean people, keynote speaker Nettleford declared, live together rather than side-by-side—"part-Asian, part-French, part-English, part-Indian but totally Caribbean.” An entertaining and outspoken personality, he admonished earlier speaker Senator Shawn-Michael Malone to encourage quadrille dancing for the people themselves not for tourists.

A panel discussion following the keynote address featured Bradley Christian of the V.I. Cultural Heritage Institute, Dr. Cyrille, and St. Croix historian Dimitri Copemann. Christian explained the dominance of the floormaster who calls the steps for the dancers (or floormistress, in the case of Helen Joseph and Lucille Roberts) and noted that the St. Croix quadrille, derived from the French, is faster than the St. Thomas version, which is more stately and derived from the Germans. Cyrille observed that practically every Caribbean island dances quadrille but that every country has re-created it. Copemann outlined the V.I. history of quadrille, which was at its peak from 1900 to 1950.

The evening then became a demonstration of quadrille. Chairs seating a capacity crowd at the University of the Virgin Islands’ cafetorium were pushed back, creating a dance floor for floormaster Christian and the St. Croix Heritage Dancers. Senator Malone joined the group for the entire session, perhaps proving to Nettleford that he is well able to dance for himself and not for tourists.

Rockefeller Fellow Dr. Kenneth Bilby Lectures on Jonkonnu

On June 3, 2004, CBMR Rockefeller Fellow Dr. Kenneth Bilby, who was in residence at the Adams Institute during January-June 2004, gave a lecture titled "Sounding out John Canoe: Seeking Spiritual Connections in Caribbean Festival Arts” at the St. John School of the Arts. Dr. Bilby—an author, anthropologist, and ethnomusicologist—had been conducting research on John Canoe (junkanoo or jonkonnu) in the Bahamas, Jamaica, and Belize. During his lecture, he stressed the common threads in festivals throughout the Caribbean, including the three Virgin Islands festivals, showed slides, and demonstrated the common rhythmic cell used in live performance at jonkonnu festivals. The slides showed commonalities in masque of early jonkonnu—such as large headdresses shaped like houses or like a cowhead with two-foot horns—in all three of the locales examined by Bilby.

Following the lecture, a Summit of Tradition Bearers was held featuring five St. John musicians (see article on page 6).

The lecture and Summit were supported in part with funding from the V.I. Council on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Rockefeller Foundation. The premises and program planning were provided by the St. John School of the Arts.
Jonkonnu (continued from 5)

they offer resounding confirmation of what many in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean have intuitively grasped: both Jonkonnu and Buru, despite their “secular” appearance in the present, spring from deep spiritual roots. They also remind us that the process of creolization that produced new cultural forms throughout the Caribbean must not be equated with Europeanization or deculturation; for whatever might be suggested by their surface features (some of which, like the Yuletide holiday itself, are clearly traceable to Europe), these older varieties of Jonkonnu and Buru remain fundamentally and inarguably African, not only in sound and movement style but also in spiritual orientation and meaning. By listening to those in Jamaica who have continued to celebrate Christmas with the ancestors, we can better understand the true spirit of Jonkonnu and related festivities.

Teaching the Music of Alton Adams

BY KIRSTEN PENNER KIENBERGER

IN MARCH OF 2003, two presentations of Alton Augustus Adams’ biography and marches were given. The first was sponsored by Dr. Lorna Young-Wright at the University of the Virgin Islands, St. Thomas Campus, with the assistance of Professor Austin Venzen and members of the UVI Concert Band. The second was held at the California Music Educator’s Association (CMEA) Professional Development Conference at the Pasadena Convention Center, with Dr. Anthony Mazzaferro and the Claremont Symphonic Winds. And, thanks to the children’s biography of Adams by Dr. Linda Benjamin, the outstanding research of Dr. Mark Clague, the support and encouragement from the staff at AMRI and the Center for Black Music Research, and interviews with Alton Adams Jr., much of Adams’ history is now available to the interested public.

I first became interested in the Adams story seven years ago as a new resident of the Virgin Islands. Before moving to St. Thomas, I taught high school instrumental music in northern California public schools for eleven years. I was responsible for a music survey class and the instrumental performing groups—concert band, jazz band, orchestra, and marching band. For three years at Los Altos High School in Silicon Valley and for five years at Concord High School in the Mt. Diablo Unified School District, I also taught one quarter of Black Music History, which included a study of ragtime, Ma Rainey, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, W. C. Handy, and other notable African-American musicians.

In California, the first quarter of the year in many instrumental music programs is often dedicated to preparing for band reviews, where students march in parades and perform field shows. Each year, band directors search for a “new” march. Had I known about him, I would have included Adams in my curriculum and would have been pleased to perform his marches with my bands. It is easy to look at Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington and place them in the realm of one genre while assuming that John Philip Sousa stands for all of the concert band marches. Obviously, this is greatly overgeneralized, but it would have been eye opening and informative to place Adams’ stunning Navy photo alongside Sousa’s.

In June of 2002, Dr. Lawrence Benjamin suggested that I attend the session about Alton Adams that was offered (continued on 10)
Teaching the Music (continued from 9)

as a part of the “Documenting Living Treasures” workshop that was sponsored by the Center for Black Music Research and held at the VI Cultural Heritage Institute. That session centered on an article by Mark Clague titled “Instruments of Identity: Alton Augustus Adams Sr., the Navy Band of the Virgin Islands, and the Sounds of Social Change”; it provided me with biographical and historical information regarding Adams’ musical career. The biographical content was presented chronologically, with pertinent correspondence and performance of the marches inserted to illuminate the history. Workshop instructor Dr. Johann Buis of CBMR commented in the lecture that if Adams’ history had been more widely recognized, he would likely be as prominent as James Reese Europe—a musician to whom, with his orchestra, I had devoted a week in my high school curriculum.

As an educator and band devotee, I found it thrilling and at times heartbreaking to read the personal correspondence that Adams received. The correspondence from J. P. Sousa, E. F. Goldman, W. C. Handy, Vander Cook, and others is very interesting and was a major component in the presentations held in March. It is remarkable to hear Adams through his own voice, especially when he responds to E. F. Goldman regarding being blackballed by the southern-led faction of the American Bandmasters Association (ABA). The personal correspondence from Goldman, Handy, and Virgin Islands’ Governor Oman offer the reader insightful glimpses to the warm relationships and high regard that Adams enjoyed.

I wanted to spread the word to music educators regarding Adams’ place in history as the first black Navy bandmaster and composer and to share the correspondence and history pertaining to his marches. I decided to have an interactive presentation at the CMEA Conference. I began the session by asking the attendees which of them had served in the Navy or the military. Who would like to be governor of the Virgin Islands? ... John Philip Sousa? ... W. C. Handy? ... As the educators responded, I passed out letters from Governor Oman, Sousa, Handy, and military personnel to volunteers and asked them to serve as the voice of their letter’s author. This allowed the volunteers to be involved in teaching the session about Adams. It greatly enhanced the session to hear the variety of voices reading the letters, and it was especially poignant when Adams’ grandson read his grandfather’s response to Goldman regarding the ABA.

The response from California has been positive, with a number of requests from college students and educators for more information and for copies of his music. I was personally encouraged by the official opening and ribbon-cutting ceremonies of the Adams Music Research Institute in 2002 on St. Thomas and am indebted to all who have supported my interest in this topic. I hope to offer this presentation again in the Virgin Islands; this time, I will recruit local voices to read the correspondence and will add Professor Venzen’s new arrangement of “Childhood Merriment,” to be played by the UVI Concert Band. I hope to partner with several other university or community bands and present it at future state and educator conferences. I feel that there is great potential to continue to impart Adams’ history and music to music educators in the United States and the West Indies.

References

“Tra-la-la-la-la-la” (continued from 12)

collection "Virgin Islands Folk Songs, compiled by the late Dr. Hugo Owen Bornn. This publication, which was especially approved by the Bornn family to be used by elementary school teachers in Virgin Islands schools, gives a general idea of the beautiful, simple philosophy inherent in the music. Every song has a moral value to teach, or a warning to give, whether it is "Trouble tree don't bear no
blossom,” “No’body’s business but meh own,” or “Don’t go, Princie, don’t go, don’t cross the ocean!” Many of the songs include an instrumental accompaniment notation for percussion instruments such as claves, maracas/gourds, guiros, bongos/congas, and triangle. Although many may argue that the folk songs were bastardized to some degree and cleaned up in this collection, it must be remembered that the purpose of the collection was to get the songs in the schools so that they would not be lost for generations to come.

Of course, we cannot discuss this collection without referring to a collection of Virgin Islands Folk Songs by Wilbur “Bill” LaMotta, originally published in 1987 and republished in 1990 for VI. schools through a special request of the State Office of Arts and Culture in the Department of Education. The collection is important because it provides written musical access to seventeen folk songs and several quelbe musical arrangements. Protest songs, such as “The Fire-bu’n Song” (which we also know as “Queen Mary”) and “LaBega Carousel” (which was usually the closing theme at dances long ago) are included in this collection. Furthermore, the collection includes musical arrangements of and a discussion about scratch band, as well as the Christmas folk songs “The Guavaberry Song” and “Mama Bake Yo’ Johnny Cake.” The collection provides historical descriptions and the musical nuances so necessary in understanding the local selections.

The “scratchy, scratchy” sound, as the people here say, came into use with the emergence of the all-important scratch band, a traditional music form that is uniquely representative of Virgin Islands music. Through the years, Jamsie and the Hot Shots, Archie Thomas and his group, Frett and the Merrymakers, Edgie and Stanley and the Ten Sleepless Knights, as well as recent new groups have made this music form popular and enjoyable!

The early instruments used in this music have changed through the years; culture is not static but is dynamic and constantly changing and evolving. So we may not have the original sound of the ass-pipe, since the material now being used in this instrument is PVC piping. Similarly, the music sound created by the wash-pan or washtub bass was later played by the bass guitar.

Regardless of the change in instruments, the sound can still move islanders into a shuffle, gyrating hip movements, a quadrille dance step or two, and continuing dance forms—even the bamboula. But these dance forms could not be performed without the specific music.

Lois Hassell-Habtes is the Assistant Principal of the Bertha C. Boschulte Middle School and the Musical Director of the Caribbean Chorale. She serves as Secretary for the St. Thomas Historical Trust and as an Advisory Member for AMRI. Hassell-Habtes continues to preserve and present local history and culture through song and traditional Virgin Islands storytelling.

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**Voices**

The Voices column welcomes submissions of 50 to 200 words that share news and commentary related to the topics and locations addressed by this newsletter—Editor

**Alton Adams** was long a legend when I interviewed him for an article in Pride Magazine that ran in the October 1985 issue. He was already 95, but still spry and opinionated. The interview details are sketchy nearly 19 years after the interview, but I best remember his blue eyes. I was already in love with history and was most impressed with his memorabilia collection and his old house.

As I read the story I wrote about him, I see that he told me he was once a reporter too. I’m sure we must have chuckled over that.

I’ve interviewed a lot of people in my career as a reporter, but I feel honored to have met and written about people such as Alton Adams.

Lynda Lohr
St. John
Lois's Notes

BY DR. LOIS HASSELL-HABIES

"Tra-la-la-la-la-la"
Music in the U.S. Virgin Islands

Music in the U.S. Virgin Islands is very near and dear to Virgin Islanders. It seems like it will always be that way, because music is always a part of any and every celebration or occasion.

They say from way back that when the drumming began, the “people dem” knew that a message was being sent through the hills and villages to someone. In those days, it was a means of communication. The rhythms used in those drum messages, coupled with the sing-song voices of the people, later became cariso: a musical and melodic form of Virgin Islands music whereby a story or message is told and carried across hills and into the villages and neighborhoods. Cariso in the Virgin Islands was made known and popularized through the untiring efforts of tradition bearer Leona Watson, and through her vigilant crusade, we have come to know our “history in song.” Cariso songs that she performs, such as “Queen Mary” and “Peter von Scholten,” ruthlessly bring us to our senses as a people and make us aware of the real heroes and heroines, leaders and murderers.

From a very young age, Virgin Islands children are involved in our music and its traditions. The same songs that we sang as we played, and that we hear the little ones sing and play today, grounded us within that particular neighborhood, reminding us of friendships, fun times, and brotherly love. We may not remember a single verse, but we can all sing the “Tra-la-la-la-la” from “Brown Girl in the Ring,” just as we can sing the refrain to “Soldier Crab”—“soldier crab don’t you bite.”

An important part of all Virgin Islands music, whether played in the yard or performed in a dance hall, is the instrumentation accompanying it. The above children’s folk songs are included in the (continued on 10)

The 2004–05 Rockefeller Fellows

Dr. Timothy Rommen was in residence at AMRI from September 2004 to January 2005. He holds a Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology from the University of Chicago and is Assistant Professor of Music at the University of Pennsylvania. During this year with AMRI and the CBMR, Dr. Rommen is working on a project titled “Popular Music and the Ethics of Style in the Circum-Caribbean,” in which he examines rock/alternative music in Trinidad, junkanoo in the Bahamas, and reggae in Barbados with a view toward the question of how the ethical dimensions of performance and reception can reveal information about the extent to which style participates in local discourses of identity.

During January–May 2005, Dr. Rebecca Sager will be in residence at AMRI. She holds a Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology and is an independent scholar who has undertaken collaborative research projects to explore new theories and research methodologies for studying rhythm and rhythmic synchronization. This year, Dr. Sager is researching “How Rhythm and Motion Power Identity in Caribbean Dance.” Her project focuses on how the several dancers perceive rhythms in Haitian konpa, Dominican merengue, and zouk in the French Antilles and how they synchronize their movements to the music and to each other.