The roots of Caribbean music

Caribbean music, like its people, is rich in its diversity of forms and rhythms, which may account for its great popularity. To fully understand the appeal of this music one has only to consider its origins.

The original inhabitants of the region, the Caribs made music by singing accompanied by calabash (gourd) rattles (a possible forerunner of today's maracas.) These songs may still be heard today in Dominica and in Belize, the country to which the Black Caribs were subsequently deported. They consisted of melodies of a narrow range of notes sung in a rather tense voice.

When a cargo of male slaves became shipwrecked off the coast of St. Vincent, the survivors made it to shore, engaged the Caribs in battle, triumphed, slaughtered the males and with the females began the new race, as it were, the Black Caribs. This brought about a fusion of African rhythms and Amerinidian song.

Like these slaves, most of the slaves brought to the Caribbean were from West Africa, a region well known for its rich and varied culture. These Africans brought with them their polyrhythms and the 'call and response' musical form. They also brought with them an 'attitude' that anything could be a musical instrument. This attitude had been pivotal in the development of new musical instruments throughout the world. (Africa has given the guitar, horns flutes etc.) In the Caribbean this attitude led to the birth in Trinidad and Tobago of the steelpan.

From the Europeans, who came mostly from the Netherlands, Great Britain, France, Spain and Portugal came many musical traditions especially the idea of a dominant melody and harmony, an element also common to African music.

The melodic patterns of Northwest European folk music were transmitted through the church. From Spain and Portugal came important rhythmic structures which linked them to those of Africa.

When slavery was no longer 'politically correct' and definitely no longer economically viable East Indians were introduced as indentured labourers, primarily in Trinidad and Guyana. The East Indians brought with them their lively musical traditions. Their rhythms soon became mixed, especially in Trinidad in the tassa drumming of the Islamic Hosein festival. Currently Hindu percussion instruments and rhythms have regained prominence since they have been incorporated into the calypso in the creation of soca and chutney.

Although they may not be aware of the evolution from mento through ska, rocksteady and rockers to the current dub craze, everyone has heard of reggae. Similarly everyone is familiar with the Caribbean's oldest established musical form: calypso and its many variations. How ever there are other forms that deserve attention.

For those who have ventures to ballroom dance classes names like mambo, cha cha cha would be quite familiar. Also, they know of the merengue, the original music of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which has become a major part of the Caribbean and Latin American music scene. In the same vein one can mention salsa and cumbia.

Another form, and this one has a distinct French flavour, is zouk. Zouk is the roots-music of Guadeloupe and Martinique and also of St. Lucia and Dominica, where it battles for prominence with the local cadence and the two giants: reggae and calypso.

This list can go on and on, but the point has been made. Caribbean music is rich varied and vibrant. What Caribbean music is today and the sense of identity it embodies is best illustrated in the following point-summary taken from the book *Caribbean Popular Culture* edited by John A. Lent:

1. Music rarely goes without singing, cannot go without dancing.

2. For a type of music to be 'hot' it has to be loud and intense.

3. The popularity of a musical genre is largely dependent on the way the music incites people to participate, and the more participants, the more successful the participation is;

4. Musical performances are conceived as public entertainments and hence have to be spectacular, colorful, and well timed;

5. Knowledge of the music of other groups and peoples is part of West Indian traditions, and versatility is highly valued;

6. A great sense of rhythmic timing, a convincing interpretation, and controlled rhythmic and melodic improvisation are associated with good and knowledgeable musicians.

This is the world to which you are invited on March 19, in the SUB Cafeteria. Enter and be captivated!

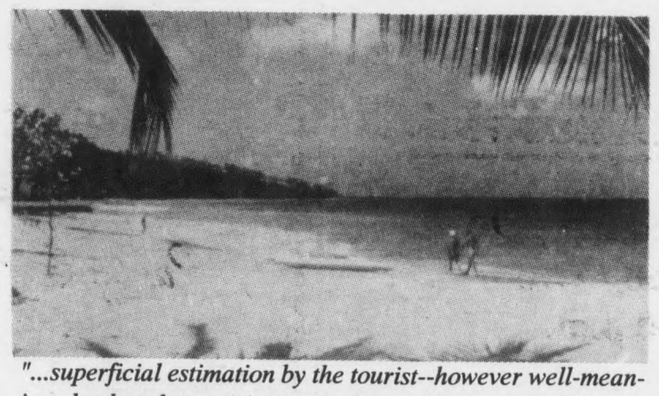
The Caribbean perspective

The Caribbean is one of the least understood of the regions foreign to but influenced by North America. Geographical proximity allows for ease of association and quickness of judgement; cultural complexity, historical differences and economic inequality create and maintain a divide that is not easily bridged. Often, North American and European judgement of the Caribbean rests upon the two-week tour; this superficial estimation by the tourist--however well-meaning--leads only to misinterpretation and resentment. Academic voyeurism is no different, and the judgement is underscored often by condescension, arrogance and a dreadful oversimplification.

In fact, North American and European academics dictate to us who we are, what we are and when we came into being. Guyana, Venezuala and Belize are separated from Jamaica, say because of carthographic simplicity; linguistic, historic, cultural, social and political ties are blissfully ignored. In historical overviews of the region, the genocide of the Arawak and Carib peoples are glossed over or ignored. Writers and scholars that stress our cultural and historical ties to Africa, India and China are categorized as substandard, misguided radicals who, in betraying the Empire, betray themselves. Thus, writers who stress the heterogeneity of the region are marginalized; or they are measured and condemned by inadequate conventional yardsticks; worse, they are ignored.

Caribbeans are seen for the most part as carefree, rum-drinking, ganja-smoking, dark-skinned bodies that gracefully run along sandy white beaches, sweating poetically. Or, we are seen as hopelessly poor, hopelessly divided-the economic and cultural ghetto that attaches itself to the First-World socio-economic and cultural infrastructure: the Caribbean is to Canada and the United States as Harlem is to New York. The idolatry of absolutes.

Over the last fifteen years or so at UNB, these impressions have been challenged by professors from the Caribbean. Professor Emeritus Louis Seheult has been one of the pillars of UNB's Forestry Department. Dr. Russell McNeilly has taught in the Faculty of Education since 1966 and had contributed to the multicultural society of Fredericton. Dr. Joseph McKenzie has taught Biology since 1967. Dr. Anthony Boxill has taught English since 1966 and has supervised many theses on Commonwealth literature. Several students



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from the Caribbean and Africa have been attracted to UNB because of Dr. Boxill's presence. Similarly, Professor Dexter Noel has taught Spanish at UNB since 1969. He is one of the founding members of the Caribbean Circle, and remains an active participant in Caribbean events. Most recently, Dr. Joy Mighty has joined the ranks; she has been teaching in Business Administration since 1992. Dr. Maurice Holder has taught in the French Department since 1989 at STU and is now lecturing at UNB. Mrs. Kay Nandlall, the International Student Advisor of UNB/STU has made and continues to make a major contribution to the quality of student life.

The presence of these scholars and administrators on these campuses has wide-ranging implications for the two academic communitie. Not only do they share their various areas of academic expertise, but they also lend new perspectives on traditional themes and texts. They participate in and enrich the social life of these campuses. It is imperative that their contributions be maximized for the good of the students, especially. Professor Dexter Noel will be the feature speaker at this year's Caribbean Nite.

Since 1972, the Caribbean Circle of UNB and STU has done much to advance an understanding of the Caribean and its people. The Circle draws its membership primarily from Caribbean students attending the two universities. However, faculty members and Caribbean people from the wider society have also contributed to the Circle. Over the past two decades, the organization has sponsored seminars, workshops, lectures, and various social events that have sought to provide the STU, UNB and Fredericton communities with a more penetrating look into Caribbean life and letters. Over the years, Fredericton has been treated to the song, dance and food of the region during Caribbean Night.

These events together show that the Caribbean is a place of easy laughter that is not without thick political tension. We live in a region wrought from the hurt of history, but we are people who celebrate our survival.

We have inherited and have produced those who would confound our hopes and futures, but we have labored forth poets that sing our dreams into being.

We are intimate with the facts of catastrophe as we are with the rhythms of Reggae and Calypso, songs of struggle and triumph. We Caribbeans are children of the deracinated, transplanted and enslaved who share with others the miraculous roots of community beyond fixed or static boundaries.

It is therefore in this spirit of eclectic transcendence that the entire Caribbean community invites one and all to our Caribbean Nite 1994 in the SUB cafeteria, on Saturday, March 19 starting at 7:00pm. Come celebrate with us!

Contributed by the Caribbean Circle.