The Popular Music and Entertainment Culture of Barbados

Pathways to Digital Culture

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To my dear wife, Charmaine, and to our son, Christopher-Chars.

Contents

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Introduction

This book provides insight into some aspects of Barbadian music and entertainment culture, and it considers their impact and imprint on the wider society. While there is some attention to historical process and development, this book does not set out to produce a detailed history of the life and times of every artist or music-entertainment phenomenon. If readers of this work do not find their favorite artist gaining extensive attention and critique, this is not the work's objective. This book highlights some of the major and not-so-major phenomena and artists, some of whom it uses as examples and case studies in order to construct an overall perspective of Barbadian music culture. An encyclopedia of Barbados' music and entertainment sector might do justice to naming and cataloging the thousands of persons who have made significant contributions to the nation over the decades. But this is not that kind of work.

This book documents, analyzes and begins to theorize about Barbadian popular culture. Given the continued absence of substantial academic writing on the popular culture of Barbados, this work attempts to cover a wide range of topics in an effort to help provide a critical base for itself and for future discussions on Barbados' music and entertainment sector. Admittedly, the post-1970 period comes in for more substantial discussion than the earlier years. The book's concern with the evolution of sound and technology, and the explosion of digital and virtual culture in particular, means that the post-1990 period receives extended focus.

The emphasis that the book places on the pre- and post-2000 era is intended to signify a point of transformation within the culture of Barbados. The year 2000 marked a significant moment worldwide, as in the Caribbean. It signaled the start of a new century—a new dispensation, if you will. There was not a break or definitive fracture in the body social of Barbados at the

very moment when the old century gave way to the new, but it could be suggested that in those years leading up to and those years following the turn of the century, Barbadian (and by extension Caribbean) culture underwent some significant adjustments. In particular, the entrenchment of digital and virtual culture saw the emergence of a new set of cultural and technological practices within popular entertainment culture and also within the wider society.

Broadly conceived, the work is divided into four parts that represent four phases of development in Barbados' culture. Part one, which includes chapter one, basically covers aspects of pre–twentieth century development. Part two, chapters two and three, covers the early twentieth century up to the 1970s, discussing such music forms as folk song, calypso, and spouge. Part three contains chapters four and five and covers, broadly, the 1980s and 1990s and examines such genres, artists, and phenomena as calypso, soca, gospel, dancehall, world music, interpretations of popular Western styles, Gabby, Eddy Grant, early digital technology, and Crop Over.

Part four, which contains chapter six through ten, looks at the post-2000 period. It argues that world entertainment and popular culture went more fully digital in this new era, and it considers the impact of this technological shift on Barbadian culture. While recognizing that Barbados has traditionally been regarded as one of the most conservative societies in the region, this work argues that the culture has undergone its most marked transformation in this period. This transformation is largely founded on a set of technological implementations. The seeds of this transformation, which were sown over the last two decades of the twentieth century, are first manifested in full bloom in the first decade of the twenty-first century. This book argues that Barbadian culture as traditionally conceived in the past is fading. Influenced by new and emerging communications and music technologies, Barbadian youths as well as players in the entertainment sector are reshaping Barbadian culture. The book provides a discussion of the nature of this technological movement. Among other things, it conducts a close discussion of the use of new technologies like the Internet by older, more mainstream artists, compared to their use by younger, trendier acts. Additionally, it considers how other agencies and interests are using the Internet to fashion and assert control of Barbadian culture, as with the international sensation Rihanna. So the book is about Barbados, but it is also about Barbados' contact with the outside world and, more particularly, with virtual worlds.

The naming of the four parts of the book is a strategic act. Part one, "Acoustic," does not attempt to fix the kinds of activities discussed therein to actual acoustic instrumentation. Rather, the logic of this label is best understood in light of the other sections of the work. The labeling of parts plays with certain truths and notions about sound and its development in Western societies. The mention of acoustic instruments in opposition to other kinds of

instruments might suggest a more forthright, less highly sophisticated or electronically mediated medium of sound transfer. Parts two and three, "Electronic/Analog" and "Electronic/Digital," might suggest a scientific advancement on the previous part. The final part, "Digital/Virtual," suggests an even more advanced development. The affixing of these part names to different historical periods is intended to capture some sense of the dominant sound-production mediums and technologies in vogue over the period treated therein. If, however, one examines the value system locked up in the sequential and "progressive" labeling used in this book, it could be argued that the evolution of sound is much more complex. There is a much more complex overlap. Acoustic instruments are still in vogue in the digital dispensation, for instance, and digital technology has craved for a way of simulating analog and acoustic instruments. It is this complex reality that the book also points out and discusses. Rather than have readers see the different sections as discrete, it wants to force readers to contemplate the interconnectedness of the various periods, sectors, artists, genres, instruments, and technologies that it treats. Hence, for example, the book presents and re-presents the artist Gabby as straddling a number of compartments.

In the final analysis, this book offers a critical perspective on the development of Barbadian music and entertainment culture. It carries out its chosen task by route of several pathways that lead to an opening up of Barbadian digital culture in the twenty-first century.

Part One

Acoustic

Chapter One

Tuk

FROM EARLY STRAINS

It is well-known that the European powers who seized authority and control over the original inhabitants of the Caribbean and then later shipped Africans into the region sought to maintain control by formal and informal means. In Barbados, slave laws were put in place as early as 1660 in an attempt to help govern Africans on the island and to curb aspects of their expressive culture. Subsequent amendments and specifications were added to the original decrees in 1688, strictly warning Africans not to "beat drums, blow horns, or use loud instruments."[1]

Although there were concerted attempts to uphold these laws and keep censorship intact, William Dickson, a British citizen residing in Barbados around 1788, while making reference to the banning of drums, reveals that the colonialist project had not reaped the kind of unmitigated success that the lawmakers would have imagined. Dickson reports how the "black musicians . . . have substituted in its place, a common earthen jar, on beating the aperture of which, with the extended palms of their hands, it emits a hollow sound, resembling the more animating note of the drum."[2] This is but one example of the ways in which slaves were able to circumnavigate the legal and formal prohibitions that governed their society. There is other evidence in the literature to suggest that Barbadian slaves, like their brothers and sisters elsewhere in the region and the Americas, were able to maintain some contact with aspects of their traditional culture. The archaeologists Jerome Handler and Charlotte Frisbie[3] have argued that music played a central function in slave society. (J.W. Orderson's novel *Creoleana* also bears this out.[4]) In addition, the 1971–1973 pioneering archaeological research project in Barbados led Handler and his associate Frederick Lange to conclude that

"houses also probably contained, albeit with less frequency, other items which slaves are known to have used or manufactured: such items could have included various types of baskets, fishnets . . . and musical devices like drums, rattles and stringed instruments."[5] A survey of sketches, letters, and travelogues on early Barbadian customs and lifestyle (though the documents are far from being totally reliable historical sources) provides enough evidence to confirm the existence of what must have been active and functioning percussive bands.[6] For example, George Pinckard's writing on African-Barbadian slave practices states that "the instrumental parts of the band consist of a species of drum, a kind of rattle, and the ever-delightful banjar. The first is a long hollow piece of wood, with a dried sheep-skin tied over the end; the second is a calabash containing a number of small stones fixed to a short stick which serves as the handle."[7] These predominantly percussive bands, usually of about four members who would come together to play on special occasions, might add to their number on the most grand occasions. These occasions included the annual Crop Over celebrations that marked the end of the reaping of the sugarcane plant, and festive celebrations during the Christmas holiday season.[8] Some commentators on Barbadian, or "Bajan," culture believe such early references are to the traditional percussive band, later to be called the tuk band, that would become a key signifier of Barbadian expressive culture and musical sound.

There is no single, conclusive position concerning the actual origin or the specific date of the emergence of the tuk band. Suffice it to say that most connoisseurs and cultural commentators tend to agree that the tuk band, and tuk music as it came to be classified in the twentieth century, has a history that can be traced back to slave society. Fewer individuals are convinced that its origin is purely African, since the percussive band was shaped in significant ways during slavery, also borrowing influences from European culture and tradition. In *Notes for a Glossary of Words and Phrases of Barbadian Dialect*,[9] the Barbadian literary icon Frank Collymore defines the phenomenon of tuk as "crude musical sounds." This definition carries with it the baggage of cultural stigmatization that has surrounded the tuk band and its music for centuries. Early commentators on tuk, like Pinckard above, also described its unpolished, expressive sound, though some could not help but call attention to its infectious qualities.

It is reasonable to assume that the major tributary of what would become known as the tuk phenomenon came across the Atlantic when the slaves were shipped from Africa into the region. It is during the early and ensuing decades on the plantation, when the expressive culture of the slaves came into contact with formal cultural institutions such as the British marching band, that tuk aesthetics began to more fully take shape, as African-Barbadians absorbed other forms for the sake of their own survival. It is this process of active appropriation and accommodation that marks tuk as more

than a musical phenomenon. Tuk culture is therefore defined in its early manifestation as having to do with survival, adaptation, and dynamic negotiation. Tuk therefore symbolizes the continuation of African musical expression in the "New World," but it also represents the ability of a people to find creative ways to make sense of their changing circumstances.

Much of the early data on performance techniques, musical structures, and rhythm tended to be ethnocentric. Many of the European observers of the music made reference to its strangeness or, rather, its difference from European musical forms. It is this difference that calls attention to the heavy African influence within the early strains of tuk music—the most significant indigenous rhythm of Barbados. (The other major rhythm is spouge, which effectively emerged in the 1970s.) To Pinckard, the rhythms of the slaves' music seemed like "noisy sounds" that required "only a slight aid from fancy to transport [the listener] to the savage wilds of Africa."[10] Furthermore, where such ethnographic data refer to the presence of polyrhythms, call-and-response structures, and intricate patterns, there are sufficient grounds for making the connection between that music and the music of tuk.

After emancipation in 1834, the tuk band and tuk music received substantial support and encouragement through the formation of another institution, the friendly society called the landship. The landship's origin is placed in the 1860s. After emancipation, some working-class Barbadians found a way of banding together to express themselves through the landship masquerade. (Landship crews also came together to pool their financial resources and to create an institution to support its members in times of need. The revolving funds scheme, also called a "meeting turn" or "susu," ensured that members of the landship both contributed to and benefitted from the pooling of funds.)

The landship is perhaps more widely known for its masquerade. The association got its name from the fact that its members attired themselves in maritime garb. They performed marching and other drills under the command of their leader. It is widely believed that the landship members were inspired by observing the antics of British sailing crews. But the landship's drills and antics are in many cases very far removed from the practices of actual naval personnel. It is clear that the landship members used the trappings of naval culture to mask their own expressive activity, as when they danced and paraded to the music of the tuk band, which served as the engine of the landship for many decades. Much in the same way that African-Barbadians had used the British marching band as a foil for their formation and perpetuation of African movement and music, the landship also drew from and overturned many of the conventions of British naval culture.[11] The tuk band became a vital component and affiliate of the landship movement. The tuk band provided the music for the landship during performance. Tuk music of varying pace and style created a dynamic sound track for the dramatic spectacle of the landship corps. The band's flexibility was put to effec-

tive use, allowing the landship to parade and perform their routines at a slow pace. But, like the band, the landship was at its best when the ship's engine was at full steam, when the beat of the tuk band pounded at quicker tempos. The band and the ship were therefore complementary outfits. Together they offered mutual support, but they also created even greater interest and spectacle when they performed in public together, especially at special events and social gatherings.

As in years gone by, audiences today are still captivated by the performance techniques of the landship and the tuk band. Much of this spectacle has to do with the expressiveness of both groups. They are at their best and most expressive in the up-tempo mode. When the rhythms are very fast there is greater improvisation by both band and landship. On occasion there is a hint of entrancement, when the band and performers give in to the energy of the moment. At these times the tuk band and landship are closest to the kind of spirit possession associated with some African Caribbean religions. Wayne "Poonka" Willock, a leading tuk player, makes the point that the tuk band is "the engine of the boat, landship."[12] This reference to the engine calls to mind Kamau Brathwaite's observation about African survivals in Western worship, and in particular his statement that the god Shango possesses the locomotive in the New World. However, the state of possession associated with the tuk band and the landship does not reach the depth of entrancement associated with some of the other African-Caribbean rituals.

The actual makeup and constitution of the early tuk band is not known, especially given the level of censorship it has had to endure. But it is reasonable to conclude that the form it maintained into the early twentieth century is not far removed from what the band might have looked like in the previous centuries. There were changes in the actual instruments used and in the number and composition of the instruments, but, arguably, there were fewer changes in terms of musical interpretation, rhythm, style, and attitude. In the twentieth century the band became defined by a number of core instruments, namely the bass drum, the snare or kittle drum, the penny-whistle or flute, and a percussive idiophonic instrument, usually a triangle, although according to Willock this can be augmented at times with a second kittle drum, as well as several other percussion instruments.

The tuk band is noted for its extremely rhythmic music and expressive rendition. It is marked by improvisation, spontaneity, and verve. Tuk musicians have over the years made their instruments bear the weight of their experiences. While some of the instruments they played belonged to the culture that tuk players were dragged into, the players made the instruments their own. Given the heavy weight of censorship they had to negotiate, tuk musicians had to adapt to many circumstances; they had to develop the ability to play and perform different styles of music. Their versatility is evidenced in the variety of songs they interpret. In addition to playing and