

THE JAMESIE PROJECT

A Report by Robin Fredey

“As an artist, film & video maker, I am involved in the creative process while exploring, celebrating and documenting distinct cultures. The goal of film and video work is to enrich, enlighten, increase tolerance and decrease fear and tension between cultures. I work collaboratively with members of these individual communities providing a forum to voice their untold stories, personal challenges and compelling triumphs. Social, artistic and political actions are placed within the context of their cultures, exploring the viewer to confront old myths and discover a new perspective.” **ANDREA LELAND**



James Brewster

James Brewster is a vibrant Quelbe musician from St. Croix who is part of a dying breed. In today's fast paced music world of rock, hip hop and rap, Quelbe hardly seems relevant- much less important enough to make a film with it as the centerpiece. But that is exactly what award-winning film maker Andrea Leland has done- and more- in her new documentary “Jamesie, King of Scratch”. The 70 minute documentary will premier on St. Croix some time in February. Other venues for showings are in the works for St. Thomas and St. John for early 2007, as well as opportunities to show in national and international film festivals. Check local listings or the website (www.jamesieproject.com) for specific dates.

The documentary celebrates Quelbe music, the official music of the Virgin Island, and one of its most legendary performers, James Brewster, or “Jamesie.” Quelbe, also known as Scratch Band Music or Quadrille, is an indigenous, grass-roots form of folk music which originated in the U.S. Virgin Islands and has spread to other parts of the Caribbean. A form of oral history, its lyrics are used to immortalize significant historical events, spread “rude” gossip about one's neighbors, and relay the day to day trials and tribulations of life on an island. Scratch bands musicians play homemade instruments made from gourds, squashes and tin cans which one can “scratch up,” along with more contemporary instruments, such as the saxophone, congas and bass guitars.

On Sunday, June 22, 2003, a group of scratch musicians came together on the lawn of the Mon Bijou Great House, a former plantation house, to play, eat and reminisce. It is a Crucian tradition. The grand old limestone house sits next to the remains of a crumbling sugar mill. In addition to Jamesie, there were several local scratch musicians on hand. These included greats such as Blinky McIntosh and King Derby and a guest of honor, George Rawlins, one of the oldest scratch musicians still playing. A great moment of filming that day occurred when most of the band took a break and Jamesie, Derby and George played a few old scratch tunes in the traditional acoustic style. This unique sound is rarely heard anymore, so everyone present stopped and listened.

The documentary is anchored by performances by Jamesie and the All Stars, such as the one at the Great House, in a local nightclub, or performing at the St. Croix Agricultural Fair. These performances are interspersed with golden moments of interaction between Jamesie and his fellow musicians and friends. Through



Andrea Leland and Henrik Lockhart filming at a Chicago World Music Festival



G. Rawlings, Derby and Jamesie

these performances and conversations, the viewer will come to understand the way in which scratch music has traditionally been integrated into all aspects of Crucian life.

Beginning in 2003, producer Andrea Leland, a part time St. John resident, has worked in collaboration with Jamesie and the All-Star musicians collecting video and audio recordings of live performances and oral histories. Kathleen McManus, from St. Croix, introduced Andrea to Jamesie and was the co-producer for portions of the footage collected on St. Croix. Henrik Lockhart from St. Thomas and WTJX is the associate producer for the project and one of the cameramen. Besides the government grants and private donations, Andrea receive in-kind help from many people, including the Benedict family who own Cottages by the Sea on St. Croix and Don Turnbull, who maintains the Jamesie website. An 8-minute trailer was developed in the fall of 2003 and is now available on the website.

Subsequently, crew members from both the Virgin Islands and Chicago followed Jamesie and the All Stars as they performed at several Midwest music festivals. During the fall of 2005, more intimate footage of Jamesie was collected at his home in St. Thomas. Over the summer of 2005, most of the footage was logged and transcribed in Chicago. Editing began in late summer of 2005 and is now complete. Nearly 80 hours of footage has been collected. All unedited footage will be placed in archives somewhere in the Virgin Islands and stateside. The public will have access to this unedited footage for scholarly research and for historical preservation and reference.

The documentary provides the world and maybe more importantly, the people of the Virgin Islands, an entertaining and intimate glimpse of the culture of the Virgin Islands. Ms. Leland has certainly accomplished her goals as a filmmaker in this project by preserving the spirit of a way of life, conveying the artistic message of the subject and enlightening her audience with the music of James Brewster and the other Quelbe musicians of the Virgin Islands. It is the hope of Ms. Leland that the documentary become an important reference material for schools and educational programs in the Virgin Islands and elsewhere. Working as an independent film maker, Ms. Leland has funded this project through grants from the V.I. Humanities Council, VICA, the Illinois Humanities Council and through donations collected through the St. Croix Foundation. For more information visit www.jamesieproject.com. Tax deductible donations can be sent to: St. Croix Foundation, PO Box 1128, Christensted, St. Croix 00821 – please indicate for the “Jamesie Project”. Copies of the documentary will soon be available at www.andrealeland.com.