

JAMSIE BREWSTER

An Expanded Excerpt from the "Leisure" column by Peter Des Jardins in the St. Croix Avis Newspaper

St. Croix / U.S. Virgin Islands

Jamesie Brewster's quelbe music prevents seasickness. Where the music goes, your belly will follow. As the boat dances across the sea, just keep dancing on the rocking deck, and all will be well.

I first learned this simple remedy on the ferry from St. Croix to the St. Thomas Carnival in '79. I was new to the Virgin Islands, and feared the 46-mile journey in rough seas. The crowded boat was filled with West Indians headed for the big bacchanal. Everyone was well supplied with rum and beer. It was a voyage of constant laughter and movement. Jamesie and the Happy 7 played on the stern, with a background of whitecaps in the moonlight. An altruistic crew spent the whole trip catching the speakers when they toppled, dancing like Disney characters brought to life by music. My landlubber metabolism was charmed as well. I never even had a queasy stomach. After a four-hour journey, I was still dancing as we pulled into the harbor of Charlotte Amalie.

That was twenty-five years ago. Jamesie Brewster is still alive and well, and recognized as a living master of quelbe. What is quelbe? It is a true, hybrid, Afro-Caribbean folk tradition of the Virgin Islands. Take the quadrille, the European dance craze that started in the mid-1700's in France and migrated to the new world by the mid-1800's. Add African percussion instruments, including banjos, gourds, triangles, and even a kitchen sink if it has good tone. Mix well for the next hundred and fifty years, along with the African spirit that led slaves to sing gossip in the streets (it is said that a good song could make it's way from Christiansted to Frederiksted, a distance of over 18 miles, within 48 hours) and you have the core of quelbe music.

Tradition is one thing. Jamesie Brewster is something else. With a Caribbean version of the simplistic originality that is found in good blues music, Jamesie has documented traditional life in the Virgin Islands. While America has invaded the islands with M-TV, housing projects and hip hop style, he writes songs about a simple life of raising goats and catching fish. His biggest hit over the years, "Wash Yo Tail Light," reminds all "When yo wake up in de mornin', don't mind yo neighbors business." It's good advice to all, set to a simple but infectious rhythm that invades airwaves throughout the Caribbean.

Jamesie himself is getting older. He still stands straight and sings out in a strong, clear voice that comes from the past. He plays guitar with a steady rhythm, while the rest of the band falls into place. Even without dancers, he seems surrounded by ladies in long madras skirts, pacing out traditional steps with a sophisticated hip shake in every step.

This is not tourist music. Leave your pre-conceptions behind. Jamesie Brewster and the All Stars present unique music from a small corner of the Caribbean. They keep it alive. The music will make you smile in a way that people used to smile in old photographs of the Caribbean. It's almost like taking a vacation from the twenty first century to a corner of the Virgin Islands a hundred years in the past. If you dance a little, it's guaranteed to prevent seasickness as well.