

Video Review

Jamesie: King of Scratch. Producer/Director: Andrea Leland. DVD; 70 minutes; Andrea E. Leland Productions, A Nine Morning Production; 2006. www.jamesieproject.com, New Day Films, Inc. www.newday.com.

“Jamesie: King of the Scratch” is a visual ethnography that contextualizes scratch band music, also called *fungi* or *quelbe*, the popular social commentary song form of the Virgin Islands (V.I.). Because it is the most extensive documentation of the genre and its role in local culture to date, it is essential to the maintenance and preservation of V.I. folk music. Filmmaker Andrea Leland examines the significance of scratch band music through the artistry and life of James Brewster, through Crucian eyes, that is, as interpreted by the artist, members of his band, and other natives of St. Croix. At seven-nine years of age, Brewster (affectionately called “Jamesie”) is the oldest living advocate and performer of the music.

My desire to review the film and clarify differences in nomenclature in light of the paucity of the scholarly publications on the music, resulted in personal communication with the following Virgin Island cultural activists: Dmitri “Pikey” Copemenn, a school teacher and *quelbe* saxophonist featured in the film, Yvette Finch, Cultural Specialist for the Virgin Island Cultural Heritage Institute, and Myron Jackson, Director for the Virgin Island State Historic Preservation Office. Jackson states that though the terms scratch band, *fungi*, and *quelbe* are used interchangeably, the former is heard most often in St. Thomas, “*fungi*” in Tortola and other British Virgin Islands, and “*quelbe*” in St. Croix. The latter is commonly employed when the music is performed by a vocalist with instrumental accompaniment as opposed to being played solely by instruments (Jackson 2007). *Quelbe*, designated the official music of the U.S. Virgin Islands by the legislature in 2003, is derived from the *cariso*, an older African-derived responsorial song form. Today, *quelbe* symbolizes an amalgamation of melodic and harmonic elements of the European quadrille, syncopated rhythms introduced by enslaved Africans, and texts descriptive of past communal and historical events. Dmitri Copemann (2007) remembers that “*quelbe*” was the name of a type of local pastry tart. He also cites the first documented use of the term “*quelby*” in an article by a non-native writer during the late 1800s describing a graceful and elegant shawl dance of African origin (Nichols, 1998, 69, 70).

“Fungi” may be used when referring to the music because its unique blend of cultural traditions and standard and homemade instruments bring to mind the mixture of foods needed to create the local dish by the same name. Jamesie and his cousin Sylvester

”Blinky” McIntosh, a saxophonist, expound on a common local explanation for the use of the word “scratch”: an ensemble featuring a variety of instruments “made from scratch” such as the “squash” (a hollow gourd scrapper) and the “ass pipe” (a mouth blown car muffler). However, Copemann (2007) believes that the phrase “made from scratch” was not a part of V.I. vocabulary at that time, and states that musicians today seldom use the terms “scratch” or “scratch band music”. In the documentary, Blinky states that the term was popularized by American tourists in the 1950s to describe the rough percussive sound created when local musicians would rake a metal rod across the notched surface of the “squash”.

Quelbe bands during this era featured a combination of standard and homemade instruments such as the banjo or ukulele, squash, steel (a triangle), flute, congas, and ass pipe. The papaya flute, tambourine, and piccolo are instruments that were occasionally seen in the ensemble years ago, but are no longer employed (Jackson 2007). Instruments such as the banjo constructed from a sardine can, shown during the opening sequence of the film, were usually played by children or when standard instruments could not be obtained (Copemann 2007). Jamesie confirms this as he recalls making his first sardine can banjo as a child after being reprimanded by his father for touching his guitar. Blinky claims responsibility for introducing the saxophone into quadrille bands in the 1960s. The sax quickly replaced the flute as the principle melodic instrument for quadrille. During the 1970s the electric lead and bass guitars and the drum set were employed in the ensembles. Today, bands might also include an electric keyboard.

Leland includes complete performances or excerpts of approximately eighteen quelbe songs. Jamesie and members of his band explain the meanings of most. “Fire In the Water” recalls an incident of a big woman bathing naked in the sea and “Jackass in the Yard” tells the story of a man’s frustration with a stubborn donkey. “Stand up and Gimme de ting from Behind”, about an encounter with a local prostitute, is one of many sexually suggestive songs. The role of quelbe as a repository of local history is emphasized in “Queen Mary Girl,” commentary recalling the burning of the town as a defiant act to attract the attention of the queen. “De Bega Carousel” is a popular protest song against fifteen and twenty cent daily wages for carousel workers.

The first half of the documentary contains archival footage describing the acquisition of the Virgin Islands by the US from Denmark in 1917 for \$25 million and scenes of St. Croix. Band members recall the meager compensation of the early days of scratch music then describe President Truman's visit to the Virgin Islands, a trip that resulted in a very generous monetary gift. They discuss the relationship between scratch band music and the evolution of local dance styles and quadrille. Throughout the film, Leland emphasizes the traditional role of quelbe and scratch, that of providing music at social dances and gatherings, festivals, and fairs. Scenes from the St. Croix Fair include Crucian folk dance, quelbe performances, and preparations of local delicacies and beverages. Because the documentary contains footage of Crucian dance and commentary on the relationship between quelbe and quadrille, scenes of the band performing at a quadrille would have been an interesting addition. Yvette Finch (2007) states that at local quadrilles bands typically accompany European dances such as jigs, waltzes, polka mazurkas, the Seven-step, the Two-step, and the contra dance. Perhaps, Leland does not include such footage because she feels it is beyond the purview and primary objective of the documentary.

The second half of the film features footage of Jamesie in Denmark and in the continental US, participating in the Chicago World Music Festival and the Lotus Festival in Bloomington, Indiana. Though this initially seems to demonstrate an absorption in matters secondary to the documentary, it actually places Jamesie, quelbe, and the Virgin Islands within a broader perspective: one that is both historical and transnational.

Copemann references the introduction of the quadrille to the Virgin Islands by the Danish and the infusion of African rhythms into the genre. During the world music festival, members of a visiting Danish band recall Jamesie's trips to Denmark in 1995 and 2000 and comment on the difficulty classical and jazz musicians had performing the simple rhythmic and harmonic patterns characteristic of quelbe.

Scenes of the flight back to the Virgin Islands and the view of the coastline re-contextualize the music, reminding the viewer that the documentary is really about Jamesie and quelbe in St. Croix. The closing scenes reexamine the significance and maintenance of quelbe with emphasis placed on V.I. youth and the future of the music. Leland returns to the local radio studio where an interview with Jamesie on the meaning of quelbe songs was shown in the first half of the film. Now he responds to questions comparing the use of sexually suggestive lyrics in quelbe to the use of such text in contemporary popular music. In the interview

that follows on the evolution of local music since 1960s, Jamesie blames mass media, specifically television, for the corruption of V.I. youth. Leland concludes with scenes from Virgin Island schools, showing efforts to incorporate *quelbe* and other local genres through participatory activities among elementary children. Though the documentary contains interviews by numerous Crucians, most are by *quelbe* and Danish musicians. Unfortunately, interviews with local or Danish scholars are not included. This would have further validated the significance of the film without detracting from the filmmaker's objective to contextualize *quelbe* while maintaining the film's accessibility to a non-academic audience. A clear distinction between *quelbe* (the song form) and scratch band music is also needed. With the exception of a few unnecessary scenes in Chicago and Bloomington, the pacing of the film is very good. To acquaint the general listener with the Crucian accent, Leland uses text on screen for all *quelbe* songs and for dialogue by Crucians during the first half of the film. Scholars and cultural activists who raise the issues of authenticity and equality in the recognition of regional dialects might question this use of text onscreen. I encountered no problems comprehending the spoken Crucian dialect and I believe onscreen text should only be included when music and singing challenge intelligibility. However, a second observer of the film less acquainted with the rhythmic meter of many Caribbean accents had difficulty understanding the dialogue without the onscreen text. Contact with the filmmaker has revealed that a version exist with text onscreen for songs only. The significance of "Jamesie: King of Scratch" is immediately apparent. In addition to including performances of music seldom heard outside of the Virgin Islands, it visually and aurally contextualizes *quelbe* by examining the role of the music through elder practitioners in the community and through its oldest surviving performer, Jamesie Brewster. Finally, it documents *quelbe* as one the most valuable genres of social commentary of the Anglophone Caribbean. Though the film focuses solely on Jamesie and his music, recordings of *quelbe*/scratch band music are also available by bands such as Blinky and the Roadmasters, Stanley and the Ten Sleepless Knights, and the Bully and the Kafooners (Sheehy 1998, 1970 and Jackson 2007).

References

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