

# FOLKLIFE OF THE U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS: PERSISTENCE AND CREATIVITY

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**D**espite many challenges, folklife is still a creative resource in the lives of many U.S. Virgin Islanders. Virgin Islands' folklife is the legacy of generations who brought cultural traditions from Africa, Europe and elsewhere, adapted those traditions to meet local needs, and combined them with those of other cultures in vibrant and useful new forms. Although unique, the development of traditional culture in the Virgin Islands has been affected by the same historical movements and social practices that have shaped other Caribbean societies. This development can be understood within the history and geography of the Caribbean as a whole.

## THE CARIBBEAN CONTEXT

Most islands in the Caribbean Sea are mountaintops created by great volcanic eruptions along a planetary seam that arches from Florida to South America. These were the lands Columbus first "discovered" and claimed for the Spanish empire when he came to what would later be called the "New World." Preoccupation with gold and other grand riches made subsequent Spanish settlements in the Caribbean merely staging areas for Spain's colonization of the American mainland. This approach to exploiting the new territories left room in the Caribbean for colonization by other European nations.

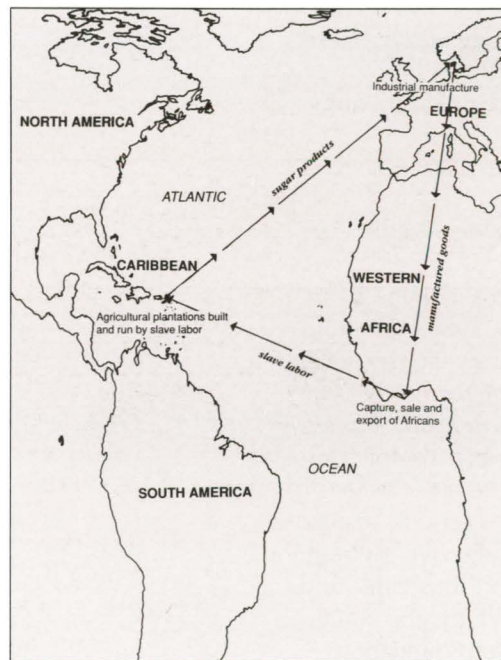
Commercial entrepreneurs working in league with European governments developed the flatter parts of islands into plantations. Indigenous peoples — Caribs, Arawaks, and others — were driven off or enslaved if they did not die of the foreign diseases brought from

Europe. Some islands were almost completely cleared of native vegetation for cultivation of cash crops, transforming them into agricultural production units in a worldwide system of economic exchange. On other islands, enslaved workers used land unsuitable for cash crops as provision grounds, or gardens, for growing food.

An infamous triangular trade linked the Caribbean islands (and later, South and North America) with western Africa and Europe. Manufactured goods from Europe were exchanged by European and African slave traders for people captured in western Africa. Those Africans who survived the passage across the Atlantic chained in ships were sold as slaves, on the island of St. Thomas and elsewhere. The

slave owners who bought them did so with profits made from plantation grown and processed sugar, molasses and rum. These Caribbean products were shipped to Europe to meet the necessities of a newly urbanized labor force. Profits realized in the European sale could purchase trade goods bound again for Africa and the trade in slaves.

The plantation system itself, which combines mini-



*The infamous triangular trade linked different modes of production together in a world system*

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mal cost and maximal control of labor with large scale production of a single crop, was invented by the Portuguese for use in their island possessions off the coast of Africa. In the Caribbean, the slave plantation reached its potential for both profitability and human destructiveness. It was a complex institution, with a diversified and stratified labor force, international financing, and a developed body of management theory.

Enslaved persons defied the practices of slavery by whatever means available. Organized rebellions began to sweep most colonies within a decade after the arrival of the first slave ships. The first insurrection of enslaved African runaways, who came to be called Maroons, took place in 1522 in Santo Domingo against the Spanish. Jamaican Maroons have a long tradition of resistance and have built the longest continuously surviving communities. In the then Danish Virgin Islands, a successful but short-lived revolt on St. John in 1733 permanently stunted plantation slavery on that island. The system was reformed after a revolt in St. Croix in 1848 when slavery was declared illegal by the Danish crown. After that entrepreneurs secured the labor of persons already resident in the Caribbean by means of contracts. These contracts granted workers rights and living standards little better than those obtained during slavery.

Many former slaves did not become contract laborers. Instead, they practiced agricultural and craft skills learned from a variety of African and European sources. The free rural and urban communities they built were developments of social forms that had existed during slavery but outside of and in resistance to it.

Caribbean island-born or creole cultures developed to meet the challenges of this historical experience. These cultures emerged, as did those in many other areas of intense European colonization, through creolization, a process of cultural amalgamation that results in identifiably new forms. Built on African foundations and framed with European social forms, they were constructed by strong, active, creative people who lived in complex relationships to European derived and dominated institutions. In the Caribbean, people created distinct cultures on different islands because of

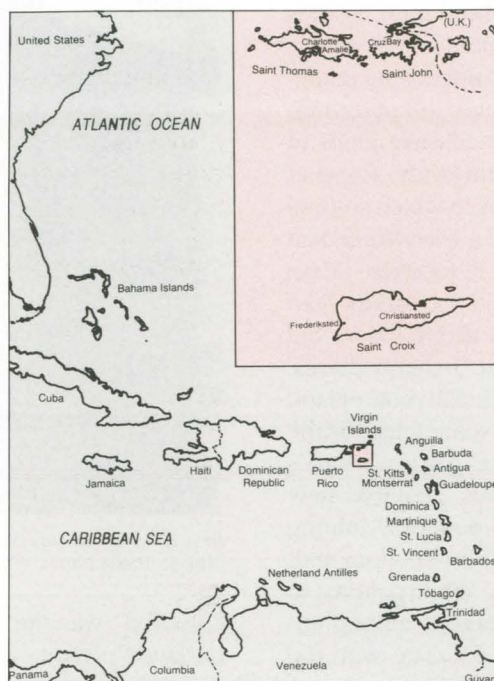
variations in the nature and extent of continuing encounters with native peoples, Europeans, Africans, Asians and later, with the bearers of creole cultures from other islands.

## THE U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS: CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Virgin Islands, U.S. and British, are geographically part of the Lesser Antilles, a chain of small islands east of Puerto Rico colonized and ruled primarily by the English, Dutch, Danish and French. The U.S. Virgin Islands are a closely grouped archipelago of over 50 mountainous islands, most of which are not presently inhabited. St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix are the three major islands. Columbus named the group "Las Islas Virgenes" in honor of the Swedish St. Ursula and her legendary army of 11,000 martyred virgins.<sup>1</sup> On his second voyage in 1493, Columbus records that his ship briefly anchored at the mouth of the Salt River in St. Croix. He and his men were attacked by Carib Indians and fled eastward toward Puerto Rico. Colonization of the Virgin Islands did not begin until the 17th century and then only sporadically with English,

Spanish, French and Dutch involvement. The Danes established their first foothold on what is now the U.S. Virgin Islands when the Danish West India Company received a royal charter for the island of St. Thomas in 1671. Under the leadership of the governor of St. Thomas, Denmark occupied St. John in 1717, and St. Croix was purchased from the French in 1733. In 1917, the United States purchased the islands from Denmark to use as a naval base to protect Panama Canal traffic from possible German attack.

In the U.S. Virgin Islands the earliest European settlers were English, Dutch, and French, but the largest immigrant population was originally from Ghana and other parts of West Africa. Old family names reflect Danish and Spanish ancestry as well as some Italian, Irish, Lithuanian, Polish, German and Russian heritage. A Sephardic Jewish population from the Dutch Islands



*The Caribbean with an inset of the U.S. Virgin Islands.*

<sup>1</sup> According to *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, Inc., 1965), 333-334, the legend goes back to the 4th or 5th century when Ursula, to avoid an unwanted marriage, departed with her maiden companions from Britain, where her father was king. On their way back from a visit to Rome, they were slaughtered by the Huns in Cologne. By the 9th century the legendary number of martyred maidens had grown to thousands.



relocated in St. Thomas in the 1790s and established the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas, the second oldest synagogue in the hemisphere. Moravian missionaries were invited to the islands to educate and Christianize enslaved Africans in the early 18th century and played a major role in the development of the local culture. The Moravians acknowledged the importance of local language by translating the Bible into Dutch creole. Laborers from the mideast and India came to the islands as contract laborers after the Danes abolished slavery in 1848.

Principal economic activity in the Virgin Islands historically centered around two institutions: the port, exemplified by St. Thomas, and the plantation, exemplified by St. John and St. Croix. While port and plantation complemented each other, they had different kinds of economic needs and provided different kinds of opportunities; they formed different contexts in which cultural forms developed. The port required a labor force that moved the articles of commerce. It fostered urban living, growth of an artisan class, and a cosmopolitan perspective. The organization of plantation life served the cultivation and processing of sugar. In many places, enslaved workers were allowed to till small plots of land to provide food for themselves and sometimes for the planter's household. Working these gardens, slaves practiced traditional horticultural skills, acquired new ones, and established an exchange economy among themselves. Some managed to buy their freedom with money raised from selling their crops. While patterns of mutual support evolved in the plantations among enslaved workers, freemen tended to associate with the planter society and often moved to the ports.

Danish rule was marked by political neutrality. They were usually uninvolved in the European conflicts that spilled over into the colonies. St. Thomas, with its deep, safe, and neutral harbor, developed into a major international free port. Neighboring peoples often sought asylum in the Danish islands, as in the case of Tortolans fleeing from English attacks. Economic opportunities attracted "free coloureds" from other islands. "Free



*In a Three Kings Day parade in St. Croix, a moko jumbie towers over most spectators. (Photo by Mary Jane Soule)*

coloured" was the legal term used by the Danish for enslaved persons with African ancestry who had been granted or had purchased their freedom, and for the children born to free women with African ancestry. Slaves could be given their freedom by their masters throughout the Caribbean. Under the Danes, slaves could also buy their freedom.

The diverse national origins of settlers, the formation of different socio-economic classes which sometimes cut across racial divisions, and migrations between islands have all contributed to the unique character of U.S. Virgin Islands. Creolized traditions have evolved in a spectacular variety of forms that can be seen to define an Afro-European cultural spectrum. In the area of music and dance, an African call-and-response legacy shapes the song tradition of *cariso*, while a European influence predominates in *quadrille* dancing. Basket-making traditions introduced by Moravian missionaries have a recognizable European style also found in baskets made in Appalachia. Some traditions like *moko jumbie* stiltwalking and calypso singing were developed elsewhere in the Caribbean but are now part of the U.S. Virgin Islands culture. Some of these forms from other islands remain distinct, but most have been given a Virgin Islands imprint. The styles and traditions distinctive to the Islands are what Virgin Islanders call



*In her home in St. John, Mrs. Louise Sewer prepares whist-reed for making a basket. (Photo by Karen Samuel)*



their native culture. In the context of Caribbean creolization, the concept of native is thereby given a new meaning. Native culture here means an emergent, continuously evolving, local creole culture that is distinct from similar cultures of other islands. This native culture absorbs and reworks cultural practices which came and are still coming from both outside and within the Caribbean.

## ST. THOMAS

In 1666, the Danish crown chartered the Danish West India Company to occupy and take possession of St. Thomas. However, the first European settlers, as on most other Virgin Islands, were English or Dutch. Strategically located at the head of the chain of the Lesser Antilles with the Atlantic Ocean on one side and the Caribbean Sea on the other, St. Thomas is endowed with a deep and protected harbor. It was a principal site in the trade of manufactured goods, enslaved human beings and sugar products between Europe, Africa and the Americas. The island became a central holding place for slaves brought from the African Gold Coast. The port prospered as trading schooners constantly sailed in and out of the harbor exporting sugar, indigo, spices, cotton, grain, tobacco, and fruits, and importing and transshipping manufactured goods and slaves.

Because of Danish neutrality during the 17th century European wars and St. Thomas' good harbor and location, the island became a haven for pirates, many of whom became legendary figures and left their names to mark the landscape. Tourists stop and gaze from Drake's Seat and visit Blackbeard's and Bluebeard's castles, now incorporated into hotels.

Initially, St. Thomas had tobacco and cotton plantations. They were, in the most part, replaced by sugar by 1765. But by 1815 the island's value as a trading hub came to dominate its economy and culture. Most St. Thomians came to see their traditions centered around the urban marketplace, international trade, and city lifestyles in the deep water port of Charlotte Amalie. In an expanding economy dominated by energetic, cosmo-



*Joe La Place, a French fisherman from St. Thomas, narrates a personal experience. (Photo by Mario Picayo)*

politan merchants, an urban class of workers and artisans — including a growing free Black population — built the grand residences and shouldered the work of transport and craftsmen's trades. Urban neighborhoods developed. These were a center of social life and helped define the character of Charlotte Amalie. Savanne, one of the earliest of these neighborhoods, lives in island memory as the epitome of urban native culture. The cultural complexity of the island increased as migrants arrived from other islands for political and economic reasons. The vital communities of French fishermen of Frenchtown and the French farmers in the Northside, now recognized as native, were formed by settlers who emigrated in the 1860s from St. Barthelemy, known locally as St. Barths. Historian Antonio Jarvis relates how they first came to the island:

Shortly after slavery was abolished, in 1848, two members of the LaPlace family left St. Barths for St. Thomas of which they had heard a great deal. These young men found that Charlotte Amalie was still a very busy port but they noticed also that the natives neglected the land; the green hillsides were already uncultivated and copse-grown; so, instead of engaging in fishing, they thought they might do better by supplying vegetables to the people of the city. These LaPlace boys soon climbed over St. Peter Mountain and Crown and discovered that Barret and Hull estates were good sites for farms, and more fertile than other areas. They worked for three years until they were no longer renters, but owners of the land. On off-days they caught fish, as it was a quick cash crop. After three years of living in St. Thomas, they decided to make a trip back to St. Barthelemy to get the girls they had left behind. It hardly took any time for Trudi and Doni LaPlace to marry and find twenty other adventurers willing to go back to St. Thomas. This was the beginning of a continuous migration, stopped only by the United States immigration laws. (Jarvis 1944: 54-55)

Distinct French communities continue. Known as "Frenchies," those who live in Frenchtown are primarily



*Children play in the Big Yard in Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, 1950. (Photo by Claude Maloon)*



fishermen and boat builders, though most of the work they now do is repair. The traditional form is the *pirogue*, a dugout canoe carved from a tree trunk. In Frenchtown backyards, fishpots are made and mended. Frenchies who live on the north side of the island come to the market early on Saturday to sell their herbs, fruits and vegetables.

French woven straw hats and baskets are still made by a few women in Frenchtown, but in earlier times, almost all women made their own. Married women wore a *caleche*, a shoulder length headdress of plaited straw covered with white cloth, resembling hats worn by peasant women in Brittany. Men also wore distinctive hats. Even today, most older women keep rolls of plaited grass from St. Barths to make hats for Sunday or special occasions.

In the late 19th century, when steamships replaced sailing vessels, St. Thomas became less important as a trading port. But it continued to be an important coaling station, or fuel stop, for coal-powered ships until the 1930s. Older Virgin Islanders still remember coaling times when men and women carried baskets of coal on their heads to the docks. They were given a "tally," a coin which could be cashed in for two cents, for each basket. Traditional sea shantys still heard today, like "Roll Isabella Roll," comment on the tally days and the exploitation of the coal carriers:

*Roll Isabella roll, oh roll Isabella roll,  
Roll Isabella roll, the damn shopkeepers got  
the island down.  
Went to the shop with a quart(er) to buy  
fifteen cent thing,  
When I looked in me hand, the damn  
shopkeeper give me tally for change.*

Although it is no longer a shipping center, St. Thomas is still a busy port. Cruise ships dominate its harbor, and tourists replace the traders of earlier times. But aspects of traditional island life persist. The combination of port town lifestyles and enduring cultural heritage, together with a constant flow of ideas and people from the outside, have made St. Thomians at once cosmopolitans and keepers of tradition. Fishermen still go out at dawn in Hull Bay and sell their catch by the docks. Fishpots are made and mended in the back yards of homes. The northside French farmers continue to grow herbs and vegetables in terraced gardens. Johnny cake and fry fish are fried in coal pots at the beach on Sunday. Women prepare traditional cakes and candy, and men and women make guavaberry wine for holidays. Young people are still taught hand crafts, many of which were introduced by the Moravian missionaries. And songs based on traditional forms continue to be composed; a number of calypso songs about the recent hurricane, Hugo, were submitted to a "Hugo Song Contest" sponsored by local radio station "Lucky 13."

## ST. JOHN

A little over two miles from St. Thomas, St. John became part of the Danish crown in the early 1700s. St. John was first acquired to expand sugar cultivation, but the plantations did not last long. One of the earliest and initially successful slave rebellions in the Caribbean took place in St. John in 1733. That same year the island was devastated by drought and a hurricane. Many plantations were destroyed, and many plantation owners returned to Europe. Freed Blacks from other islands acquired some of the land and attempted to revitalize the sugar plantations. Although sugar cultivation continued for some time, it never became as extensive as it had been before the rebellion.

From the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, there emerged a new class of estate owners who, though landowners, were relatively poor and less powerful than those in the larger colonial system. They had only limited need for laborers and cultivated smaller plots of land. As the plantation system declined, plantation laborers continued to sustain their peasant society on the fringes of the plantations by gardening for subsistence and internal trade. According to anthropologist Karen Fog Olwig, the provision grounds allotted to slaves for their own subsistence enabled them to develop a system of production and distribution that outlived the plantation (Fog Olwig 1987: 6-7).

To this day, a social infrastructure resists exploitation from the outside, supported by a traditional subsistence economy and cooperative behavior. Guy Benjamin, a local historian and educator, recalls his growing up in his book *Me and My Beloved Virgin St. John U.S.A.* (1981:1), "East End was a self-sustained village. We had our cows, goats, pigs, chickens, fish and seafood, sea-grapes from the shore, fruits from the land, our school, and six or seven sailboats to go to St. Thomas for all our desires." The community's eleven families shared the work in hard times and in good times.

Fishing, gardening, charcoal making, masonry, herbal healing and traditional cooking, all support a vital local



Mrs. Marguerita Frett stretches, shapes, and twists "jawbone" candy on a marble slab as children anxiously await the cutting and cooling of this homemade treat. (Photo by Janet Burton)



exchange system augmented by an inter-island trade. Benjamin recalls the first motorboat he ever saw, "Every week the *Adella* went to St. Thomas with her load of cows and returned filled to her gunwales with sugar, flour, matches, oil, lard, butter, fat pork, salted beef, rice and cornmeal" (Benjamin 1981: 28).

Although gardeners, fishermen, basketmakers and others involved in traditional occupations are now turning to the tourist industry for a living, they resist the destruction of their identity, persist in their traditions, and transform foreign lifestyles into their own. Miss Lucy earns her living touring visitors around St. John in her flower-decorated taxi. She drives visitors from one end of the island to the other on the recently paved road which connects the more commercial port of Cruz Bay on the western end with the more traditional East End and Coral Bay. She stops by the sugar apple, guava, coconut and genip trees explaining their cultural, culinary and medicinal importance. A tour of the island with such a guide is a trip into the tales of the island, the lore of the "bush" or wild herbs, and a history of its communities and culture.

Like tourism, the dominant presence of the National Park Service has greatly affected the daily life and culture of St. Johnians. In 1956 the National Park Service acquired two-thirds of the island from Laurance Rockefeller as a national park. This acquisition has generated mixed feelings among St. Johnians. On the one hand, the Park Service has protected the land from massive tourist development. On the other hand, St. Johnians lack full access to the land resources which are critical to the continuity of their lifestyle and craft traditions.

## ST. CROIX

St. Croix, the only island of the three principal U.S. Virgin Islands with large areas suitable for farming, became a classic Caribbean planter society. Intrigue and conflict among the Dutch, English and French gave the island its claim to seven flags. Denmark bought it from the French, who had abandoned it when they ordered all inhabitants removed to the then booming plantations of the island of St. Domingue (which became Haiti). After the Danish purchase, and because of the Danes' lack of interest in settling there, English and Dutch settlers from St. Thomas and St. John and from the "down islands" to the east — St. Kitts, Nevis and Barbados — were invited to start estates, the local name for plantations. A "free coloured" class is mentioned in documents as early as 1744, some of whom became estate owners.

The Danes wavered about emancipation, but a liberal Danish governor, Peter von Scholten, declared the end of slavery during a major slave uprising in 1848. After emancipation, liberated slaves were replaced on

the plantations by contract workers from the down islands.

Migrants from Nevis, St. Kitts, Barbados, and Antigua brought with them dramatic and narrative traditions, including "tea meetings" and "masquerade jigs," which were incorporated into the Crucian cultural repertoire. A tea meeting was a community social event that included an oratory contest and a talent show. The tea meeting was charged with pomp and humor. Participants challenged each other's oratorical skills and knowledge of history and current events.

Masquerading is a long established tradition on the island. On holidays, small costumed groups would "dance masquerade" from estate to estate, singing and jesting as they went. The procession concluded in town, in either Christiansted or Frederiksted. Today this tradition has been transformed into an organized town parade. A "masquerade jig" is the fancy footwork danced by some of the masquerade troupes.

Masquerading dance traditions survive in Crucian dance music. One of these forms is quadrille, a tradition introduced in the 19th century by European planters, which became very important in Crucian social life. Once held on the estates under palm-thatched shelters, today's dances can be found in St. Gerald's Hall in Frederiksted accompanied by "fungi" or "scratch" bands. Fungi is named for a traditional dish that combines a variety of available ingredients, so the fungi band — also called scratch because of a gourd "scratched" for percussion — brings together a variety of instruments including fife, drums, banjo, bass, trumpet, bass guitar. Instruments change according to band. Both fungi stew and a fungi band have a down-home, informal style.

Cariso and calypso songs comment on current events and individuals, voice complaints and take sides in controversies. Cariso's praise and derision came to the islands with slavery. Its extemporaneous composition and flattering or satirical content make cariso the forerunner of contemporary calypso. Immigrant groups



*A scratch band performs traditional quelbé music, indigenous to the Virgin Islands. From left to right the instruments are: squash (scratch), guitar, claves, rhythm pipe (ass pipe), and ukelele. (Photo courtesy the Von Scholten Collection, Enid Baa Public Library and Archives, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands)*





*In the 1930s, market vendors inspect fresh provisions recently arrived from neighboring islands. Trade with adjacent islands still creates spontaneous marketplaces like this one on the wharf in Christiansted, St. Croix. (Photo by Raymond Jacobs)*

have often been cariso's target. For example, the cariso song "Me Mother Had Tell Me Not to Marry No Bobajan" warns girls about the "Bobajans" or "Bajans" — men from Barbados who came to work in large numbers after emancipation. A Crucian cariso singer commented on the rhetorical power of the songs in an interview: "When you did anything that was wrong, they look at you from head to foot — and they composed a song about you. And that lasts forever. Even though you die, somebody remembers the song."

In 1878 a rebellion now commemorated as "Fireburn," because half the town of Frederiksted was burned down, erupted in reaction to desperate economic conditions and restrictive post-emancipation labor laws. Mary Thomas or "Queen Mary," a canefield worker and one of the leaders of the rebellion, is celebrated in cariso songs. The following stanza, still popular among cariso singers, praises Queen Mary's readiness to die for her cause:

*Queen Mary - 'tis where you going to burn-  
Queen Mary - 'tis where you going to burn-  
Don't tell me nothing t'all  
Just fetch the match and oil  
Bassin (Christiansted) jailhouse, 'tis where  
I'm going to burn.*

Other aspects of Crucian life and history also become themes for songs — conflicts with estate managers and foremen, the economic hard times in the 1950s, horse-racing and, most recently, hurricane Hugo. Many a calypso was written about hurricane Hugo and performed during the traditional celebration of the Day of the Kings this year. Although calypso developed in Trinidad, it has assumed a distinct style in the Virgin Islands. Calypsonian Mighty Pat assessed the situation after the hurricane in his song:

*When I looked around and saw the condition  
of our Virgin Island,  
I tell myself advantage can't done.  
One day you rich. Next day you poor.*

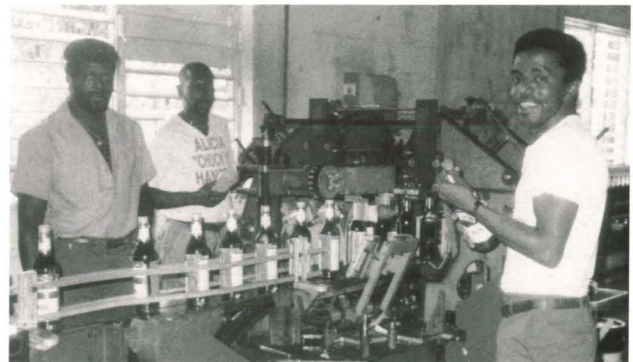
*One day you up the ladder. Next day you  
crawling on the floor.  
Beauty is skin deep; material things is for a time.  
A corrupted soul will find no peace of mind.  
I think that is all our gale Hugo was trying to  
say to all mankind.*

As in St. John, cane workers survived on crops and animals raised on provision grounds of the large estates. Richard A. Schrader, Sr. describes these grounds in his history, *Notes of a Crucian Son*:

The nega ground on the estates' land was truly a blessing. From it came: tanya, yam, okra, watermelon, cabbage, corn, cassava, pumpkin, potato and even kallaloo for the Crucian kitchen table. For saltin (meat) the people raised chickens, hogs, goats and sheep. A few people owned milking cows. But most favored goat milk and raised their children on it. Beef was produced by the big land owners with large herds of cattle. (Schrader 1989: 31)

Sugar cultivation continued into the 1960s although the economy had begun to shift with the opening of the Hess oil refinery, the Martin Marietta alumina plant, and a boom in tourism that continued to draw immigrants from the down islands. Immigrants from the mainland U.S., known in the islands as "continentals," came in at this time as school teachers for the mushrooming migrant population and later moved into hotel and restaurant management work. Much farm land has now become grazing fields for beef and dairy cattle and goats. Rastafarian communities from Jamaica (and later native born) began to settle in the area in the 1970s, cultivating vegetable gardens as others turned to service occupations.

Puerto Ricans, now a significant part of the population, came primarily from the islands of Culebra and Vieques to work as cane cutters. After less than a generation, many have become government workers and small businessmen. Although they are established in their new communities, like many of the other immigrants they maintain a link with their homeland. It



*Virgin Islands rum factory workers bottle and label Cruzan Rum before it is distributed to local and international markets. (Photo by Jewel Ross Sage)*



has become traditional for the mayor of Vieques to take a boat to St. Croix on "Friendship Day" to commemorate the ties between Crucians and Puerto Ricans. During the Christmas season, families visit between islands in *parranda* or holiday serenading traditions.

Puerto Rican traditions both from the European and African ends of the Caribbean cultural spectrum have become part of Crucian culture. Among these are *baquiné* or songs for children's wakes, and the *rosario cantao* sung in the highlands of Puerto Rico in the month of May, the month of the flowers, for the Day of the Cross:

<i>Mayo florido,</i>	Blossoming May,
<i>Mes de las flores -</i>	Month of the flowers -
<i>Aquí te cantan,</i>	To you they sing,
<i>Los trovadores.</i>	The troubadours.

A traditional Puerto Rican song form, the *plena*, also thrives in St. Croix and provides social commentary much like cariso and calypso.

## U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS AND THE FESTIVAL

Native cultural patterns represent both historical continuities and an ever changing pattern of adaptations and amalgamations. Several key values and orientations continue to characterize local culture in the Virgin Islands. Chief among these is education. Islanders also honor skill: with words, with crafts, in work. "Throwing words" is a highly valued verbal skill characteristic of the Caribbean in general — the ability to contend effectively with words in social, ceremonial and competitive situations. As described by Roger Abrahams,

The range of verbal repertory includes the ability to joke aggressively, to 'make war' with words by insult and scandal pieces, to tell Ananzi stories (any kind of folk tale), and to make speeches and toasts appropriate to ceremonial occasions. (Abrahams 1983: 57)

Expressive forms are as vital in everyday life as in

rituals and celebrations. On the three islands there are also rich traditions of local history and personal narratives.

Another value islanders hold in common is what they call "good manners." These go beyond politeness in the appropriate recognition of another person upon meeting and before engaging in social or business conversation. Good manners are learned in the home and reinforced in school. Richard Schrader remarks:

Manners and respect, a common theme in school, continually rang in our ears, and were hammered into our brains at home. 'Yoh must always have manners and never be disrespectful to older people. Respect and manners is a passport that can take yoh through this world,' my parents would say. (Schrader 1989: 21)

Family ties reinforce cultural unity between islands. It is not unusual to have family from at least two of the three islands. This is most evident at Christmas time when serenaders go from house to house visiting family and friends, bringing cheer with the "Guavaberry Song." Today they travel on safari busses through St. Thomas and St. John, and last year they included St. Croix.

These cultural values currently face a new set of challenges. Virgin Islanders have historically struggled to control their destinies and define their own lifestyles, values and aspirations. Exertion of cultural control, even when enslaved, is represented to this day by such forms as cariso, calypso and storytelling, in foodways and the practice of "bush" or herbal medicine, in the traditional occupations of fishing, charcoal making and masonry. Currently, Virgin Islanders, as people throughout the United States, and indeed the world, face the challenges of mass popular culture, tourist culture, and the multiple cultures of new immigrants. How can Virgin Islanders appropriate and revitalize mass culture without falling into the tourist industry's definitions of native culture? To what cultural forms will the ongoing creative process of amalgamation between native and immigrant cultures give birth?

John Kuo Wei Tchen, in an address entitled "Race and Cultural Democracy," presented at the Smithsonian Institution's Martin Luther King, Jr. celebration last year, addresses the pluralistic nature of American society. His observation that ethnic groups in the U.S. "have shared histories" and "interwoven identities" seems equally descriptive of communities on the three American Virgin Islands. These cultural identities, he continues, are both "constructed and multi-faceted."

The U.S. Virgin Islands Festival program thus not only presents the "interwoven identities" of the islands, but inescapably becomes part of the process of constructing them. The program has been researched and designed by scholars and community members of the three islands in collaboration with the curator and Office of Folklife Programs staff. Researchers have documented



Salvador Fragoza, Amador Felix, Nicolás Encarnación and Genaro Ortiz rehearse Puerto Rican jíbaro tunes in their backyard in St. Croix. (Photo by Daniel Sheehy)





In her yard in St. Croix, Mrs. Lucille Roberts cuts a sugarcane stalk for family and friends. (Photo by Mary Jane Soule)

traditions that have been maintained informally over time. These traditions are practiced in community settings such as favorite fishing coves in St. John, Frenchie Northside gardens of St. Thomas, or the Christmas parade of St. Croix; in intimate domestic settings and in work places; in markets and in dance halls.

Local researchers suggested an interesting strategy for interpreting traditions of the Virgin Islands to create a public program. This was to identify "cultural touchstones" or historical points of reference that are still useful in understanding the present. The big yard, the marketplace, and public celebration were selected as meaningful cultural touchstones to all three islands.

The big yard developed in urban neighborhoods of St. Thomas as shared area behind row houses where workers lived. The big yard was the setting for everyday activity, casual or planned meetings, storytelling under the tamarind tree, laundering, cooking, children's play, and gossiping. Although the St. Thomian big yard is not found as an urban space in St. Croix or in St. John, the concept of big yard can refer in general to a communal place for shared domestic activity on all three islands.

While the big yard shapes the private world of the home, the marketplace is at the crossroads of commerce where people sell and trade, throw words, preach, campaign and catch up on events of the day. Its values are public; its gestures and jests may be broad.

Socially inclusive and temporarily transforming, celebrations join domestic and public spaces and bring the islands together, whether it is carnival on St. Thomas, the Day of the Kings Festival on St. Croix, or Emancipation Day on St. John.

The big yard, the marketplace and celebration are contextualizing, interpretive devices that represent continuity in the folklife of the islands and that serve as backdrops for exploring contemporary cultural issues of concern to Virgin Islanders. In these discussions, as in

performances and demonstrations, multiple voices collaborate in telling stories their own way, in a dialogue with one another, with the public, and with the sometimes complex voices within.

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## SUGGESTED LISTENING

*Virgin Island Voices*. Radio Program produced by Mary Jane Soule, 1989.

*Zoop, Zoop, Zoop*. Recording produced by Mary Jane Soule.