

Bahamas Musical Survey



Killer's rake and scrape band, which includes vocals and electric guitar, performs at Day Shell's, Nicholl's Town, North Andros.

Photo by Grace Turner

by Kayla Olubummi Lockhart Edwards

The Bahamas could be described truly as the islands where stories are more often sung than spoken – “islands of song.” For hundreds of years along this scattered island chain, the human voice has been raised in melodious strains of joy and sadness to a rhythmic pulse that is deeply influenced by its populace’s African ancestry. Even Bahamians’ spoken dialect has a particular melodic ring.

The absolute wealth of raw musical talent that exists in almost every island, and the ease with which rich three- and four-part harmonies flow, are remarkable. For example, while conducting research on Cat Island in preparation for the Festival, a group of farmers waiting for a business meeting to begin were asked to sing a typical anthem. Without hesitation, two of the ladies raised a rousing song, and 92-year-old Mr. Donald Newbold became the featured bass with a voice of honeyed thunder that left us in total amazement at the depth of his vocal range and richness.

Greatly influenced by hundreds of years of colonial domination as well as by American culture, Bahamian sacred music is by far the islands’ most

outstanding cultural expression. Anthems are religious hymns that closely resemble the American ante-bellum slave songs brought to The Bahamas during the Loyalist period. Favorite characters in anthems are Moses, Noah, and Elijah from the Old Testament, and King Jesus, King Peter, and Mary Magdalene; the anti-hero is inevitably Satan. The most common themes are faith, optimism, patience, weariness, and fighting. An example of an anthem is “Do You Live By Prayer?”

*Do you live by prayer?
Do you live by prayer?
O yes, I do live by prayer.*

*Remember me,
Remember me,
O yes, remember me.*

*Have you passed here before?
Have you passed here before?
O yes, I have passed here before.*

*I'll bid farewell
To every fear
An' wipe my weepin' eyes.*



Dickey Doh sings in tight three- and four-part harmonies, and continues the tradition of the Bethel Baptist Church singers, whose members included parents of today's Dickey Doh.

Photo by Joan Wolbier

*Then I can smile
At Satan's rage
To see a burnin' world.*

Rhyming songs (spiritual and secular) present an animated storyteller with back-up chorus. The rhymer tells the story – sad, happy, provocative – in verse after rhythmic verse, with the chorus echoing basically the same refrain after each verse and usually singing in three-part harmony. It is not unusual for rhyming songs to have up to 10 or 12 verses; many times the rhymer will spontaneously create verses as he or she goes along. The texts are often based on biblical themes, fantasies, or real-life happenings. “Run, Come See Jerusalem,” for instance, recounts the sinking of three small boats off the coast of Andros Island during the 1929 hurricane.

“Run, Come See Jerusalem”

*It was nineteen hundred and twenty-nine.
Run come see, run come see -
It was nineteen hundred and twenty-nine.
Run, come see Jerusalem.*

Now John Brown, he was the captain.

*Run come see, run come see -
Now John Brown, he was the captain.
Run, come see Jerusalem.*

*Now it was de Ethel, Myrtle, and Praetoria.
Run come see, run come see -
It was de Ethel, Myrtle, and Praetoria.
Run, come see Jerusalem.*

*O de big sea build up in the northwest.
Run come see, run come see -
O de big sea build up in the northwest.
Run, come see Jerusalem.*

*When the first sea hit the Praetoria,
Run come see, run come see -
When the first sea hit the Praetoria,
Run, come see Jerusalem -*

*Now there was thirty-three lost souls on the ocean.
Run come see, run come see -
Yes, there was thirty-three poor lost souls on the
ocean.
Run, come see Jerusalem.*

It is now common to hear contemporary African-American gospel and European classical harmonies

emanating from the churches of the myriad religious denominations to be found throughout the Commonwealth. In about 90 percent of these denominations, regardless of what their founders intended, the congregational singing is accompanied by hand clapping, rhythmic percussion, and spiritual dancing as well as spirit possession. In Baptist, Church of God (called Jumper Church), and other Pentecostal services, possession usually occurs during the singing and clapping section of the service, although it also could happen during the praying and preaching periods. Religious relics of West African worship style, both hand clapping and spirit possession – the supreme African religious experience – have been incorporated into the European Christian religious practice. Although dancing is not allowed in the Baptist and Jumper churches, a remarkable degree of rhythmic bodily movement called “Rushin’” is most commonly indulged in during the singing of the anthems and spiritual songs.

Secular music in The Bahamas historically has been called Goombay music. In the Ring Dance, Jumpin’ and Firedance, types of West African fertility dances, the participants would form a circle with one dancer in the center. The players would begin to clap with their hands and the drummer would call out “Gimbey,” a corruption of the West African word *gumbay*, or large drum, to begin the song or chanting. Bahamian secular music relies on the goatskin drum to create its rhythmic base.

Stories of everyday occurrences become popular songs telling of lovers’ infidelity, the Bahamian female’s many wiles and schemes, and the beauty of the environment. They often contain proverbial instruction, e.g., “Never interfere with man and wife, never understand/No matter who is wrong or who is right Hoihi!/Jus’ offer sympathy.”

These same songs are played instrumentally by rake and scrape bands. The rake and scrape band hails back to the 1800s, when the Africans who were brought to The Bahamas sought to make music on whatever was available to them. The carpenter’s saw was a tool used daily, pork barrels made a suitable keg over which to stretch the skin of a goat or sheep to make a drum, and the accordion might have been a gift from their colonial

masters; the music makers combined these three instruments. The music of the rake and scrape band is traditionally used to accompany the Bahamian Quadrille and the Heel and Toe Polka dances, all relics of the initial mixture of Africa and Europe. Although these bands may now be composed of modern electronic instruments, they seek to retain the original “rake and scrape” flavor.

Traditional children’s ringplay games have accompanying “ditties” which are found throughout the Caribbean.

“Blue Hill Water Dry”

*Blue hill water dry
No where to wash my clothes*

*I remember the Saturday night
Boil fish and johnny cake*

*Centipe knock tuh muh door last night
Take him for Johnny, slam him BAM!*

Ceremonial songs like “Soley Married” (Soley married, Soley married, come here let me tell you gal/Soley married/She married Walter, Walter Ferguson, come here let me tell you gal, Soley married) are still sung at weddings in New Providence and the Family Islands. The name of the girl being married at the time can be substituted for Soley. It is also not uncommon for the welcome and introduction of the chairperson for an evening’s concert to be sung instead of spoken.

Music in The Bahamas is changing. Pan-Caribbean reggae, soca, and salsa are heard in clubs and hotels. American pop and world music are widely recognized. And yet, the song and music of the people, that which conjures up the soul of The Bahamas at home, in worship, at work and in play, and in celebration, endures.

SUGGESTED READING

Bethel, Edward Clement. 1978. *Music in The Bahamas: Its Roots, Development and Personality*. Master’s Thesis, UCLA.

SUGGESTED LISTENING

Edwards, Kayla Olubumni Lockhart. *Lil Piece Uh Duh Bahamas*. Artists International.

Spence, Joseph. *The Complete Folkways Recordings – 1958*. Smithsonian/Folkways 40066.

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