

The Development of St. Lucian Culture

by Anderson Reynolds

“In this era of globalization, the ubiquitous mass media and the information super highway, it is easy for the cultures of small societies like St. Lucia to be swept away and replaced by the cultures of larger, richer and more dominant societies.”

At 2003 Jazz On The Square, while listening to Ronald “Boo” Hinkson doing his thing, reveling in his new CD, *BEYOND*, which it appeared was rapidly becoming a hit, I overheard a conversation in which a young man was trying his best to convince a young woman that jazz wasn't St. Lucian culture, rather it was music like calypso, reggae, and cadence. Of course, the young woman, who was rocking away, would have none of what the young man was offering.

I know a well established St. Lucian musician who takes every opportunity to denounce country and western as red-neck music and as such has nothing to do with black culture and therefore is in no way St. Lucian culture. In fact, this artist goes as far as to say that St. Lucian country music lovers should be ashamed of themselves for loving a racist originated music. And I know a carnival activist who (based on his discussions of culture) seems to think that calypso and carnival are the beginning and end of St. Lucian culture.

What constitutes St. Lucian culture is no doubt an intriguing conversation piece. However, what I want to focus attention on with this article isn't what classifies as St. Lucian culture, but how we as a society can encourage and develop the artistic expression of St. Lucian culture. Culture is the visible expression of a people's way of life. So in that sense everywhere there is human life there is culture. Culture requires no encouragement, for it is a natural outgrowth of human beings going through their daily lives. What I am proposing to encourage and develop is the translation of this outward expression of our existence into artistic expressions as represented by cultural products. By cultural products I mean paintings, plays, movies, documentaries, musical record-



Painting by Cedric George, featured artist of this issue

ings, books. In short, artistic expressions that can be readily disseminated.

The CDF has a Role to Play

The Department of Culture renamed the Cultural Development Foundation (CDF) was established to do just that. According to the CDF its role is to create conditions conducive to the enrichment of St. Lucia's cultural environment, and to encourage, facilitate, and promote cultural development and cultural events. The CDF hopes to accomplish this through training, advocacy, and effective administration. However, a common problem with institutions set up to promote culture is that the institutions themselves quickly acquire the notion (or at the very least behave that way) that culture is all about them, that they are the paragons of culture, they are the creators of culture. But if not the CDF, who creates culture? Who among us are actively engaged in giving artistic expression to St. Lucian culture?

They are the people and groups creating the cultural products. I am talking about the writers, poets, musicians, calypsonians, painters, actors, video and film producers. The Kendel Hippolytes, McDonald Dixons, and Adrian Augiers; the Pelees, Invaders, and Meshaks; the Dustan St. Omers, Cedric Georges, and Stephan Pauls; the Travis Weekes', Mathias Burts, and Kennedy “Boots” Samuels'. Having said this, how should the CDF avoid the trap of seeing itself as the embodiment of culture and go about promoting the artistic expression of St. Lucian culture?

To accomplish this mission the CDF need not simply wait for the creators of cultural products to come to it for assistance. The CDF needs to be proactive. It needs to seek out all such persons and groups and ask “how best can we assist you in developing your craft, in transforming your creativity into cultural products, and in marketing and promoting these products worldwide?” We have groups like Chè Campeche and Tanbou Mélé who have acquired national acclaim, have already taken their act overseas, and, in a limited way, have produced audio or video recordings of some of their works. We have the pioneering southern drama group, Vizyon De Lavi / Iyanola Pictures, who so far has produced two movies, Tears in the Valley and Ribbons of Blue now available on VHS and DVD. How do we help them climb the next hurdle of becoming regional and international cultural icons? How can we help them to record their work more extensively for mass dissemination? In these respects C&W's Star Quest may have worked wonders.

Besides such groups or persons who are now enjoying national attention, there are a host of aspiring singers, musicians,

writers, poets, painters, actors, who have the talent and motivation, but have limited guidance, and who often haven't a clue about what it takes to uplift their craft to international standards. Through my visits to our secondary schools to do book readings and to impress upon students the importance of reading and education, I discovered that we have a profusion of promising student writers. With little encouragement from anyone they are writing poetry, short stories and novels. The sad thing is that they are receiving little guidance in the art of writing. There are no writing workshops to help them hone their craft, there are few avenues for publishing their work, they have few contacts with established writers, and from where they stand they probably cannot envision writing as a career. So



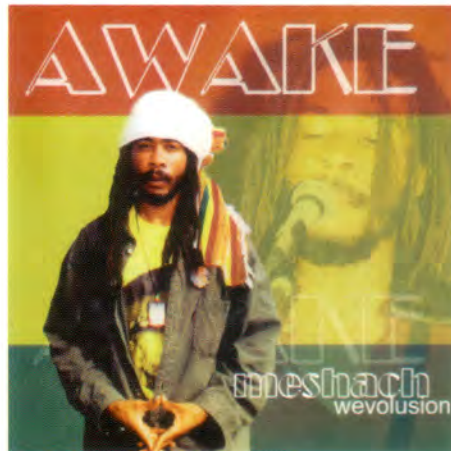
graduation from secondary school often marks the end of their writing and, in many cases, creative life.

A few years back the CDF launched a series of islandwide workshops taught by Jamaica School of Drama lecturer, Pierre Lemaire. The CDF had also sponsored a writing workshop at the Central Library, geared mostly towards members of the Writers Forum who, as a group, won the 2002 M&C award for poetry. And in the past the CDF has sponsored calypso writing workshops. In a further effort to develop the arts, the CDF has created literature, drama, and music think-tanks that are charged with developing ideas on how best to encourage and spur the artistic expressions of our culture. So it would be misleading to suggest that the CDF isn't actively involved in developing St. Lucian culture. The problem with the CDF's efforts is that they are sporadic and often it is only the well initiated that are aware of these activities. The CDF can go further in the nurturing and development of craft. Workshops in the various artistic disciplines could be institutionalized and made into annual or better yet biannual

events. The CDF could team up with the literature, music, and art teachers of our secondary schools to help establish art programs and art clubs. The CDF could set aside overseas scholarships for gifted and aspiring artists to further the development of their craft.

Besides the CDF, other laudable institutions that are playing a significant role in the upliftment of St. Lucian culture include the M&C Annual Fine Arts Awards and the Jubilee Trust Fund whose recent undertakings included the staging of Sarafina and The Banjo Man (along with CDF) and the establishment of The George Odlum Grant for the Creative Arts.

The Demise of St. Lucian Culture

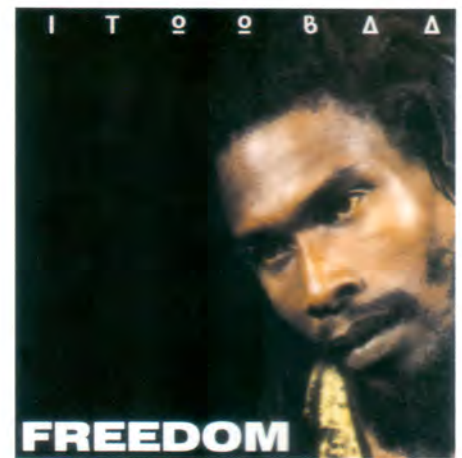


Failure to encourage the artistic expression of St. Lucian culture, and the documentation of these artistic expressions takes on a more serious tone when you consider that without urgent intervention there is a chance that some aspects of our culture will be lost to us forever. Specifically, I am talking about our folk music, the music that no one can and would argue isn't St. Lucian culture, because one would be hard pressed to find another music or cultural expression more indigenous to St. Lucia. St. Lucian folk music speaks to the genesis of St. Lucian culture. If we want clues about where we came from, and who we are, there are few better places to look than our folk music. But the sad fact is most of the paragons of our folk music, the people who are not simply performing songs passed on to them, but have created and are creating their own music, are in the later part of their lives. I am talking about the Rameau Poleons, and the Yves Simeons of St. Lucia.

Monty Maxwell, one of St. Lucia's leading jazz and blues musicians, a fixture

of the St. Lucian Jazz Festival, and arguably the best musician to have come out of Vieux Fort, is so taken by Rameau Poleon that as often as possible he teams up with Rameau on gigs. In fact, Rameau Poleon features prominently on some of Monty Maxwell's songs in *Shine*, his soon-to-be-released debut CD. By teaming with Rameau Poleon, Monty has created a cross between Jazz and St. Lucian folk music, a new genre of jazz. In fact, by fusing St. Lucian and Caribbean rhythm with Jazz and Blues, Monty is no doubt cultivating a new jazz or musical niche. Therefore, the release of *Shine* may prove to be no less than legendary.

Monty Maxwell admits that Rameau Poleon's music inspires him. He laments that Rameau Poleon has so many wonderful songs that it would be a great national



loss if the artist were to pass away before his songs were recorded. He says many of the songs are known only to Rameau. That is the reason he, Monty, takes every opportunity to work with the folk musician, and that is why he has volunteered to help produce recordings of the artist, providing that sponsors can be found to finance logistics and studio time.

Now, the loss Monty is talking about isn't simply that the world may never hear some of Rameau Poleon's songs. The loss could go much deeper than that. To illustrate let us ponder Reggae. Or let us ask the question: What are the roots of Reggae?

Well, long before there was reggae there was Jamaican folk music. Then in the 1940's Jamaicans came up with the bright idea of fusing all of this folk music to form what was coined Mento, which they started recording in the early 1950's (the birth of a cultural product). In the early 1960's, to Mento was added American R&B and the result was Ska and "Rude-Boy" music. A few years later, beginning in the mid 1960's, Ska was mixed with Soul to give rise to Rock

Steady. Then in the late 1960's, under this restless Jamaican creativity, Rock Steady gave way to Reggae, a term that encompassed the many developing styles of Jamaican music characterized by the trademark "skank" as in skanking. Out of this skanking music, Dub and Roots Reggae emerged in the early and mid 1970's, and soon branched off into Dancehall, Lover's Rock, and Hip-hop. Now reggae, Dub, Dancehall, Lover's Rock and Hip-hop have changed world music and have become a multi-billion dollar industry.

Imagine that. If the various strains of Jamaican folk music had disappeared before they could have been fashioned into Mento and then Ska, there would be no reggae, no Bob Marley. There would be no Three Little Birds singing at dance halls, bars, discos, hotels and airport lounges, and the classy restaurants of the world, and the millions of dollars of income and foreign exchange that Jamaica earns from music each year may have never materialized.

Imagine again. It is 2030. On an early Sunday afternoon a young musician is visiting his grandparents. On top of an old bookshelf lies a dusty CD that hasn't seen play in years. The CD catches the eye of the aspiring musician. Bored, he absent-mindedly slips the CD in a CD player. The CD is The Best of Rameau Poleon. Suddenly, the young man's boredom vanishes. The music has hit a nerve. Maybe it is a long forgotten song that when he was small his parents used to play. He picks up his guitar and starts picking a tune and playing a rhythm. But restless by nature, after half an hour he gives up on that and goes and hangs out with the boys. Amid the talk and laughter of his friends, Rameau Poleon and the rhythm keep ringing in his ears. So he leaves his friends, returns home and spends all afternoon and most of the night developing the tune that refuses to go away. He has a few hours of restless sleep during which the rhythm and Rameau Poleon kept humming. By six in the morning he can take it no longer, so he gets up and returns to his guitar and the rhythm. Before long, the tune and rhythm take shape, so by the time he has breakfast at 9AM he has a fully developed song. He calls his girlfriend and says: "Guess what? I have just received a gift from God." But the gift isn't from God, it is from Rameau Poleon and the people or organizations who had had the foresight to sponsor the recordings. He records the song. It's a hit. The world cannot have enough of it. So he records a full album of songs with the same basic rhythm. A new musical genre is

born; he calls it RamPo. In less than a decade, RamPo becomes a billion dollar industry, placing St. Lucia squarely on the musical map.

The Value of Culture to Society

Notwithstanding the above discussions, what is the value of giving artistic expression to our culture, and the value of presenting these expressions in the form of cultural products? Art, or the artistic expressions of our culture, provides a window, a looking glass, into our way of lives. Therefore art provides us with a better or clearer sense of who we are as a people: where we came from, where we are at now, where we are heading, and where

way of life of our predecessors enable us to learn from their mistakes, and, rather than reinvent the wheel, build upon the foundation they bequeathed us. We know of past peoples, not because we were there to observe their lives, but from the artifacts they left behind. So we know of the Roman and Greek empires because of the books, architecture, artwork, music, etc. that survived them. Similarly, we know something of the lives of ancient Egyptians and the people of the other great African Kingdoms like Zimbabwe and Ashanti, because of the pyramids, hieroglyphs, art and artifacts that remain and the songs and stories that were passed on from one generation to the other. Art provides a distilled representation of a people's way of life. Therefore, it should be possible to study a people's art and reconstruct how they lived their lives: how



we should be heading. Art develops consciousness. It enables us to become more conscious of ourselves as a people or nation or civilization (the West Indian Civilization). By clarifying the circumstances of our existence, it helps us go through life by making conscious decisions, instead of simply reacting to circumstances, or acting out of necessity. Art provides us with the leverage or mental fortitude to change the very circumstances that shape our lives. Through art we begin to have a sense that we could be in control of our lives, for it is the daily choices we make that help determine how our lives turn out.

Art is the avenue through which the culture, the way of life, of previous generations is passed on to future generations. Knowledge and understanding of the



affluent, how democratic, how religious, how peaceful, how happy they were.

In this era of globalization, the ubiquitous mass media and the information super highway, it is easy for the cultures of small societies like St. Lucia to be swept away and replaced by the cultures of larger, richer and more dominant societies. The concern that many St. Lucians raise about the ongoing Americanization of St. Lucian culture suggests that this issue isn't just a theoretical one.

There are two ways of dealing with this concern. One is to screen out or place restrictions on the inflow of foreign culture: music, movies, television programs. The second is to pay less attention to what is coming in, and more emphasis on the quantity and quality of

what we are putting out. Meaning, fine, we are getting plenty of US television programming, but let us make sure our people are exposed to plenty of our own. Fine, the radio stations are playing a great deal of foreign music, but let's make sure that we are producing an abundance of quality music which is getting its fair share of air play. It is for this reason I think that NTN (Channel 2) is a stroke of genius. My position is that while others are influencing us with their culture, let us put ours out there in this great world cultural pot, so we are doing our fair share of influencing others.

Case in point. Reggae, or more specifically Bob Marley's music, has influenced generations upon generations of writers and poets, not to speak of musicians. It is as if each new generation is pleasantly surprised to discover that a Bob Marley exists. Bob Marley's music has changed the world. A visitor to the Castries, New Yorks and Londons of the world cannot fail to notice the vast number of people wearing African-influenced garments and variations of locks (even if most are by no means Rastafarians and have never smoked weed). Clearly, there is a Jamaicanization, or rather, an Africanization of Black Culture throughout the New World. No small feat for a three-million-people country!

There is a lot of talk about the world wide web and the information super highway, but I am a little bit disheartened because amid all that talk I hear very little from our leaders about content. Besides the promotion of tourism, carnival, and the jazz festival, we are providing very little content of our own. What I mean is, how much of our music, books, movies, etc. are out there? How many video and educational games are we producing? How and when are we going to address the content issue? Clearly, in terms of cultural content, in terms of putting our culture out there to mitigate the influence of other people's culture on us, the government and the CDF have a role to play.

In dollar terms, entertainment (music, movies, theater, etc.) is the largest industry on earth. The greatest influence America has on the world is not through its military, nor its financial aid, but through the export of its way of life, its culture: music, movies, books, television, fast foods. As a resource-poor country what are we doing to corner a fair share of this multi-trillion dollar entertainment pie? Continuing advances in music, video, computing and cinematic technology are making the creation of quality cultural products more affordable. The beauty about cultural



products like books, music and film is that once they are in place they face a potential market of six billion people, and at high volumes the per unit reproduction cost is negligible. Furthermore, once there continues to be a demand for the product, production and sales can continue into perpetuity (case in point, Bob Marley's music). At sufficient volumes, even if net profit from the sale of any one unit were only a fraction of a dollar, total profits could still amount to millions of dollars. Often times all it takes is for one song, one book, one piece of painting, or one movie to achieve prominence. Because once this one song or one book achieves financial success all previous and subsequent works of that author acquire greater demand and value.

Culture as a Public Good

A relevant question at this point is that if the entertainment industry can be so lucrative why do our artists need financial and other support from the CDF or the government? The rewards to be had should be motivation enough for artists to bring their craft to international standards, and to produce cultural products for the world market.

Here is the problem. A lot has to happen before the artist arrives at a level where his craft is on par with international levels. And even when the his art is as good as what is produced anywhere else, a lot has to happen in terms of packaging, marketing and promotion before the art can enter the shop window of the world. Very often it takes

years of working at his craft before the artist can arrive at an acceptable level, and sometimes much longer before the artist's work catches the imagination of the public. What often happens is that the artist's home market is sufficiently large to allow the artist to live off his creativity, even while developing his craft.

On the contrary, one reality of small economies like St. Lucia is that the market is too small to fully support artists. Too few books, CDs, or paintings get sold to allow the writer, musician or painter to recoup cost, much less earn a living. For this reason businesses are reluctant to invest in the creation of cultural products, and many artists trade their craft for gainful employment long before they have reached internationally competitive levels. Among those who continue to produce, few invest the kind of time and resources required to create at international standards. Consequently, there is a paucity of books, music and other types of cultural products authored by St. Lucians and on St. Lucia that are marketable beyond our shores.

The sad thing is that while the cost to the artist may far exceed the financial benefits, the benefits to society can far exceed the cost. For example, of what value are the story books we read as children, the books that instilled in us the values of civility that have shaped us into responsible and productive members of society? Of what value are the works of Derek Walcott? Works that have given voice to our voices, have placed us on the world map and have made us proud to be St. Lucians. Of what value is the music of Bob Marley to society? Music that has changed the world, has helped forged a cultural bond across the West Indian Civilization and across African descendants no matter where they live, music that has become the voice of protest for the suppressed and dispossessed of the world. Clearly, the value to society of cultural products can far exceed the cost of production or the financial benefits to be had by the artist, particularly in small economies like St. Lucia.

Because of that, cultural products need to be treated as public goods. A Public good is such that its consumption by one person doesn't exclude its simultaneous consumption by other persons. The inability to exclude others from consuming the good, makes it difficult for producers of the good to recoup their cost, therefore, left to the private sector, the good may not get produced or an insufficient amount may be provided. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the

society the benefit of the good may far exceed the cost of production, particularly since once the good is produced it is available for simultaneous consumption by all members of society. A perfect example of a public good is national defense. What often happens in the case of public goods is that the state subsidizes or fully sponsors the provision of the good.

If the CDF and government are to treat cultural products as public goods, besides the above suggestions, what more can they do to encourage the creation of cultural products and how can they raise money to sponsor such activities? Presently if a cultural group is registered with the CDF it is eligible for a 50 percent exemption on imported equipment and products related to its craft. Musical instruments, video cameras, etc. are very expensive, so even with this concession customs duties on these items are tantamount to paying twice for them. The cost of musical instruments discourages the formation of bands, especially since the money to be made from playing music in St. Lucia is so limited. There are almost no bands in St. Lucia that are on par with the top Caribbean bands. Were it not for the musical contributions of the police band (a 100 percent government sponsored

activity), there may not have been a band to back the calypsonians.

In terms of music it would appear that Barbados has far surpassed St. Lucia. To add insult to injury, Barbados has taken our creole, mixed it with soca and then exported it back to us. I should think that if any one were going to fuse soca with cadence and market it worldwide it would be us. If you were to walk into the major music stores of New York—the HMS's, the Virgin Records', the Tower Records'—you would find the music of Square One, Krosfyah and other Barbadian bands and artists, but not one St. Lucian CD. Are we locking ourselves out of a trillion dollar industry?

We need to go much further than simply exempting instruments from customs duties. We need to find a way to formally finance cultural development. How about a cultural levy on cigarettes and alcohol? How about setting aside 5 percent of all grants (no matter for what purpose) for cultural development? We have proven to be very efficient in getting grants to build stadiums, schools, jails, fishery complexes and commercial free zones. How about tapping into international sources for grants to finance the creation of St. Lucian cultural products?

If additional motivation for financing



Monty Maxwell

cultural development is needed, consider that a recent international study indicated that real economic development was predicated on the health and social (cultural) development of a society. In this world of globalization our cultural identity may be at stake. Besides, what's wrong in carving for ourselves a piece of this multi-trillion dollar entertainment pie? 🇸🇨

Thanks, Rameau

Though my feet do not speak the language
Of the steps and rhythms of your dance
My heart understands the lyrics of
The culture you unselfishly shared
The pieces of our past you upheld.

I have seen you as you are
Never as you deserve to be;
On makeshift thrones of borrowed lumber
on Independence Day in the park,
In naked country's disused discotheques
Drenched with the scent of the smelly white stuff
Dispensed from demijohns below the counter.

I have stood in sacramental awe
Imbibing each stanza of fluid note
That flowed like magic from your vyolon's lips;
You are an alphabet of mystique
Each time I have watched you play:
Hat askew, fingers walking the body
Of the thing you necked like a lover,
Your feet light, tap dancing on the spot.

Entouraged, as your menu often shows,
By gay and bouncy, *dwiatted chantwèls*

That pause from homely chores or from sweating,
Futilely, in the sweet potato fields,
Chanting a desideratum;
And the fellow on the goat-skin *tanbou*
Fingers recalling the ancestral kraal
Fingers itching, too, to shift the ashen cigarette
Locked in his chimneyed mouth;
The others that dance and carousel
That *bwiyé* for *La Woz* or *La Magéwit*;
Captivating as they always are
It is you, always you who spice up
The enchanting Kwéyol ambiance
That colours us different from our neighbours.

And so through you, a living legend
I send a prayer for missing comrades
Whose voice I still hear from the great beyond:
Roddy who loved 'mas and lived for the stage
And Eric the biggest voice in folk;
To the Queen of culture, unparalleled
To the cultured priest who raised Kwéyol high
To you and others yet unrewarded:
May you live, even though you die!

Now, play me that vyolon to a sigh!

—Modeste Downes