

***Jamesie, King of Scratch (DVD)***. Andrea E. Leland. Evanston, IL, and St. John, U. S. Virgin Islands: Andrea E. Leland, 2006. Running time: 70 minutes. (Universities and Private Schools: US\$250.00; Libraries, Public High Schools, and Nonprofit Community Groups: US\$99)

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The scratch band music of the U.S. Virgin Islands (also known as *quelbe* music) is rarely heard outside of its homeland. Like many other “traditional” or “folk” musics of the Caribbean, this old-time string band genre has survived on the margins. To compromised North American and European ears, its vaguely calypso-like sound might suggest touristic fantasies of never-ending sun, sand, and rum punch; conversely, given a contemporary “world music” spin, it might fall somewhere on the spectrum between rootsy authenticity and quaint nostalgia. But as Andrea Leland’s appealing documentary shows, this is an important cultural expression that deserves to be taken seriously on its own terms. Focusing on 79-year-old James “Jamesie” Brewster, a revered scratch band musician from St. Croix, Leland helps us understand much about what this music means to practitioners.

The film opens with a series of images that carry iconic significance in the context of Caribbean music making. Starting “from scratch” (which according to some folk etymologies accounts for the name of the music), Jamesie constructs a home-made stringed instrument resembling a banjo. The resonator (which is spherical but lacks a skin) consists of an empty can that once held industrially-processed fish. This sequence effectively suggests the creativity and resourcefulness of a people long living on the periphery, and points to parallels with the broader Caribbean. Virtually all of the Jamaican studio musicians who created reggae, for instance, tell of starting out on guitars, banjos, or drums they made from “sardine tins” or “butter pans,” before they could dream of owning factory-made instruments.

From here the story unfolds mostly through interviews with Jamesie and fellow scratch band musicians, intercut with bits of lively performance and historical footage. We learn something of the genre’s history, its basic musical characteristics, changes over time (including the ways it has been influenced both from within and without), and other aspects of the tradition that the musicians themselves consider important. A key point is that this is a music that “tells stories,” and thus serves as an important repository of local history.

We see almost at once a duality in the kinds of stories told through the music. One of the first songs Jamesie explains for viewers is “Fire in the Water,” about a naked female swimmer taken by surprise when some “seagrass” finds its way between her legs. This and several other featured songs (such as “How She Panty Get Wet?”) represent a side of scratch band music that clearly revels in sexual innuendo. But soon enough this imagery is offset by other songs that contain powerful, and often direct, statements of protest from the past. A good example is “Queen Mary,” about a 19<sup>th</sup>-century uprising against oppressive labor practices. Another clear expression of local labor unrest is the song “LaBega Carousel,” which includes the line, “me ain’t going work for no twenty cents a day.” We see in this Virgin Islands string band tradition, then, the same kind of topical variation (and potential for contentious dichotomization) that marks the histories of calypso, reggae, and other Caribbean musics. Indeed, this dualism in lyrics has lately become a central point of contention in morally-charged discussions of globalizing Jamaican popular music, where “slack” songs (centering on sexuality) are often unfavorably opposed to “conscious” songs (explicitly addressing social and political injustice). Though Leland’s film does not explicitly make the point, we have here another example of how music making in the U.S. Virgin Islands and other parts of the Caribbean might be seen as cognate—reflecting and expressing not just broadly similar political and economic histories, but historically-deep cultural values and tendencies that appear to be shared across much of the region.

Eventually the focus shifts. Much of the second part of the film shows Jamesie interacting with cultural Others in distant lands, as Leland follows him on a number of international tours. Although perhaps a disproportionate amount of footage is devoted to this part of the story, several interesting situations arise. We learn that Jamesie has a following of sorts in Denmark (the original “mother country” of the colonies that later became the U.S. Virgin Islands). A number of young Danes have become enthusiastic and respectful performers of scratch band music themselves, and some have even recorded with Jamesie. One encounter with a group of conservatory-trained Danish musicians at a music festival stands out. The musicians marvel at how difficult it is for them to play this “simple” music well. As a (White) good-natured Danish clarinetist puts it, “it was so simple, what he [Jamesie] did. . . . It’s very difficult to play simple the right way, but those guys are fantastic at it.” All of a sudden, we are on uncomfortably familiar terrain, reminded—however obliquely—of the kinds of racialized and

class-coded constructions that continue to bedevil debates about music and identity in the USA (and, indeed, much of the postcolonial [or neocolonial] world).

As we follow Jamesie to the U.S. Midwest, where he is warmly received at a number of “world music” venues, and then back to the Virgin Islands, the film strikes a number of discordant notes. At home, where he is the guest of honor on a radio program featuring his music, a local caller says on air that she does not like scratch band music and would rather hear a song by a U.S. hip-hop star. A passing comment by Jamesie earlier in the film now seems more meaningful. Waxing enthusiastic about how well people had treated him in Denmark and Germany, he had added, “but down here [in the Virgin Islands]—man!—they kill your spirit.” By the last section, we are aware that scratch band music is in fact an embattled tradition. Indeed, the film closes with Jamesie’s voice telling us (and, by extension, the group of local schoolchildren on the screen in this moving final scene), “we cannot let it go down. . . . I am fighting for it. And I’m staying with it.”

This is an intelligent and enjoyable film, from which the viewer can learn much about scratch band music. While appropriately allowing a subtle sense of malaise to creep through, Leland has managed to craft a loving and mostly celebratory portrait of one of the tradition’s foremost exponents. Hinting here and there at the insidious pressures and challenges facing this and similar musical traditions, she leaves us to ponder for ourselves the complexities and vaguely perceptible workings of the hegemonic forces that would seem to be a fundamental part of Jamesie’s story.