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Bilby, Kenneth

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A Caribbean Musical Enigma: Barbados

Kenneth Bilby

Center for Black Music Research

Columbia College

kbilby@colum.edu

Destination Barbados. Directed by Ola Balogun. The Cinema Guild, 1997. 29 minutes.

At first glance, Barbados might seem a viable candidate for the title of “least enigmatic Caribbean society.” Unlike several of its Eastern Caribbean neighbors, it was ruled by a single European power from the time of its original colonization in 1627 until political independence in 1966. Partly because of this, it became known as “Little England.” Along with this nickname went an image of cultural homogeneity, “puritanical” propriety and tidiness, and a relatively comfortable fit between imposed colonial culture and local identity. The postcolonial shift in perspective that has rendered such imagery highly problematic has occurred more slowly in Barbados than in many other parts of the Caribbean; but by the time *Destination Barbados* was completed in the late 1990s, it was well underway.

As a promotional vehicle for the country’s music, dance, and festival traditions, the film bears witness, in a peculiarly discomfiting and perhaps unintentional way, to the cultural dilemma of postcoloniality in a former slave plantation society. In one of the film’s more revealing moments, a local UNESCO official, Hubert Charles, tells us that not so long ago “people were of the view that Barbados was a cultureless society.” While the former “Little England” is hardly the only part of the Caribbean to have had this charge leveled at it, Barbados has arguably been more vulnerable to such representations than most of its island neighbors. Indeed, as Barbadian scholar and cultural critic Curwen Best (1999:142) points out, “Barbados has for most of its history been regarded as the Caribbean island with the least to offer by way of a vibrant indigenous culture.” In the Caribbean region—a part of the world that takes special pride in the vitality of its performing arts—the stakes are raised dramatically when the yardstick used to measure the health of a local “cultural heritage” is the one featured in this film: music and dance.

And so the film is at considerable pains to establish not only the “richness,” but the profound “indigenoussness” and “Africanness” of the Bajan musical heritage. In the opening sequence, an Africanesque percussion ensemble featuring congas and timbales sets the stage for a narrative

in which the themes of resistance to slavery, African cultural survival, and local creativity are never far from the surface (though it is not clear what makes the rather generic percussion group shown here particularly Barbadian). A disembodied narrator soon informs us that “the heroic memory of Bussa [a historical figure recently lionized in Barbados as the leader of a 19th-century slave rebellion] and his companions lingers on in a land fertilized by the toil of successive generations.” The same voice reminds us at another point of “the musical heritage of African rhythms” in Barbados, suggesting that this is at the foundation of “an evolving culture forever setting new artistic landmarks.” Juxtaposed with this lofty commentary are the more prosaic observations of a series of on-camera spokesmen representing agencies such as the Barbados National Cultural Foundation, the Barbados Agency for Musical Culture, and the Barbados Tourism Authority. One official tells us that “Crop Over [the island’s major cultural festival, which is also one of its considerable commercial assets] is one of the oldest of its kind in the western hemisphere.” Another states that “there is an ongoing argument that calypso got its origin in Barbados.” But it is in the imagery of the closing narration that we are presented with a neat summation of the film’s central thrust: “Barbados today: much more than a tourist destination—a people increasingly proud of their African roots, source of a rich musical tradition, of an artistic heritage that flowered in the harsh climate of slavery.”

By all accounts, these matters are not nearly as settled as this film suggests. While the Crop Over festival may well boast an ancient pedigree, the original form of it is said to have faded away in Barbados by the middle of the 20th century at the latest. The festival (or a facsimile) was revived with support from the government in 1974, and since the 1990s, “has been preserved within the context of institutionalized folklorization” (Marshall and Watson 2007:348). It is unclear how much real continuity there is between the Crop Over celebrations of the slavery era and the reinvented version that reigns today. Nor is the idea of a Barbadian origin for calypso easy to sustain (as a number of spokespersons in the film admit). Even Guyanese-U.K. pop star and music producer Eddy Grant, a long-time resident of Barbados who serves as yet another of the film’s spokesmen, is unable to agree, stating at one point that, “calypso is, as most people know, the music of Trinidad and Tobago.” And the larger question of African musical influence is no less problematic. Although there is no doubt that various African and African-derived musical practices once existed in Barbados (Handler and Frisbie 1972), the island today appears to lack the kind of indigenous “neo-African” drum-based traditions still found in most other countries in the region. The closer one looks, the more it begins to appear that Barbados has been busy reinventing itself in recent years, musically and otherwise—not

just as a black Caribbean, but an *African*-Caribbean, society.

Perhaps partly for this reason, scholars working on Barbadian expressive culture in recent years have been led to develop more subtle methods in assessing the African contribution to the Barbadian musical heritage. It turns out that challenging Eurocentric stereotypes (or Afrocentric ones, for that matter) of Bajan cultural poverty—defined most often as a lack of a vibrant “indigenous” culture—is no simple matter. There appear to be only two, closely related local performance traditions whose credentials as major indigenous forms are beyond dispute. The first is the *tuk band*—a type of marching band similar to the fife and drum ensembles found more widely in the Anglophone Caribbean (Meredith 2003). The second is the *Landship*—a kind of friendly society that organizes staged “naval maneuvers” along with marching, music, and dance (with music typically provided by tuk bands) (Burrowes 2005). While these two traditions receive virtually no coverage in the film, they have come to occupy a place of central importance for Barbadian cultural theorists, no doubt partly because they are indisputably indigenous to the island (Best 1999:9-20). Neither appears particularly “African” on the surface. Tuk bands, at least nowadays, use imported, factory-made side and bass drums and flutes (“pennywhistles”), and resemble British and Euro-American (as well as some African-American and Caribbean) fife and drum bands; their music, while certainly displaying some “African” characteristics, is clearly the product of a complex process of creolization in which European-derived components played an important part (Millington-Robertson 1991:39; Meredith 2005). Landship performances, for their part, incorporate costumes explicitly modeled on the uniforms of the British Royal Navy. Partly because of this, “for some Barbadians, the Landship is an embarrassment and a colonial artefact that suited a time when Barbadians were good at aping the colonisers in ‘Little England’” (Burrowes 2005:215). Despite the ideological problems these traditions may pose for postcolonial cultural purists and arbiters of authenticity, scholars such as Curwen Best (1999) and Marcia Burrowes (2005), inspired in part by creolization theory, have argued persuasively that they represent forms of cultural “subversion” and “cloaking” that allowed African-Caribbean cultural principles and aesthetic imperatives to continue in acceptable guises in a colonial environment in which possibilities for overt cultural resistance were severely limited.

By failing to give serious attention to these historically-deep, highly creolized indigenous Barbadian performance traditions, the film misses an opportunity to convey something of the surprising complexity of musical life in Barbados—which, as it turns out, is more varied and vibrant than one might think. Instead, the spotlight is kept on the kinds of institutionalized folkloric representations sanctioned by the Barbadian

government, such as the official calypso competitions that form part of the annual Crop Over festivities (Millington-Robertson 1991). Such events may tell us more about the music policies conceived by Barbadian political and economic elites, and the promotional and pedagogical goals of the latter, than about the actual “vibrancy” of an “indigenous culture” (Harewood 2008). The film ends, tellingly, with an onstage parade of lavish, larger-than-life costumes that are impossible (at least for the untrained eye) to distinguish from the fantastic “kinetic” carnival creations of renowned Trinidadian costume designer Peter Minshall. And one wonders what all of this really tells us about Bajan culture.

Among the Caribbean’s many ironies—and one that escapes this film entirely—is that over the last decade and a half or so, Barbados, though often found musically wanting in the past in comparison to some of its Caribbean neighbors, has risen to become one of the region’s musical powerhouses. Not only is it home today to a thriving calypso tradition (and a number of highly creative and successful individual recording artists), but it has produced several internationally-known jazz musicians and pop artists. Most significantly, drawing on *soca* and a wide variety of other Caribbean and other musical influences, a few Barbadian dance bands and recording artists—among them *Krosfyah*, *Square One*, and *Coalishun*—have pioneered an eclectic and highly innovative pop sound that has had a tremendous impact in the Eastern Caribbean and beyond. And so now, in the early twenty-first century, as Trevor Marshall and Elizabeth Watson point out, “Barbados is acknowledged as fertile soil for thriving African Caribbean musics. Although the island cannot lay claim to distinctive music beats comparable to those of Jamaica or Trinidad, Barbadians can take pride in the survival and resilience of their African heritage.” “The image of Barbados as merely ‘Little England,’” they go on to say, “has joined the ranks of debunked myths from a colonial past” (Marshall and Watson 2007:356-357).

As this passage suggests, what the most successful Barbadian musicians appear to have excelled at is the synthesizing of “distinctive beats” from elsewhere with their own Bajan musical ideas and sensibilities, coming up with new Afro-Caribbean sounds with surprisingly wide appeal. So while popular musicians from Suriname, to take one example, have yet to achieve a truly international hit with any of the thousands of recordings they have made in their own indigenous genres, a Barbadian band, *Square One*, was able to do so for them, when they covered the Surinamese kawina song ‘Faluma’ (originally recorded by the Paramaribo kawina band *Ai Sa Si* in 1998). Despite the fact that its lyrics, in Sranan and Saramaccan (two indigenous Surinamese creole languages), remained unintelligible to most listeners, *Square One*’s version of the song became one of the biggest pan-Caribbean hits of 1999

(The song was even covered eventually by Jamaica's Byron Lee and the Dragonaires—a kind of litmus test of pan-Anglo-Caribbean popularity.) One might argue that this story of postcolonial musical rebirth in local recording studios (and among Bajan touring bands) makes Barbados, in fact, one of the *most* (rather than least) enigmatic and culturally interesting societies in the Caribbean. The increasing international popularity of Barbadian *soca*/calypso artists is also an important part of this still-to-be told story.

Unfortunately, *Destination Barbados* offers little to help us make sense of this enigma. Beyond the few nice snippets of local calypso performance it contains, it is unclear what its educational value might be. Viewers (including students) with a more critical eye might well be inclined to dismiss it as little more than promotional fluff for the Barbadian tourist industry. With some prodding, however, they might find that it points to questions of music and postcolonial identity that deserve further thought and discussion.

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