For Haitian Immigrants, Radio Remains a Passion

The New York Times

August 20, 1993, Friday, Late Edition - Final

Distribution: Metropolitan Desk

Section: Section B;; Section B; Page 3; Column 1; Metropolitan Desk; Column 1;

Length: 894 words

Byline: By GARRY PIERRE-PIERRE

By GARRY PIERRE-PIERRE

Body

When Guy Victor planned a protest three years ago to rally ***Haitian***-Americans against a Federal Government policy that barred them from donating blood, he estimated that, at most, 2,000 people would participate. Instead, more than 50,000 showed up.

"Sincerely, I was shocked," said Mr. Victor, the former president of ***Haitian*** Enforcement Against Racism, a Brooklyn-based human-rights organization. "We did not anticipate such a large crowd."

The success of the march across the Brooklyn Bridge to lower Manhattan in April 1990, Mr. Victor said, is largely owed to the ***Haitian*** ***radio*** personalities who exhorted listeners to denounce the policy, which they said unjustly stigmatized Haitians as carriers of AIDS.

Relying on ***Radio***

Haitian-Americans, like many other ***immigrants*** who relied on ***radio*** in their homelands, have clung to the medium in the United States as a primary source of information and entertainment. In New York, where an estimated 500,000 ***Haitian***-Americans live, three stations that broadcast in the New York area -- ***Radio*** Soleil in Flatbush, Brooklyn, ***Radio*** Tropicale in Hempstead, L.I., and ***Radio*** Verite in South Orange, N.J. -- have become community bulletin boards, offering prayers, news of Haiti, updates on immigration law and AIDS education, among other things.

And with the ouster of the Rev. Jean-Bertrand Aristide as President of Haiti in 1991 and the effort to return him to power, the stations have become town halls for political debate among the ***Haitian*** diaspora.

"***Radio*** is indispensable in the ***Haitian*** community," said Valerio St. Louis, a talk-show host on ***Radio*** Soleil. "They live off the news," Mr. St. Louis said. "They insist on learning what's going on in Haiti. When we have not given the news, they will call and ask what's going on."

Sitting behind the microphone recently in the cramped studios of ***Radio*** Soleil in Flatbush, Brooklyn, Mr. St. Louis was inundated with calls from listeners waiting to discuss the news of the day.

"It never stops," said Mr. St. Louis, who plays ***Haitian*** music interpersed with news. "Sometimes people call because they are upset with the political situation, and others call just to say hello or want you to mention their names on the air."

A Powerful Medium

The importance of ***radio*** among ***Haitian***-Americans has its roots in Haiti, where the illiteracy rate is about 80 percent and most people cannot afford a television.

"In Haiti, a peasant may not wear shoes, but he has a transistor ***radio***," said Raymond Cajuste, a film maker who teaches at City College in Manhattan and is the host of a show on ***Radio*** Tropicale. "He makes a conscious decision to buy the ***radio***."

Because they cannot afford broadcast licenses, ***Haitian*** broadcasters in the New York area pay ***radio*** stations a fee to piggyback their signals on existing frequencies. About 100,000 households have paid $75 to $150 for special receivers or computer chips that enable their ***radios*** to receive the ***Haitian*** programs.

Much of the Creole-language programming in the New York area used to be limited to a few hours on non-***Haitian*** stations. While such programs still exist on stations like WLIB-AM, WSOU-FM and WNWK-FM, the shows on ***Radio*** Soleil, ***Radio*** Tropicale and ***Radio*** Verite have attracted the most attention.

Frenzied Debates

On those stations, the issues are debated with a ***passion*** that can often reel out of control. At times the tone of the frenzied on-air debates is more like professional wrestling than National Public ***Radio***.

"I have been called a Macoute," said Pierre Hubert DeRonceray, referring to the Tontons Macoute, the private militia that terrorized Haitians during the Duvalier family's 30-year dictatorial rule, which ended in 1986. "Sometimes they call and talk about my mother."

Mr. DeRonceray, a reporter at ***Radio*** Tropicale, said callers often denounce him because his father, Hubert Deronceray, is the leader of a conservative party and opposed Father Aristide in the 1990 elections.

While the programs' formats are diverse, the topics continually revert to politics, and most of the callers support Father Aristide.

So when Arioste Denis, director of the United ***Haitian*** Association of the U.S.A, a grass-roots political organization in Manhattan, aired anti-Aristide shows on ***Radio*** Tropicale, to many listeners it was like yelling obscenities in a church.

On one show, "Appendre Comprendre," or "to learn to understand," Mr. Denis's main theme is Father Aristide's political inexperience and the Haitians' "political ignorance."

"We really don't understand democracy," he said. "Everyone has the right to express themselves, but we all don't have to have the same ideas."

'Such an Open Wound'

Many listeners say that while the shows provide valuable information to ***Haitian***-Americans, the hosts should tone down their oratory.

"I have my American habits, but I want the information that is on ***Haitian radio***," said Oscar Paul, 27, a ***Haitian immigrant*** who lives in Flatbush. "I want the news from Haiti because the political situation now being what it is. It's such an open wound."

Tamara Jean, 20, of Bayside, Queens, said she listens to Mr. St. Louis's show every afternoon because it does not focus on politics.

"I wish the others would play more music and do less talking," she said. "But they are fun and sometimes they can be very interesting."

Graphic

Photo: "***Radio*** is indispensable in the ***Haitian*** community," said Valerio St. Louis, a talk-show host on ***Radio*** Soleil. "They live off the news." He sat behind the microphone at the station's studio in Flatbush, Brooklyn. (Steve Berman for The New York Times)

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (78%); AIDS & HIV POLICY (78%); PUBLIC POLICY (78%); AIDS & HIV (78%); RACE & ETHNICITY (76%); HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS (76%); POLITICS (76%); RACISM & XENOPHOBIA (76%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (76%); BROADCASTING REGULATION (75%); PROTESTS & DEMONSTRATIONS (73%); IMMIGRATION (69%); IMMIGRATION LAW (69%); SEX EDUCATION (69%); NEWS BRIEFS (66%); LITERACY & ILLITERACY (65%); POLITICAL DEBATES (64%); LITERACY RATES (60%); BLOOD DONATIONS (58%)

Company: ***RADIO*** SOLEIL (NYC); ***RADIO*** TROPICALE (HEMPSTEAD, NY); ***RADIO*** VERITE (SOUTH ORANGE, NJ)

Organization: ***RADIO*** SOLEIL (NYC); ***RADIO*** TROPICALE (HEMPSTEAD, NY); ***RADIO*** VERITE (SOUTH ORANGE, NJ)

Industry: ***RADIO*** BROADCAST INDUSTRY (89%); BROADCASTING INDUSTRY (89%); AIDS & HIV POLICY (78%); BROADCASTING REGULATION (75%); TELEVISION INDUSTRY (72%)

Geographic: NEW YORK, NY, USA (92%); NEW YORK, USA (91%); NEW JERSEY, USA (79%); HAITI (99%); UNITED STATES (94%)

Load-Date: August 20, 1993