

## Preface to the Third Edition

**T**HE FIRST EDITION of this book originally arose out of a simple necessity that I encountered in trying to assemble readings for my overflowing Caribbean music classes. The amount of English-language academic literature on Caribbean music is growing, but most of it is, in one way or another, unsuitable for the general reader or for college students. Journalistic articles and websites on the region's pop music also abound, but they are scattered among innumerable sources and represent nearly as many perspectives and topics. Clearly, a need has existed for a readable guide to Caribbean music oriented toward a broad audience.

A more fundamental need, of course, is for greater knowledge of Caribbean music and culture in general, both in the United States and in the Caribbean itself. Caribbean immigrant communities now constitute significant and dynamic segments of North American society, making up, for example, well over a third of the population of New York City and more than half of the population of Miami. Urban neighborhoods throb to the pulse of Caribbean music, and Caribbean stores and products have become familiar and colorful elements of urban America's cosmopolitan landscape. Their impact now extends to hinterland areas such as central Pennsylvania, where a typical diner or pizzeria may offer "*mangu domincono* [*sic*]"—the Dominican plantain dish *mangú dominicano*. As the U.S. government and economy continue to dominate the Caribbean, the two regions have become more closely intertwined than ever.

This book is oriented toward a few distinct yet overlapping sets of readers. One group includes the music lover who has taken a fancy to some kind

of Caribbean music and wants to know more about the background of that style and about the region's music as a whole. Another set includes the student of Caribbean society or of pan-American society in general, who seeks an introduction to this most dynamic aspect of our hemisphere's culture. Last, but not least, is the set of readers of Caribbean descent, increasing numbers of whom now populate college classes. Many such students love the music of their culture and take pride in their ethnic identity but know woefully little about their musical heritage beyond the current hit parade. Ignorance of other local Caribbean cultures is even more prevalent, inhibiting the formation of pan-regional alliances and contributing to the persistence of rivalries and stereotypes. North American universities are only beginning to rectify this situation. Even in a Caribbean cauldron such as New York City, very few colleges have made an effort to recognize the music cultures of their immigrant populations, whether because of a Euro-American ethnocentric disdain or a lack of qualified teachers and suitable course materials.

*Caribbean Currents* has attempted to address this need, by providing a readable and informative overview of Caribbean music for the student and general reader. Although this book contains much new information, especially on recent developments that are only beginning to be documented in print, it does not pretend to be an original scholarly monograph. Similarly, it does not attempt to be a comprehensive reference book on Caribbean music, which would demand a volume several times the size of this one. Instead, it is, by choice, a book with a circumscribed scope. For one thing, I have adopted a relatively narrow conception of the "Caribbean Basin," excluding, for example, the musics of coastal Venezuela, Central America, and Mexico, however interesting they may be. Further, even within such limits, instead of attempting to include all possible genres and subcategories, I have endeavored to highlight the most important and representative aspects of each music culture rather than attempting to include all possible genres and subcategories. As a result, a considerable range of subjects, from Cuban *changüí* to Jamaican *benta* music, is not fully covered herein. To the Cubanophile interested in her island's *arará* drumming, for example, I offer my apologies—and a set of recommended readings. But, as the title promises, rumba and reggae, among many other genres, are definitely present, and they are given much more thorough treatment than would be possible in a sketchy survey that attempted to touch on every category.

Production of a third edition of this book seemed appropriate for several reasons. The first edition, printed in 1995, clearly served its purpose, as it sold well among both college students and lay readers and received the Annual Best Book Prize from the Caribbean Studies Association. However, the

## Excerpt • Temple University Press

decade after 1995 saw a number of significant developments in Caribbean music, from the flowering of reggaeton and timba to the mainstreaming of Dominican bachata, not to mention the emergence of an entire new generation of performers. The sheer volume of accessible information on Caribbean music also increased dramatically, both on the Internet and in publications by Gage Averill, Robin Moore, Norman Stolzoff, Ned Sublette, Chris Washburne, and others. The second edition, produced in 2006, reflected many of these developments and contained various revisions and additions. Among these were some charcoal renderings of photos, drawn by me and intended less to highlight my artistic talent, which is in any case unimpressive, than to avoid copyright complications.

Given the rapidity with which Caribbean music evolves and new information about it appears, the 2006 edition, too, found itself in need of updating. To that end, I am pleased to be able to present this third edition, for which Michael Largey wrote Chapter 6 and I wrote (and take sole responsibility for) the remainder. This new edition incorporates much information from recent publications, such as those by Geoffrey Baker, Donna Hope, Sydney Hutchinson, and Robin Moore, as well as from the vast amount of material on the Internet. More importantly, it covers significant recent developments, including the ongoing reggaeton and bachata boom, the expansion of music videos, the impact of the Internet, the restructuring of the music industry, and the ongoing colorful perversities of the Jamaican dancehall scene. It also discusses dance styles in much greater depth than the earlier editions. In general, it is also laden with miscellaneous new material and reworkings of the old, reflecting my ongoing education in the field.

In writing this edition I have drawn heavily from the earlier work of such writers as Leonardo Acosta, Alejo Carpentier, Juan Flores, Donald Hill, Argeliers León, Gordon Lewis, Fernando Ortiz, John Storm Roberts, and Gordon Rohlehr, and—among the more current generations of writers (in addition to those mentioned above)—Paul Austerlitz, Hal Barton, Orlando Fiol, David Garcia, Frank Korom, Benjamin Lapidus, Deborah Pacini, Stephen Steumpfle, and Amanda Villepastour, to name but a few. Particularly useful and inspiring in writing the Jamaica chapter was the monumental work of Kenneth Bilby, who contributed to the earlier editions of this book. Journal articles by Enrique Fernandez, Daisane McClaine, Gene Scaramuzzo, and others have also been helpful, and I am indebted to these authors not only for the information they provided but also for more than one felicitous turn of phrase that I have borrowed.

More specific thanks are due to the many individuals and institutions that have assisted me in completing this volume. Delfin Pérez and Chris

Washburne were invaluable Latin music gurus. Regarding the researching of Indo-Caribbean music, I must mention Narsaloo Ramaya, Ajeet Praimsingh, Kries Ramkhelawan, Rudy Sasenarine, Moean Mohammad, Mukesh Ragoo, and Mungal Patesar. I have also been fortunate to have at hand another set of excellent informants in the more than one thousand Caribbean students who have taken my classes at John Jay College and who have been of invaluable help in keeping me in touch with current developments and in providing their perspectives on music. I have also learned much from my current and former students at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, especially Manuela Arciniegas, Ryan Bazinet, Javier Diaz, Johnny Frias, Stephanie Jackson, Angelina Tallaj, Janice Mahinka, and others already mentioned.

For their help in collecting photographs for the volume, thanks are due to John Amira, the Ethnic Folk Arts Center, Sydney Hutchinson, Sandra Levinson of the Center for Cuban Studies, Chantal Regnault, Roberta Singer of City Lore, and Lois Wilcken. Donald Hill guided me through the treacherous world of copyright permissions. I also thank Sophia Manuel for trying to teach me how to draw with charcoal, Liliana for keeping me up on current developments in the club scene, and Beth for letting me neglect domestic duties to undertake Caribbean research trips (which mostly consisted of various sorts of “liming”). On behalf of Michael Largey, gratitude is also extended to Gage Averill, Lolo Beaubrun, Allison Berg, Dominique Cyrille, Laura Donnelly, Julian Gerstin, and Jocelyne Guilbault. Finally, I thank Susan Deeks and Joan Vidal for the fine copyediting.

## Introduction

*The Caribbean Crucible*

**T**HE GLOBAL IMPACT of Caribbean music constitutes something of an enigma in world culture. How could music styles of such global popularity and influence be fashioned by a population that makes up well under 1 percent of the world's peoples, scattered in an archipelago, and quite lacking in economic and political power? How is it that reggae, emanating from small and impoverished Jamaica, can resound and be actively cultivated everywhere from Hawaii to Malawi? Why should it be Cuba that produces the style that comes to dominate much of African urban music in the mid-twentieth century? Or, to go further back in time, what made the Caribbean Basin so dynamic that its Afro-Latin music and dance forms such as the *sarabanda* and *chacona* could take Spain by storm in the decades around 1600 and go on to enliven Baroque music and dance in Western Europe?

This book may not definitively answer these questions, although a few hypotheses are indeed suggested. On a metaphorical level, the Caribbean has been likened to a fuse that connects the Old Worlds—Europe and especially Africa—to the New World, and with so much energy and intensity passing through it, that fuse gets very, very hot, with a heat that generates music of extraordinary expressivity. Perhaps somewhat more tangibly, the Caribbean, like certain other parts of the New World, constituted a site where those two dynamic Old World music cultures met and interacted in ways that were unique to that region and its sociohistorical conditions. Much of the richness of these original music cultures was lost in crossing the Atlantic, but much was retained. In the crucible of the Caribbean—with its particular

## Excerpt • Temple University Press

combination of white political power and black demographic power, and of insular isolation and maritime cross-fertilization—these musical elements simmered, effervesced, and eventually bubbled over, enriching the world around with the unique vitality of the mambo and the merengue.

There are other senses in which Caribbean vernacular musics evolved as quintessentially suited to modernity and global appeal. Some have argued that the cultural encounter enabled African-derived musics to replenish the warm sensuality that centuries of Christianity had repressed in Europe, making Caribbean and Afro-American musics ideally suited to a distinctively *modern* aesthetic and social worldview at last liberated from such inhibitions. Other scholars, as I suggest later, have contended that the uniquely modern and expressive power of Caribbean musics has derived from their inherently innovative, open, and creole nature, as the product of people at once liberated from Old World traditions but able to draw on them, and having a heightened self-consciousness as being part of mainstream Western culture and, at the same time, on its margins.

Some of the vitality of Caribbean music seems to derive from its importance within Caribbean society and the sheer amount of attention and creative energy it commands. Caribbeans are well aware of the international prominence of their music, and they accord it a preeminent symbolic status at home. It is not merely that in Cuba a reggaeton singer can earn thousands of dollars a month while a doctor earns only \$20, or that legions of young Jamaican men dream of being dancehall deejays, with a Benz, a gold chain, and a “truckload of girls.” Jamaicans are well aware that artists like Bob Marley and Vybz Kartel are famous throughout much of the world—certainly more so than their political leaders. We can also well imagine the incommensurate renown enjoyed by Kevin Little in St. Vincent (population 100,000), or by Rihanna in Barbados when they generate mega-hits such as “Turn Me On” and “Diamonds,” respectively—with the latter approaching a billion hits on YouTube. Likewise, in Trinidad calypso not only spreads news; it *is* the news, with politicians, journalists, and other public figures endlessly debating and denouncing the latest songs. Indeed, when Muslim militant thug Abu Bakr attempted to seize power in a 1990 coup, one of his first (and last) acts was to set up an all-calypso radio station. Music, in a word, is the most visible, popular, and dynamic aspect of Caribbean expressive culture.

As styles like reggae and Cuban dance music achieve international popularity, they become part of the world’s cultural history, as well as that of the Caribbean. Ultimately, Caribbean music can scarcely be compartmentalized as a local, regional entity when some 6 million people of Caribbean descent populate the cities of North America and Great Britain, and when the world

## Excerpt • Temple University Press

is united as never before by the mass media and international capital. In a global village where Sri Lankan schoolboys sing Bob Marley tunes, Hawaiian cowboys sing Puerto Rican *aguinaldos*, Congolese bands play mambos, and reggaeton hits routinely garner hundreds of millions of YouTube views, Caribbean music has truly become world music and, in its own way, world history, as well.