

Our Musical Heritage
The Power of the Beat

The Grace, Kennedy Foundation Lecture, 2005

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Marjorie A. G. Whyllie

The Grace, Kennedy Foundation

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The Grace, Kennedy Foundation

The Grace, Kennedy Foundation was established in 1982 on the 60th anniversary of Grace, Kennedy and Company Limited.

The Foundation expresses, in a tangible way, Grace, Kennedy's commitment to Jamaica's development by making grants to deserving community groups, in support of its stated objectives, which are as follows:

1. To develop and promote the arts, health, culture, and sports;
2. To establish and carry on programmes for the development of education and skills of people in Jamaica;
3. To develop programmes aimed at the upliftment of the spiritual well-being of individuals.

Guided by clearly formulated policies, the Directors have focused on assistance in three areas: community services; our heritage; and education; the last receiving the greatest emphasis. The Foundation's scholarship and bursary programme is, therefore, an important component of its activity.

By supporting capable and talented people and those who contribute to the development of their communities, the Foundation works towards achieving its main purpose, the development of Jamaica's human resources, on which our future as a nation depends.

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Contents

The Grace, Kennedy Foundation Lecture Series

The Grace, Kennedy Foundation Lectures

The Grace, Kennedy Lecture, 2005

The Lecture

1	The Vibratory Nature of Things	1
2	Rhythm in Jamaica	6
3	Jamaican Drums and Percussion Instruments	13
4	The Effects of Rhythm	26
5	Continuity, Conflict and Change	29
	References	32

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- 1989 **G. Arthur Brown**
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Consequences for Jamaica and the Caribbean
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The Grace, Kennedy Foundation Lectures

The annual Grace, Kennedy Lecture has, since 1989, discussed some of our nation's economic and social concerns and aspects of our heritage. This year we look at how, as a people, music has influenced who we are.

We hope that that this lecture will foster much discussion as we seek to find answers to the many questions being asked at this time in relation to our future. Is there an answer in the Arts? Is music capable of leading us on a new path in our search for solutions? How do we find other ways of resolving conflicts, of softening citizens who live in a 'harsh environment'? How do we point our children to a more caring and just existence?

Most Jamaicans enjoy music! As this lecture is circulated to our institutions – schools, libraries and homes – let us engage in the conversation that it is sure to generate.

The Foundation, as always, welcomes your comments.

Patricia Robinson

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GRACE, KENNEDY FOUNDATION

Grace, Kennedy Foundation Lecture, 2005

The musical heritage of Jamaica is rich, textured and complex. It includes the remnants of the sounds of our indigenous peoples, the classic strains of the old masters brought to the Caribbean by the European colonizers, the variety of drum beats and other rhythms of the vast African continent brought here by the slaves, who used this music to sustain their culture and to hold fast to the memories of their homeland. It is infected by the musics of other settlers and it is strongly represented by the emergent musical forms which have evolved out of the creative imagination of our many talented musicians over the years. From quadrille to mento, ska, rocksteady, reggae, soca and dancehall, musical forms have emerged and their rhythms have captured the hearts, minds and bodies, not only of the people of our island, but also of the rest of the Caribbean and the world.

The Grace, Kennedy Foundation is pleased to explore our musical heritage in its 2005 lecture and is particularly happy that Ms Marjorie Whyllie has agreed to lead this exploration. An accomplished musicologist and band leader, she is also a composer and arranger, a performer and a music educator. Her first public concert appearance took place in Kingston in 1950 when she was six years old and in 1959, when she was 15 years old, she gave her debut concert at the Institute of Jamaica presenting the works of Bach, Beethoven, Chopin and Debussy. She successfully completed an honours degree in Spanish at the University of the West Indies (UWI) on a Jamaica government teacher's scholarship and taught Spanish and music

at Kingston College for eight years. Music remained a priority for her, however, and during this time she was also involved in training workshops in music, dance and traditional folk forms for the Ministry of Education and the Cultural Development Commission. She also pursued a Diploma in Music Education at the Jamaica School of Music (now incorporated into the Edna Manley College for the Visual and Performing Arts) during this period.

Music claimed her fully in 1975 when she became Head of the Folk Music Research Department of the Jamaica School of Music and in 1982 she was appointed Director of Studies. From 1985 to 2002, Ms Whyllie served as a consultant to a number of projects in the field of music: she created and presented *Vibrations*, a television magazine programme for children, she has been consultant to the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission (JCDC) on a variety of assignments, and to the tourism sector through her work with the Tourism Product Development Company (TPDCo), the Jamaica Tourist Board and Sandals Resorts International. She chaired the review panel for the music curriculum in the Reform of Secondary Education (ROSE) project, and since 1994 has been the coordinator of the JCDC Mento Documentation Project. In 1996 she served for one year as locum tenens for the Director of Music at the Philip Sherlock Centre for the Creative Arts at the UWI and in 2002 she returned to take up that post when the incumbent retired. She currently lectures on Caribbean musics and the use of music as a catalyst in the learning environment. She has continued her work with the JCDC, with the Joint Board of Teacher Education as an external assessor, with the Caribbean

Examinations Council (CXC) as Examiner/Consultant in music and she is also a co-opted member on the Fine Arts Board of Studies of the University Council of Jamaica.

Ms Whyllie is an old girl of St Andrew High School and she has taken Jamaican music to many parts of the world. In the Caribbean, she has conducted workshops on Caribbean folk songs and rhythms in Trinidad, Dominica and the Cayman Islands. She has been a featured performer in jazz festivals in St Lucia, Antigua, Barbados, Trinidad and Jamaica as well as in London, Birmingham, The Hague, Berlin, Hamburg, Montreux, New York, Washington and Paris. Her one-woman show *From the Cradle to the Grave: Jamaican Rhythm and Music in the Stages of Life* has been presented at Carib Expo in Trinidad and in Jamaica as well as in England, Canada, the USA and Germany.

Internationally also, she has been a visiting artist in high schools in Ontario, Canada, artist in residence at Camden Arts College in London, England, and delivered several lectures in that city as well as in Nottingham and Birmingham. She also served as consultant to the BBC on a television documentary on Jamaican Independence. While in England she devised a play/study programme for six to eleven year olds using an Ananse story as the basis for developing performance skills in acting, singing, basic instrumental accompanying and dance, culminating in a performance at the Royal Festival Hall. She has also performed at *Commonwealth in Concert* in Edinburgh, Scotland, as well as with Jazz Jamaica in London and Paris, with Monty Alexander at New York's Blue Note and was resident performer at Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club in Soho, London.

Ms Whylie has been a member of the National Dance Theatre Company since 1965 and its Musical Director since 1967. She has also been orchestra leader for many Little Theatre Movement pantomimes. She leads her own group, Whylie Wrhythm, which has a repertoire of popular, Latin, light classical and jazz music. She has received many honours for her work in music and music education: from her alma mater St Andrew High School; the Pelican Award from the Guild of Graduates, UWI; a bronze Musgrave Medal from the Institute of Jamaica; the Jamaica Federation of Musicians Award; the Kiwanis Club of New Kingston Professional Achievement Award; and the national honour of Order of Distinction. She was inducted into the Jamaica Jazz Hall of Fame in 1997 and in August of 2004 she received the Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Theatre and Music.

The 2005 lecture is delivered in both speech and rhythm, the rhythm captured in this volume on the accompanying compact disc. The Grace, Kennedy Foundation is honoured to present this special lecture to Jamaica and expects that both the text and the rhythm will inform and excite further exploration of our very rich musical heritage.

Elsa Leo-Rhynie
Grace, Kennedy Lecture Committee
February 2005



Marjorie A. G. Whylie

The Lecture

The Vibratory Nature of Things

According to the Gospel of St John, “In the beginning was the Word.” The scientists’ theory is that of the Big Bang. Not at all contradictory in my estimation, as both the Word and the Big Bang are expressions of awesome power, resounding power, setting everything oscillating in vibratory motion. The vibration of particles and objects that produce sound in our bodies, in our world and throughout nature, demonstrates the existence of an energy that extends not only to the far corners of our galaxy, but to the whole universe.

Astronomers tell us that a massive black hole releases sound waves in a deep bass pitch. In October 2003 the news website of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (www.cbc.ca) posted information that NASA’s orbiting Chandra X-ray observatory was able to ‘listen’ to sound waves coming from deep within the Perseus cluster. This giant group of galaxies 250 million light-years from Earth was being studied with great excitement and focus. This is a difficult fact for our minds to grasp as a light-year is the distance that light travels in a year in a vacuum. What is interesting for those of a musical inclination is the fact that astrophysicists at NASA also found the pitch of the sound to be about 57 octaves below middle C, the note which is roughly in the middle of a standard piano keyboard, and the frequency to be more than a million times deeper than the limits of human perception. Before, black holes were thought to give off energy

as light and heat; now, we know that energy is also released as sound.

At the other end of the spectrum are the vibrations of cells. Professor of chemistry Jim Gimzewski, in a research laboratory at the University of California in Los Angeles, discovered that a minute cell of yeast, observed through an atomic force microscope and subjected to computer imaging, has the motion of its membranes recorded, providing discernible high-pitched sound which can be listened to (Niemark, 2004). The whole universe is alive with sound, humming melody and harmony, alive with rhythm, with sound waves being sent and received – sounds of stars and mud pools, crickets and toads, the songs of birds and dolphins, the buzzing of bees and the roar of the lion. To this we may add water crashing against rocks, the howling wind, rain showers and thunder. These sounds are omnipresent, often above and below the threshold of conscious hearing. So fundamental is the sound material that it must influence everything that we experience through feeling and thinking.

Music, however, is a special type of sound. Whereas a bottle crashing to the floor produces unordered, unstructured sound waves whose frequencies and volumes bear no relationship to each other – that is, noise – the patterns of vibration that produce music are organized into systems – elements of melody, harmony, rhythm, durational relationships and clear proportions. Music is a language, a human language accompanying the stages of life and rites of passage, affecting emotions, levels of consciousness, spiritual response and upliftment.

During the nineteenth century, scientific research into the physiological effects of music measured the results of its action

on heart rate, the circulatory system, blood pressure and respiration. The findings were that body rhythms are affected by music; they can be decelerated and accelerated. Sound waves, on entering the body, stirred sympathetic vibrations in cells at an elemental molecular level, and the conducting of sound through the cells is facilitated by the high water content of the body (Dewhurst-Maddock, 1993).

Experiments have shown that the heart rate and breath can be slowed by listening to music with a steady, regular pulse of about sixty beats a minute. The fairly well known *Canon in D*, by Johann Pachelbel, a late seventeenth century composer, works well in this instance. This process, called entrainment, demonstrates the tendency for two oscillating bodies to lock into phase, so that they vibrate in the same pattern. Interestingly, *Canon in D* is very often used to accompany the entry into the church of bridesmaids at weddings. More relevant to our culture is syncopation or irregular subdivision of the beat, occurring when a note is played just ahead of or delayed beyond the listener's expectation. It is most often experienced as physically stimulating and exciting. Our physical responses are even more complex when one considers the layers of rhythm that are played in combination in music for dance.

To our ancestors, the music of this earthly plane of existence was part of a sacred pattern and moved in a parallel fashion or in counterpoint with the music of the spheres – cosmic music – and obeyed divine laws. Since music, it is said, can bypass the logical and analytical filters of the mind, it can then make direct contact with the emotions, profound feelings and passions which lie deep in the memory and the imagination. Naturally, physical

reactions follow, and these effects are resonant on both individual and culture-specific levels.

Yet we must be aware that, contrary to the thinking of many persons on one side of the often heated debate on the value of Jamaican music, music itself is morally neutral. In other words, this potent force can be used to good effect or as a negative power, producing disorientation and irritation. Science is catching up with traditional wisdom, and there is now a body of knowledge, supported by experiment, analysis and thesis, on the affective power of music on the body and the mind.

In the 1990s at the universities of Munster and Dortmund in Germany, Doppler sonography brain scans found that when subjects listened to music, the blood flow to the right hemisphere of the brain increased. Music with very strong rhythms, however, increased the blood flow in both hemispheres, pitch and rhythm being processed in different parts of the brain (Neimark, 2004). This is significant for understanding how a good number of Jamaicans respond to music. To sit still while listening to music is well nigh impossible for the average Jamaican. I should like to suggest that such behaviour is learned, as rhythm – that is, the beat – is of primary importance in our musical landscape, and natural response to rhythm is movement, be it snapping of the fingers, reinforcement of the pulse by tapping of the feet, or movement of the head and shoulders.

These German investigators observed that melody appears to act on the limbic system; that is, the emotional core which moves one to feelings of discomfort and despair, fear, joy, sadness, excitement or peace. Physiological changes as volunteers listened to music confirmed beliefs that had been held for

centuries that music in major keys with fairly fast tempos correlated with a lightness, a sense of joy and happiness, while slow tempos and music with minor key tonality reflected a kind of sadness.

It seems that the whole human family needs music. Jill Neimark (2004) cites research done by the Rochester School of Medicine showing that the deaf are able to sense vibration in the part of the brain usually used for hearing. I should like to reiterate the fact that it is not only the organs of hearing that are responsive to sound; the cells of the body are also sound receptors. I can attest to the physical response to drumming and an ability to reproduce drum patterns by feeling the vibrations in the body of students at the Lister Mair-Gilby School for the Deaf in the Hope area of Kingston. The young hearing-impaired drummers then provided accompaniment for dance, or perhaps more accurately, initiated and supported dance sequences.

There is also no doubt that rhythmic music with a strong pulse has proven powerful in treating people with neurological disorders, as I also found in the 1970s in using the drum with a young child living with cerebral palsy. Not only did the vibrations of the head of the drum provide pleasurable response for the child, but the playing method requiring alternating hands and shifts across the pitch areas of the instrument encouraged improvement in muscle tone, strengthening and coordination.

Rhythm in Jamaica

Jamaican music, from the traditional offerings of the plantation period to the popular creations of the present day, through the creative output that accompanies and energizes the marking of milestones on the journey of life from the womb to the tomb, has shown an unmistakable affective power. It is a force that inspires, initiates and supports movement on the physical, emotional and psychical planes of existence.

From the earliest days of our heritage, the pre-Columbian period of the Tainos, music played a functional role in the celebration of the stages of life – birth, marriage, death – and in the recreational ball games called *arietos*. Taino music used bone and reed flutes, large drums with manatee-skin heads, and rattles worn on wrists and ankles. With the demise of this indigenous group, musical expression developed through the collision of British and African cultural norms primarily, with the insertion of Oriental and Middle-Eastern observations. European musical inputs include scale patterns and the triadic harmonies of hymnody, folk material in the songs and dances of artisans, tradesmen and sailors, military and ceremonial music, and the instrumental resources of the tabor, stringed and wind instruments.

The ‘power of the beat’ has been critical to the reception and appreciation of music in the island. There is very strong evidence of the survival of African features, most importantly

the emphasis on rhythm and the preponderance of drums and other percussion instruments in our music. These survivals are strongest where there is an overall supporting African tradition. Playing the most important role in keeping these musical elements alive is religious ritual of which rhythm – the beat – is an integral part.

The drum has pride of place among most if not all instrumental ensembles in traditional folk music and the popular musics of the present and the not-too-distant past. The drum salutes gods and ancestral spirits, it accompanies dance, controls possession, attends celebrations and ceremonials for the dead, provides the rhythmic support, the heartbeat, if you will, for rituals of healing, and is present through the stages of life. From the days of the plantation and slavery, the functional culture sought ways of achieving access to the Supreme Being and the higher powers, the spirit world of the ancestors, and to reach a transpersonal consciousness or the collective unconscious, whatever one may want to name these powers and altered states of consciousness.

Jamaican music has often been described as “the melody of Europe playing on the rhythm of Africa”. A true-sounding statement, but an oversimplification, as many European rhythms are alive and well as are many African derived melodies and scale patterns. The European melodies have taken on the beat of Africa, its syncopations and solo-chorus alternations, allowing room for improvised variations and extemporaneous expressions in repeated phrases. The European dances took on the rhythm of Africa as well, in dance stance, carriage, and performance style. Hence, the quadrille, which had started life as folk dances

of Europe, became stylized and formalized in the courts and ballrooms, journeyed to the Caribbean and was reinterpreted in the slave quarters by generations of instrumentalists and the 'hot feet' of Africa.

The Hon. Rex Nettleford often speaks of the fact that creative activity was not removed from the functions of everyday life, but came from a need to create new designs for social living that expressed a collective wisdom. This rich communal experience sought to come to terms with a new physical reality and psychic environment. Out of this state came new dialects and idiolects in the telling of stories that bridged the gap between the past and the present reality, the singing of songs that released the voice in all its expressive power, the energizing force of dance, the combination of ritual foods and herbs, and existential reality that stretched also into syncretized expressions of religion. A succinct observation of his is, "What better way is there of dealing with the oppressor than to use the religion of the oppressor."¹ I would add to that the use of that religion as a vehicle for ensuring the preservation of the cosmology of the homeland. The powerful form of rhythmically controlled sound facilitated 'communion and communication' with the higher powers, as mentioned before.

The Percussive Sound

The range of traditional instruments found in the island is fairly wide, and the percussive sound is the norm. With the exception of commercially acquired and homemade wind instruments, melodic lines and harmonic progressions are not sustained or smoothly phrased. The all-important beat also finds its way into

vocal production, accents and stress-producing syncopated figures in the flow of the tune. A certain tension also develops between the alternation of long and short notes and the juxtaposition of straight and irregular patterns within the same bar or in neighbouring bars of music. The tension is created by the sophisticated layering and side-by-side placement of patterns which, because of their strong and weak accents, appear to be combinations of uneven metre, requiring a simple metronomic beat to which all instruments relate.

The percussive quality of the voice is often heard in the singing at 'ni-nights' and 'set-ups', where male voices often sing wordless chants that provide not only deep bass support but also help to maintain rhythmic integrity:

tomarra a tomarra, tomarra a tomarra

OR

eheh heh heh, eheh heh heh

This percussive quality is also heard in the rhythms of work music, in short answering phrases, guttural grunts, and forcible exhalation of breath in time to the work being done, allowing the work gang to labour together like a well-oiled machine, and providing amusing ditties which make the work seem lighter.

Work music was not a creation of chance, but a skillful application of the power of sound and the beat. This sophistication and intricacy was evident on the African continent, where songs and rhythms accompanied tasks as varied as the felling of trees, with special creations for each kind of tree, and songs for rowing with the current of the river being quite different to those required for rowing against the current.

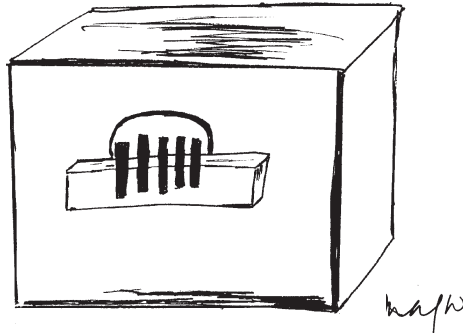
Much of this is disappearing now, with radios and tape recorders being taken into those fields which still require manual labour, and household helpers, if not tuned in to talk shows, often singing hymns, choruses and popular gospel songs rather than those songs like Mr. Potter which took on the rhythm of the coconut brush waxing and polishing wooden floors:

*Good morning Mr. Potter, good morning to you sah
Ah come to lodge a complain' to you now sah,
Ah plant a piece o' red peas a red Sally lan
Mary Jane an' pigeon come eat it out sah.*

This was accompanied by the *Johnny Cooper* rhythm, a functional creation of the coopers who made barrels for storing molasses and for aging rum for local consumption and for export. The rhythm is rather similar to the words of the children's rhythm game:

*Mosquito one, mosquito two
Mosquito jump eena hot callalou*

An instrumental counterpart of the bass/rhythm use of the male voice, mentioned before, is the Rhumba Box, known variously in the Caribbean as the marimba box or marimbula. A descendant of the African thumb piano – the likembe/kalimba/nsansa – this bass version has sprung metal keys for which the box acts as a resonator. These keys are plucked by the player, who is seated on the instrument itself. Heard in village bands, the instrument accompanies mento songs and quadrille and country dances.



rhumba box

Mento

The four figures of the quadrille are the *schottische*, *mazurka*, *polka* and the *valse*, but one may also find *la contradanse*, the *vospiana* and the contradictory *mazurka-polka*, a seemingly illogical mixture of treble and duple metre. With the evolution of a rich, vibrant and unique creole culture in the nineteenth century the fifth or 'brawta' figure was added, this figure being mento.

As a dance form, mento incorporates pelvic circling, feinting and dipping, and a balance step. As a song form, mento is full of social commentary, censure and recrimination in a vehicle of humour, touching on many areas that are almost taboo in the context of polite speech. Instrumentally, mento is a type of rhythmic organization employing syncopated melodies and the polyrhythms of traditional banjos, rhumba boxes, shakkas, drums and rhythm sticks. Its rhythms are related to patterns originating in West Africa which have developed into the goombay of the Bahamas, calypso of the eastern Caribbean, the rhumba of Cuba, the merengue of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, the bomba of Puerto Rico, and many others.

Instrumentation is very flexible, there being both commercially-acquired instruments and those which are homemade or improvised. By the end of the nineteenth century, mento had developed into the first dance music to enjoy national popularity, representing the product of what started in the late seventeenth century. This process saw many cultural inputs undergoing transformation through acceptance and rejection, and we now find 'mentORIZED' versions of work songs, ring play, dinki minni, gerreh, popular songs, North-American country and western and rhythm and blues songs and, curiously enough, hymns of both the orthodox and non-conformist churches.

Note

- 1 Opening speech at the Conference on Caribbean Culture, Edna Manley College, 1988.

Jamaican Drums and Percussion Instruments

Drums are unfortunately regarded as noisemakers. Those players who slap and beat indiscriminately on them have little understanding of subtle cadences and the efforts made in developing drumming styles and techniques that create rhythms that are perfectly suited to movement and appropriate to the moment. Sensitivity to all this is a consideration not often appreciated by the untutored ear. To satisfy the demands of the intangible heritage, that is, how people express themselves (be it in speech, music, dance or other forms), the tangible heritage (drums and other musical instruments, artifacts and so on) must be carefully crafted.

Drums are our primary instruments of rhythm and the range of drums in the island is very wide - from the specially constructed to rather simple improvised instruments. The materials from which the drums are made are usually those found upon the land or easily accessible within the environment. Some are carved out of solid logs, usually from trees which have a natural resonance; others are made of shaped strips of wood or barrel staves held together by metal hoops and fittings for tuning; still others are made from various hollow vessels and utensils which are used as substitutes for constructed drums. They come in a variety of shapes - cylindrical, tapered or square - and vary in size from those which are a few centimetres in diameter to those which are more than a metre tall and a metre in diameter.

Jamaican drums may be single headed, open ended, or double headed with skins at both ends. Drum heads are fixed to the bodies in various ways: nailed to rims, tied with withes (known in Jamaica as 'wis'), affixed by pegs which can be pushed in or out of the body to regulate tension, attached to a hoop or flesh ring which is held in place by cords, or fitted to a frame.

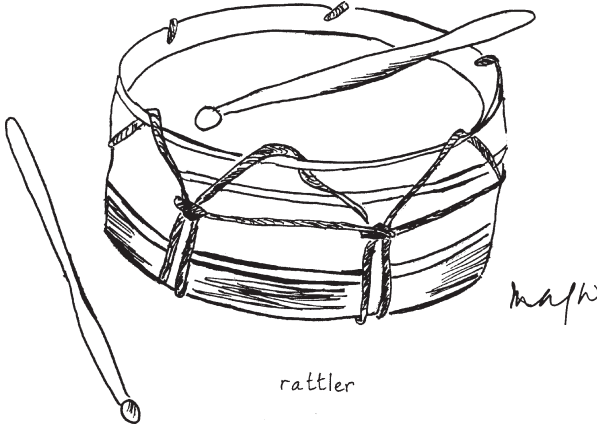
The techniques of playing are chosen according to the sonorities of the drum, that is, the natural tone or pitch of the stretched skin and the resonating chamber provided by the body of the instrument. Some are held in the armpit and some are suspended from the neck; some are held between the knees, while others are straddled and played with the hands and with the feet, which act as dampers. There are hand-played and stick-played drums. In applying the hand, one may use the cupped hand, the palm, the fingers and palm, the base of the palm or the thumb.

Drums are most often played in pairs to ensure the desired pitch contrast and gender relationship. A family or battery of drums usually consists of a male, low-pitched instrument on which is played a characteristic steady, unchanging pattern, and the higher pitched female lead drum which 'speaks' phrases and sentences, cuts and breaks – combinations of rhythm patterns that guide steps and variations.

The Range of Drums

The drum most commonly found in the island is the Rattler, known in various regions and in various ensembles as the Rattling, Kittling, Kettle or Kete drum. It is a double-headed instrument with a body made from shaped strips of wood or

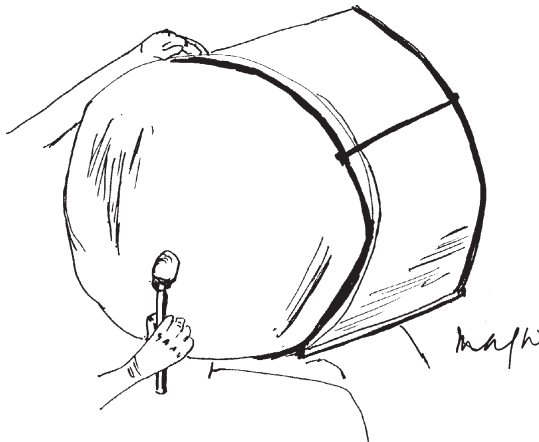
barrel staves, empty oil or paint tins, with goat-skin heads. The heads are attached to skin-wrapped metal rings or hoops made of withes, laced together across the body of the drum by cords in W-, Y- or X-shaped patterns. These cords, wrapped alternately over and under the rings, also serve to tune the heads. The Rattler may vary in size from 30 cm to 45 cm in diameter, and may or may not have a snare; that is, one or two lengths of wire stretched across the head, which is not being struck by the two slender sticks.



It is carried in the armpit or suspended from the neck and is used for **Revival** observances, **Bruckins Party** celebrations, **Jonkunnu** processions, some **Maypole** dances and **Gerreh** and other death celebrations. It is played as the lead instrument in conjunction with the Bass drum, constructed similarly to the Rattler but larger, and played with one padded stick. This family of drums is not unlike military-type European drums and those instruments used to accompany European folk dances, usually referred to as tabors.

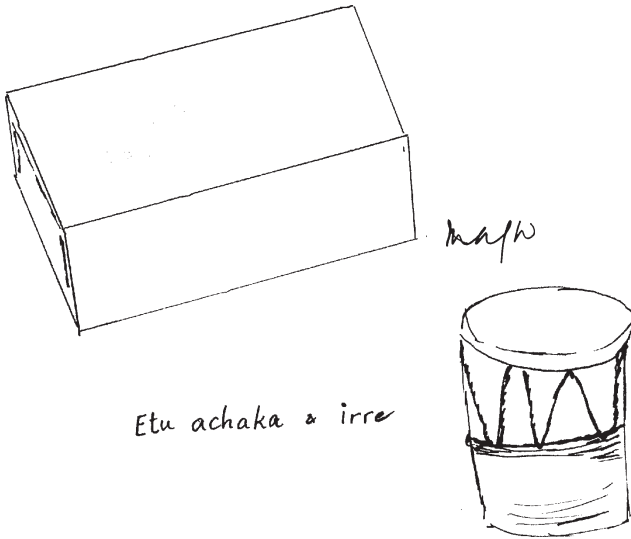
The **Buru** ensemble consists of Bass, Funde and Repeater. The Repeater or Pita – the lead drum of the Buru set – may have a wooden body, or a discarded oil or paint can may be substituted. About 30 cm high and 20 cm or less in diameter, this hand-played instrument is open ended with one goat-skin head affixed by a metal rim and fittings or a skin-covered rim laced across the body to a tension ring at the other end. It is accompanied by the Funde, of similar construction and also hand-played. Completing the group is the Bass, a slight variation on the Bass drum mentioned before. The head protrudes at least two or three centimetres above the rim, and it, also, is played with a padded, wrapped stick, or a stick capped with a sponge rubber ball.

The Buru set predates the better-known Pita and Funde of Rastafarian music. The family came to be adopted, adapted, enlarged, elongated, and modified into the battery of drums that accompanies ‘artical’ and ‘churchical’ performances, ‘bingis’ and ‘grounations’.



Rasta bass drum

In the western part of the island in Hanover one finds the **Etu** ensemble, a group of particular interest to percussionists because of the timbre of the instruments and the distinctive playing methods employed. In this group, which is of Yoruba ancestry, the instruments, language and many of the cultural practices are similar to the related **Nago** people of Abeokuta (near Waterworks) in Westmoreland. Both traditions employ the 'kerosene tin', a container in which cooking oil was sold and which was thereafter used for the storage of kerosene oil. As cooking oil is now packaged in plastic containers, new instruments have to be made by tinsmiths, as the sound required is that which is produced by thin tin sheets with their multiple vibrations as the sound bounces internally from side to side of this six-sided vessel. This is the secondary Achaka, the lead instrument being the Ire/Irreh, closely resembling the Rattler, but with a more elongated body.



A double-headed instrument, it is held between the knees, only one head being played at a time. The style of playing uses the palm, fingers and thumb as a separate unit. Using the thumb in this way is curious, and this technique is not found in any other percussion ensemble.

A descendant of the Ka drum of the Congo region is the **Tambo** drum, which is found in other areas of the Caribbean, namely the Virgin Islands and Guadeloupe accompanying the bamboula dance, and was also found in Louisiana up to the late nineteenth century. This drum, which has given its name to a formerly socio-religious dance celebrating the transition of death, now a simply social dance for couples in ring formation, is hollowed from a log and the head is affixed to the body by means of hooked pegs. Slits in the skin were stretched and secured by the hooks, the pegs also serving as tuners when hammered into the holes in the body of the drum. The player in this Congo-derived form straddles the drum and plays with the hands, dampening the sound and changing the pitch by applying the heel firmly to the skin.

The Playing Cast/Plain Kyas is the lead instrument of the **Kumina** set. Cylindrical and open-ended, it is made from a hollowed log, as is the Tambo drum. The head, fixed to a rim, is held in place by an outer rim of withes, which is wired and nailed. The male instrument, the Kbandu/Banju, constructed in the same way, is straddled as well and played with both hands and feet.

Maroon batteries of drums vary from one settlement or territory to another, yet in each, the gender relationship is of paramount importance. The Maroons of Portland, that is, of

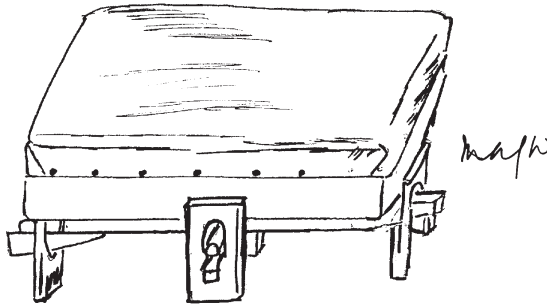
Moore Town and its environs, play a set of Kromanti drums, fairly tall, slender, cylindrical and slightly tapered. On these Kromanti Printing drums is played 'drum language' which calls the community together to participate in ceremonies and rituals. The secret language, known only to the specialist drummers and post holders, is also used to communicate with ancestral spirits and for invocation at the start of such events.



Kromanti printing drum

The male drum or 'roller' plays an ostinato pattern, a steady unchanging characteristic rhythm, while the 'cutter' as in other genres, is the lead instrument, guiding movement with 'cuts' and breaks. Maroons of Scotts Hall play the Gumbe, accompanied by a bamboo 'kata' rested across an X-shaped stand, somewhat like a sawhorse and referred to as the *kwaat*. The lead drum of the Accompong Maroons is also the square-

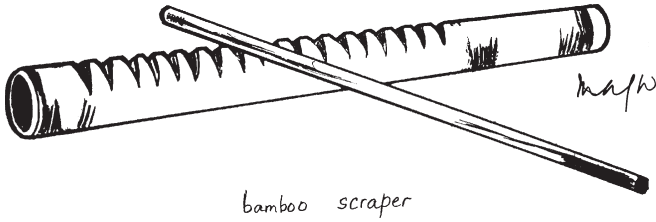
framed, stool-like Gumbe and usually completing that battery are a bass drum and two side drums.



gumbe/gumbay drum

The **Gumbay** cult of healing of Lacovia in St Elizabeth also uses the single-headed square Gumbe from which the group takes its name. Originally used for social dance in its original form in West Africa, the dense potent beats have been used to accompany a vigorous dance said to remove the effects of evil spirits which manifest as varying degrees of physical imbalance and illness.

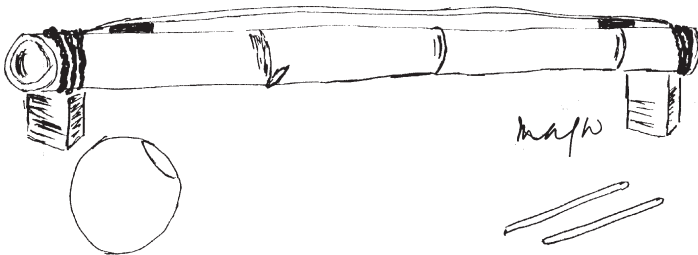
One must also mention ensembles which support **Dinki Minni** and **Benta** ceremonies of St. Mary. In Dinki Minni, a wake practice of Congo derivation, instrumentation is governed by availability. It is possible to find bottles struck by nails, graters, bamboo scrapers, shakkas without handles (made from seed or stone-filled gourds or stoppered joints of bamboo), rhythm sticks and bamboo clappers. Commonly used also are bamboo stamping tubes used to maintain rhythmic integrity. The stamping tubes are bamboo poles with the inner portion of the joints removed, allowing free passage of air, creating a booming note when struck on a rock or on the ground.



bamboo scraper

Just southwest of Highgate in Harmony Hall, a large empty oil drum, cut in half, is played with the hands, with the player employing a style similar to the Congo-derived Kumina and Tambo drums. The Benta, also of Congo derivation, is a tradition that recognizes an all-powerful god and a pantheon of gods which control the natural forces. Of interest is the lead instrument, a glissed idiophone (a self-sounding instrument) – in fact, a four- or five-jointed length of bamboo from which a string is lifted from the outer bark. This is held firm by a tight wrapping of cord that prevents further stripping. It requires two players who sit at both ends, one playing variations of a three-three-two pattern with two sticks, while the other slides a large calabash resonator along the string:

One two three, four five six, seven eight



benta, calabash and sticks

The Drummers

Traditional drummers play an important role in their communities. They are virtuosos, but specialists in their *own* traditions. As such, they are deeply aware of the significance of each variation and gradation in tone, volume, pitch – although indefinite – tempo and intensity.

For the most part, traditional drummers have developed virtuosity through long years of training and devotion to the art. In some traditions as in Etu, the drumming skills remain in one family, and the knowledge is passed from father to son, uncle to nephew. In other traditions, a fairly long apprenticeship is served on a drum of lesser importance or on a percussion instrument before the position of master drummer is assumed. The drummer must learn a wide repertoire of combinations of beats and rhythmic phrases and be familiar with a vast, appropriate literature of songs.

In socio-religious Dinki movement, the dance stance is a bent or relaxed knee position with both knees held closely together, the supporting leg or ‘front foot’ moving in directional progression, while the ‘back foot,’ placed on the ball of the foot, executes a dab step to the front of the body and behind, facilitating the progress forward or sideways, while the hips circle and the shoulders and arms move in opposition to the feet. There may be dipping, feinting and breaks, pelvic thrusts and partial extension of the leg. These complex patterns are supported by the beat, a strong pulse on the first beat of the bar, and the juxtaposition of straight rhythm and irregular subdivision of the beat. In a recurring count of eight notes, the stress would fall on one, four, five and seven, combined with one, five, and one,

three, four, five, seven and eight – complexity that is mirrored in the movement.

In the case of religious ritual, not only must the rhythms support the movement, but the players must also grow in intensity, in an ebb and flow to control the building tension in the faithful and invite or repel possession as is appropriate. In many instances, in Bruckins and Etu, for example, it is not unusual to find that the lead drummer is also the lead singer. During ritual observances or ‘plays’, it is the priest or priestess – shepherd, captain, king, queen, bishop – who leads, but it is the drummer that initiates and controls the pace, whips up enthusiasm and fervour, the relaxation or tension of the participants. The drummers must make the dancers move as one; must direct or drive; must be compelling and insistent; must lift to heights of psychic excitement and then release the dancers so that they may return to this reality.

Women Drummers

The playing of the drum, in Jamaica, is still a man’s prerogative rather than a woman’s. This practice harks back to the African continent where only the secret traditions of initiation rites and the passage from childhood through puberty to womanhood were attended by female drummers. These practices did not survive the Middle Passage and women’s participation in traditional drumming disappeared, yet they still helped to carry the beat forward with shakkas and rhythm sticks, graters, tambourines and handclapping.

In the 1960s this writer was exposed to drum rhythms as a participant in the dance theatre presentation *Roots* and

Rhythms, mounted in celebration of Jamaica's independence. It brought together dancers, singers and musicians, some of whom became the nucleus of the National Dance Theatre Company, led then by current Artistic Director Professor Rex Nettleford, and Eddy Thomas. During the summer of 1962, classes in Haitian dance were conducted by the late Lavinia Williams on the UWI's Mona campus, part of a continuing series of dance courses mounted by the then Extra Mural Department. Lavinia's daughter 'Ti' Lavinia taught the required traditional drumming styles and technique. In that class were Eleanor Wint and myself. Later, Wint went on to sing and drum with the Jamaican Folk Singers led by Dr Olive Lewin, and I became Musical Director of the National Dance Theatre Company, learning Jamaican traditional rhythms and patterns suitable for dance classes from Master Drummer Ronan Critchlow.

After an attachment at the UWI's Music Unit as a teacher of traditional African and Caribbean rhythms on the conga drum, a professional shift from teaching Spanish in high school to Folk Music Research at the Jamaica School of Music allowed me to pass on what I had learnt and to develop my own method of notation and a methodology for developing a sense of rhythm and creativity in children, as many of the School's graduates were absorbed into the education system in schools in both rural and urban areas. As the years passed, I was able to introduce competition classes for drums and percussion into the national festivals of the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission. Girls and women then took their place beside their male counterparts in performing ensembles, and developed as soloists on stage and in the tourist industry. The barrier still remains in ritual ensembles, however.

Traditional forms have found their way to television, radio and recordings. The beat has entered churches, first through drums and the ubiquitous tambourine, to be followed by the traps set/drum kit, and a host of electronic instruments.

The Effects of Rhythm

The human body produces waves of sound, rhythmic sound waves - the heartbeat, sounds of swallowing and the digestive process, the steady rhythm of the breath. Added to that are the creative elements of body percussion - finger snapping, hand-clapping, foot stomping, forcible inhalation and exhalation of breath, the indefinitely pitched grunts, groans and whistles which allow non-instrumentalists to participate in the music making process. How does this rhythmic complexity affect the individual and the community? Drums of different sonorities and percussion instruments of different textures affect areas of the body and, as mentioned before, guide movement patterns and sequences.

This phenomenon is easily discernible in the Kumina complex. The identifiable metronomic beat (a steady beat, like the ticking of a clock) of the katta sticks struck on the body of the Kbandu sets the pulse (metre) for the worshippers, the dancers who move with shuffling steps progressing in an anticlockwise circle, inching the toes along in flat-footed, close connection with the ground. The Kbandu replicating the pulse with a doubled beat separated by rests is the engine of this progress, its low-pitched vibrations resonating with the pelvic area, and it is this pelvic circling and thrusting that propels the body forward. The Plain Kyas, with cuts and breaks, directs

sideways and crossing movement and contraction and release of the trunk. The shakkas appeal to the head which oscillates gently as the neck is relaxed and 'soft', and the shoulders which move in opposition. Unchanging rhythm patterns also suggest repetition of small elements of movement and short melodic lines. It is this repetitive layering of regular subdivision of the beat and irregular subdivision, in constant point and counterpoint, that leads to autohypnotic states in which participants lose contact with reality, operating through an altered state of consciousness, leaving themselves open to ecstasy and possession – total psychic release.

The effects of the beat on the physical body are often therapeutic for both instrumentalists and those who allow themselves to 'float' on the rhythm, frequently releasing them from states of emotional distress, removing stifling inhibitions and certain physical limitations. Drummers report feelings of empowerment, heightened consciousness and upliftment, and an ability to communicate without words within the ensemble. Simple ailments experienced before an extended drumming session disappear. I have seen a bent, pain-wracked female elder throw away her walking stick on which she had been leaning heavily. She was transformed into a supple, energetic dancer who, when the drums were silent and she no longer felt the beat internally, reached immediately for stick and chair. Such is the power of the beat. The beat also facilitates communal movement towards the collective unconscious state as seen in the trumping/trooping of Revivalists.

We cannot overstate the importance of rhythm in the life of a neo-African culture such as ours. In the days of the

plantation, the drum communicated across great distances, summoning the oppressed together, signalling rebellion. In today's society, the rhythms of the night remove the social barriers between classes as uptown travels to downtown for physical and emotional release in Passa Passa. Rhythm also stirs the mix of middle class and the 'massive' at Carnival, where the uniformly designed costumed revellers jostle for space in the road march processional alongside lovers of dancehall music, their own mode of dress being a kind of empowering mask.

Continuity, Conflict and Change

The power of the beat is a continuing force in the music of Jamaica and those cultural traits affected by music. A fortuitous mix of Kumina, Buru and Rasta beats, strumming patterns of mento, and the ‘fertilizing’ influence of rhythm and blues and other North American and European forms have created ska, rocksteady, reggae and dancehall, the latter stripped of the expected harmonic structure and with little melodic movement, making it more accurately described as chant. The music, with its resonances of traditional forms, satisfied both rural population and urban dancehalls, its lyrics dealing with social conditions, man and woman relationships, condemnation of political excesses and the ignoring of the poor and dispossessed.

Through the phenomenon of ‘dub’, in earlier years, rhythm tracks that supported many popular songs ‘took life’, with occasional surges of the instrumental parts, providing a ‘bed’ of sound for the creative offerings of DJs. This spawned new genres of artistic endeavour. The birth of the DJ, ‘toasting’ over song and rhythm, gave way to the recording of these creators who then became authentic artists. Dub and ‘roots’ poetry also used this bed in its earliest manifestations, introducing clever and searching manipulation of language, rhythm and timbre to treat with the less than satisfactory conditions of Jamaican life and

relationships. This form soon moved away from already recorded rhythms, as poets forged bonds with musicians and drummers who performed live and subsequently created original tracks in support of the form, highlighting lines of particular power and poignance.

This turned on a whole generation to the power of the word – another kind of beat – and continues to draw on a growing cadre of devotees, and developed a market for recorded and published versions of this repertoire. Presentations of poetry are an important part of the entertainment scene, with structured associations, events and festivals becoming significant calendar markers.

The power of today's urban recordings lies in the 'riddim', and the creative efforts of various studio crews and musicians who have embraced the technology of the digital drum machines, synthesizers and enhanced mixing boards. So important are these sequences that whole albums are created with several artistes recording, supported by these potent combinations of rhythm. Each 'rhythm' is titled, making dancehall artistes often able to appear on shows without rehearsal with the backing band. Some of the most recent rhythms to appear are Badderation, Judgement, Drop Leaf and Cha-Changa. Artistes recording singles on these rhythms include Spragga Benz, Mad Cobra, Anthony B, Bounty Killer, Elephant Man, Vybz Kartel, Macka Diamond, Beenie Man, Tanto Metro and Devonte.

Popularity there is, but no total acceptance. There is undoubted conflict, expressed by newspaper columnists and in letters to the editor. The tendency by a segment of the society

to condemn all dancehall music as encouraging violence and antisocial behaviour patterns is shortsighted. We must be reminded that music itself is morally neutral. Most of this music is characterized by rhythmic intricacy, with a very slight nod of obeisance to melody and harmony, and therein lies the rub. The affective power of rhythm on the body makes it a potent vehicle for lyrical content, and the 'power of the beat' goes on and on.

In Jamaica, music continues attending the stages of life, from birth to death, yet much of the psychic and psychological underpinnings of this cycle are changing. The death celebrations which allowed body, mind and spirit release in the grieving process are being replaced by sound systems and the traditional foods are being replaced by the cuisine and commercially packaged snacks of street vendors. The beat continues – it is a vital part of the heritage. It plays a part in cultural upheaval and conflict, if only a coincidentally supportive role; it may add fire to the flame of controversy in the debates of civil society. It is evidence of cultural transition but, most important, we still use rhythm to foster cohesive exchange; we drum our way to better health; we sing our way to serenity.

It is my hope that the experimental work that started in the 1970s into the restorative powers of music, chant and rhythm, that is, the beat, in fostering alignment and balance of body, mind and spirit will continue, as the beat goes on, and on.

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