

ETHNIC FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4232

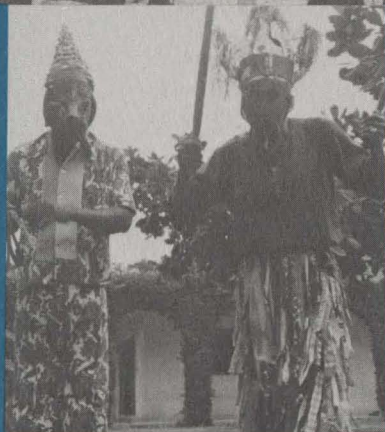
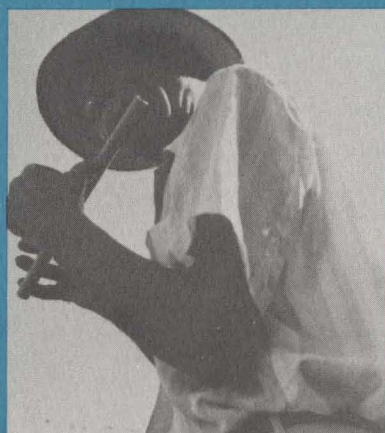


# Bongo, Backra & Coolie Jamaican Roots

VOLUME 2

Revival Zion, Wake, Quadrille Band and Fife and Drum

Recorded by K. M. Bilby





ETHNIC FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4232

SIDE 1

ZION REVIVAL

Band 1 Chorus

Band 2 Chorus

SET UP SONG

Band 3 Band of Holy Angeles

QUADRILLE BAND

Band 4 Round Dance

Band 5 Quadrille 1st figure

Band 6 Quadrille 3rd figure

SIDE 2

Band 1 Quadrille 4th figure

Band 2 Jane and Luisa

FIFE AND DRUM

Band 3 John Canoe Music

Band 4 Ballerina/John Canoe

©1975 FOLKWAYS RECORDS AND SERVICE CORP.  
43 W. 61st ST., N.Y.C., U.S.A.

**WARNING:** UNAUTHORIZED REPRODUCTION OF THIS  
RECORDING IS PROHIBITED BY FEDERAL LAW AND SUBJECT TO  
CRIMINAL PROSECUTION.

**Bongo,  
Backra & Coolie  
Jamaican Roots**

VOLUME 2

Revival Zion,  
Wake, Quadrille Band and Fife and Drum

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

ETHNIC FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4232



# Bongo, Backra & Coolie Jamaican Roots

Introduction and Notes by Kenneth M. Bilby

Jamaica is a small island by some standards, and it comprises one of the smaller nations of the world. Yet a great deal of variety exists in the folklore and music of this island. The folk of present-day Jamaica are the result of a fascinating cultural and racial mixture, and much of the island provides a virtual laboratory for the study of acculturation and cultural syncretism. Although rapid industrialization and the tourist industry are causing changes in many areas of Jamaica, many folk practices continue to thrive. In many areas, rural folk music co-exists with the urban reggae of the ubiquitous juke box; the advent of the latter has not necessarily led to the death of the former.

The word "bongo" is Jamaican creole dialect, and in its general usage refers to a person who exhibits traits, both physical and cultural, which are thought to be African-derived. The great majority of present-day Jamaicans are descended, at least partially, from the West Africans and Central Africans who were brought to the island as slaves by the English between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The amount of African cultural elements which have survived in Jamaica has been the subject of much debate over the years. Leaving aside the dubious issue of "cultural purity," there is no doubt that several African cultures have influenced the cultural admixture which is found in modern Jamaica. Such influence has been documented and can be seen in the language, some of the religions, much of the music, and many of the folkways of Jamaicans.

"Backra" is creole dialect meaning a white person, or a person who appears to be of pure European descent. A tiny minority of the present Jamaican population would qualify to be called by this term. However, Jamaican culture owes much to European, primarily British, cultures (aside from English, Scottish, and Irish influences, there has been some French and Spanish influence, probably from Haiti and Cuba). Although Europeans have always been in the minority in Jamaica, European culture (predominantly English) is the main ingredient in the Jamaican cultural admixture. This can of course be attributed largely to the conditions of inequality concomitant to a slavocracy: generally, slaves were taught or forced to repudiate their own cultures, and to place a premium upon the culture of their enslavers. Over three hundred years of English colonial rule has left its indelible mark on Jamaican culture.

The folk music of Britain has influenced much of Jamaican folk music. Yet it is precisely in this cultural domain that cultural exchange seems to have been somewhat more even. Even in instances in which melody or form is directly traceable to England, the rendition is always very Jamaican in flavor. In music such as quadrille music or John Canoe music, this "flavor" would seem to owe much to African-derived rhythmic attitudes.

"Coolie" refers to a person of East Indian descent. Another word which is commonly used, regardless of the person's religion, is "Hindu-

stani." Today there is a substantial minority of such people in Jamaica, most of whom are descended from East Indians who came to Jamaica as indentured laborers to work on sugar estates between 1860 and 1917. This flow of Indian laborers occurred largely in response to the dearth of labor caused by the end of slavery. East Indian culture has not made much impact on general Jamaican culture, but many East Indian Jamaicans have retained parts of East Indian culture while undergoing creolization. There has been some cultural exchange; for instance, in some areas East Indians have taken up John Canoe dancing, and have created their own unique costumes to go with it.

The music of the East Indians appears to have remained quite separate from other Jamaican traditions. In some areas the Hussay Festival, a Mohammedan festival from Bombay, is still held. It has been speculated that East Indian music has exerted a slight influence on other Jamaican music, which can be seen in the length and form of melodic lines. This remains to be investigated.

The largest centers of East Indian population are to be found in the western parish of Westmoreland, and in the eastern coastal parishes.

Outlined above are the three general traditions which have contributed to Jamaican folk music, in either separate or more syncretic forms. Some Jamaican folk music has basically African roots, some has basically European roots, and some has basically East Indian roots. And, finally, much Jamaican folk music is the result of a blending of these.

Jamaica also contains several other much smaller minority populations, such as Chinese, Jewish, Syrian, and Lebanese. The culture of the masses has been little affected by any of these. These minorities have tended to remain separate from the general population, and some of them retain customs which have not been absorbed by other segments of the population. The East Indians, however, have more often mixed and inter-married with Jamaican blacks, and in some parishes have spread their influence. Several originally Afro-Jamaican religious cults have been known to incorporate East Indian dialect into their services, and East Indian spirits into their pantheons.



Special thanks to Kitty Spence of New York for generous help; and to Mr. Percy Tennent of St. Ann's Bay, for making these recordings possible.



## REVIVAL ZION

Recorded in St. Ann

Revival Zion is an Afro-Christian religious cult found throughout Jamaica. It stems from the religious movement of the early 1860's in Jamaica, known as the Great Revival. At this time there was a sudden explosion of emotional religious activity on the island. It was by no means limited to the established Christian churches; new "churches" sprang up all over the island, without the sanction of the orthodox Christian churches, and they were most often led by members of the folk with no theological training and very little education.

Revivalism in general (this term includes not only Revival Zion, but also other related cults, such as Pocomania) actually goes back farther than the Great Revival and, it would seem, owes its origins partially to the Myal cults which were common in early nineteenth century Jamaica. These cults, stemming from West Africa, were involved primarily with counter-acting evil obehah through counter-spells based upon spirit possession. Some Revivalist cults still fulfill this function.

Revivalist cults were also greatly influenced by American missionaries, especially Baptists, who were active in Jamaica before and during the Great Revival. Even today a good deal of Revivalist song consists of hymns from the Sankey hymnal, a collection of hymns composed by a nineteenth century American Revivalist. Revival Zion is but one type of cult in Jamaica which combines these influences.

The membership of Revival Zion is composed primarily of rural, lower-class people; Revival Zion cults can also be found in the poorer fringes of urban areas such as Kingston, usually composed of people who have recently migrated from rural areas. It is estimated that approximately only one-tenth of Revival Zion cultists are male; the majority of cultists are middle-aged or older. Cult members often wrap their heads in long pieces of cloth which look similar to a turban. Thus, they are often called "wrapheads" by the Jamaican folk.

The leader in Revival Zion is called the "Captain" if male, and the "Mother" if female. The next position in importance is the "Armor-bearer," who closely assists the Captain or Mother in most duties. After the Armor-bearer come the "Deacons" or "Elders," who help with particular rituals such as Baptism and Communion. The Captain, or Mother, is always the prime source in the cult of information concerning ritual forms or spirit forces.

Much use is made of the Bible, and "Biblical doctrines" are supposedly adhered to; however, the leader of the cult is the ultimate authority in regard to doctrine concerning spirit forces. Spirit forces vary from cult to cult, but most Revival Zion cults are basically polytheistic. There is always God, the high god, the creator of the universe. Then there are various lesser gods, all of which are located with the high god in the heavens. Jesus Christ is often another god that comes down to Revival Zion ceremonies, but does not possess.

Other spirits sometimes include the archangels and prophets who do come to ceremonies to possess and dance. Michael, the archangel, is called the "chief messenger" or "bands messenger," and is responsible for giving messages or revelations to cultists who are possessed. The four evangelists are very powerful spirits, and

they are present at every service; they reside at and watch from the four corners of the shed (or whatever structure in which services are held), and they are arranged this way: Matthew is at the north corner, Mark is at the south, Luke is at the west, and John is at the east.

Other spirits are the great disciples, including Peter, Paul, James, and Matthias, and also there are the spirits of deceased Captains or Mothers who were either well-known in the area, or personally known by cultists.

All individuals in Revival Zion who become possessed are affiliated with personal spirits. It is said that it is up to a spirit to select an individual and become his personal guardian or adviser. In this relationship, the individual incurs certain responsibilities, such as "feeding" his spirit. These personally affiliated spirits come from the category, "spirits of the dead."

Revival Zion ceremonies are usually held in a crude provisional structure. There is always a "table," a kind of altar near the center of the structure, which is set with oranges, grapefruits, candles, and vessels filled with various kinds of leaves, or with water. These objects must be placed on the table in the appropriate manner, for they have important ritual significance. There is also often a pole in the center of the structure. The writer saw one such pole with a platform on top, which held a bottle filled with water, and parts of several bushes. At the bottom of the pole, on the ground, there was painted a circle divided into several sections; inside each section were painted various marks or symbols.

It is said that in Revival Zion possession water and the ground are the two transmitters of spirits. The spirit travels through the center pole to the ground, and from there into the feet of the person, spreading up through the legs, spine, and shoulders until it reaches the head. Sometimes the spirit travels into the water at a ceremony, and is transferred to a person through his lips and mouth.

Revival Zion music consists of Christian hymns, choruses, bands choruses, and blowing tunes. Choruses are songs consisting of a single verse or melody repeated over and over. Bands choruses are melodies sung mostly to nonsense syllables. Blowing tunes are melodies sung in "language" after one has become possessed. Singing in "language" is a type of speaking in tongues.

Choruses are usually accompanied by a bass drum and a side drum. The side drum usually has a snare made from rope stretched across the bottom. Both drums are usually made from sections of kegs, and are double-headed, the heads being made of goat-skin. Rattles and small cymbals are also often used, as well as much clapping.

When possession occurs, a type of heavy rhythmic breathing often accompanies songs. This is called trooping. It is sometimes also called trumping, laboring, or groaning. Dancing usually accompanies trooping; the Captain or Mother, and other cult members always dance counter-clockwise around the table while they troop.

The writer has seen no indications that Revival Zion is waning, nor that it will wane in the near future. It is still a vital folk religion, and may perhaps even be growing.



## Revival Zion

A. Chorus - (bass drum, side drum, cymbals, rattle, clapping) - The cymbals used are quite a bit larger than finger cymbals, but smaller than orchestra cymbals. The drums are the same kind that are used in fife and drum music, being double-headed and made from kegs. At the end of the chorus the Mother and her assistants can be heard trooping as they dance counter-clockwise around the table.

B. Bands chorus - (singing) - Trooping can be heard throughout most of this piece up to the climax. All of the trooping in this piece is done by women.

## NINE NIGHTS SET UP

Recorded in St. Ann

"Nine Night" is what country Jamaicans call a wake. Each night for nine nights after a person dies a "set up" is held. That is, friends and relatives of the person who has died gather together to sing, pray, and dance. The first of the nine nights is called "dinka-minny" and is usually accompanied by ring-play and other merriment. The rest of the nine nights are accompanied by scriptural reading, and the singing of psalms and hymns, as well as various other types of songs.

The actual burial is usually on the second or third day after death. The spirit of the dead person is believed to rise on the third night. Often there is a brief ritual on this night which involves putting a "rising light" outside the house where the set up is being held.

On the ninth night it is believed that the duppy of the dead person (which is considered to be separate from the soul, the spirit that rises on the third night) will return home. On this night a special service is held. Early in the evening mourners sing and pray. Shortly before midnight an equal number of black and white candles are lit, and eulogizing begins. Just before midnight the person presiding over the meeting (often a Revivalist cult leader) pronounces the dead person's name three times.

At midnight the presiding person is supposed to become possessed by the duppy of the dead person. Sometimes another person at the meeting will be possessed first. During this possession, the spirit is supposed to complete the dead person's final communication with the living; to express the dead person's wishes regarding his property, to predict future occurrences for certain members present, or to express any final desires.

When the possession is over the ceremony continues with more singing and game-playing. Refreshments are served. The candles are allowed to burn down, and when day breaks, the dead person's house is cleaned up, his possessions are distributed to friends or relatives who were present, and the mattress on his bed is turned over. When all of this is finished it is believed that the dead person's duppy will have departed; if the whole nine night ceremony has been arranged properly then the dead person's duppy will never return to bother the living. However, if friends and relatives have been negligent then the duppy will return and become fastened to one or more of them, and will bring trouble, sickness, and possibly death.

## Nine Nights Set Up

A. Band of Holy Angels - (singing, guitar) - This was recorded on the third night of a nine night set up. Most of those participating in

it were related to the man whose wake it was. The mixture of sorrow and forced merriment come through in the recording.

## QUADRILLE BAND

Recorded in St. Ann

By the early nineteenth century, at the latest, slaves in Jamaica were learning to play European dances on European instruments. Slaves commonly played at dances for the entertainment of the whites, and in this manner learned many European dances, such as the quadrille, the Scotch-reel, various waltzes, the polka, and the Mazurka. Certainly, when playing music at the balls of white planters, they had to produce dance music which sounded European enough to the dancers. Likewise, when playing for the folk dances of the lower-class Scottish and Irish overseers, they likely had to remain true to European tradition.

In spite of this, the slaves made the music their own. By 1825 many slaves preferred fiddle music and basically European dance music to the African dances to which other slaves clung. Thus, this kind of music began to be played by slaves, among slaves, for their own entertainment. Without the presence of whites at dances to dictate in the realm of style, the music began to change. By 1820 or so banjos and drums were being used alongside fiddles and fifes in bands which were playing European-derived tunes. The music gained a thoroughly Jamaican flavor; it differed from European dance music in its constant underlying syncopation, and its melodic style.

The type of band which evolved during this period still exists in the deeper country areas of Jamaica. Although at one time quadrille dances were regular social events in Jamaican folk life, it appears that they are rapidly dying. In the village where the writer recorded the quadrille band heard on this record, quadrille dances are held very irregularly. The young people love the music, and love to move to it, but very few of them know how to dance to it correctly. The older people complain that they are the only ones who know how to dance the quadrille correctly, because the young do not want to learn it the right way. The dance requires the dancers to accent the music by stamping their feet in unison at certain points.

Aside from the quadrille (which they call the "katreel"), the band heard on this record is familiar with Jamaican versions of polkas, schottisches, and waltzes. They also play several "round dances" which seem to be based on indigenous melodies. One such round dance which the writer heard had a melody very similar to that of the popular folk song "Linstead Market."

It appears that the musical complex attached to the quadrille bands played a major part in the formation of the mento, a form of popular Jamaican folk song similar to calypso, but wholly Jamaican in origin. Even today, some of the bands which back up mento resemble quadrille bands in their instrumentation and rhythmic styles.

The arrangement of bamboo fife, two guitars, and four-string banjo heard on this record is common in quadrille bands, although a fiddle and rumba-box (the Jamaican equivalent of the Haitian marimbula) are also often included.



Quadrille Band  
(bamboo fife, two guitars, four-string banjo)

A. Round Dance - This is an indigenous Jamaican tune which is popular in the central part of the island.

B. Quadrille (first figure)

C. Quadrille (third figure)

D. Quadrille (fourth figure) - This figure is also known as the "Titanic," as this particular version is said to date back to 1912, the year that the ship sank.

E. Jane and Louisa - This is an old waltz, probably of English origin. There is also a Jamaican play-song set to this tune, with several verses.

#### FIFE AND DRUM

Recorded in St. Ann

The typical fife and drum band in Jamaica includes a bass drum, a side drum, a bamboo fife, and assorted improvised rhythm instruments such as a pitchfork or a cheese grater. Sometimes the jaw bone of an animal is used as a scraper instead of a grater. These bands are located throughout the island.

Some bands play fife and drum adaptations of European dance tunes, such as quadrilles and reels, with a military march flavor. Most bands also play certain indigenous folk tunes which either grew out of, or became specifically associated with, the fife and drum tradition. Of course old tunes are constantly being modified, and new tunes are being created.

The type of music with which fife and drum bands are most commonly associated is John Canoe music. John Canoe, or "masquerade," as it is often called, is a Jamaican folk dance involving masking, and sometimes singing, which is done during the Christmas holidays up until New Year's Day. The roots of the John Canoe complex extend way back into the slavery era and combine elements from several different cultures.

In Jamaica, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was an annual carnival season centering around the Christmas holidays, and including a folk festival in which black slaves were allowed, or even encouraged, to take part. Free people of color, as well as some whites, also participated in the festivals, which combined elements of British seasonal festivities and African ritual dances.

Several early written accounts of these festivities exist, consisting of personal observations made between the late eighteenth century and late nineteenth century. Most of these contain references to a central dancing character, who is costumed in a colorful, outlandish manner, and who is called "Jonkanoo," "John Canoe," or "John Connu"; mention is also often made of "sets" of dancing women; and the presence of the "gombay," a single-headed drum with a table-like frame, is often indicated. Adjectives such as "wild" or "violent" are often used to describe the dancing of the "Jonkanoo" and his male attendants.

The John Canoe complex seems to have evolved as a syncretism of elements from these festivities, which were already part of an old tradition in 1774, when Edward Long described them in his History of Jamaica.

What are some of the possibilities of European and African contributions to John Canoe?

In the early years of slavery in Jamaica, slave owners usually allotted a half-acre of land to

each male slave on which to plant his own personal provisions, such as yams, potatoes, and plantains. It appears that during the seventeenth century certain West African festival traditions were carried to the New World and reinterpreted in Jamaica to fit the new agricultural practices of the slaves. Ritual yam festivals were common among several West African tribes from which many slaves were drawn; some of these festivals must have been related to the ritual activities of Jamaican slaves described by Sir Hans Sloane in 1707 in A Voyage to the Islands of Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christopher and Jamaica: "They have Saturdays in the afternoons and Sundays, with Christmas holidays, Easter called little, or Pickaninny Christmas, and some other great feasts allowed them for the culture of their own plantations to feed themselves from potatoes, yams and plantains etc. which they plant on ground allowed them by their masters.... Their songs when they dance on feast days are all bawdy, or tending that way.... They have likewise in their dances Rattles ty'd to their legs and wrists and in their hands with which they make a noise, keeping time with one who makes a sound answering it on the mouth of an empty Gourd or Jar with his Hand. Their dances consist in great activity and strength of Body and keeping time, if it can be. They very often tie Cows' Tails to their Rumps and add such others to their bodies in several places as gives them a very extraordinary appearance."

As the early "Jonkanoo" dance became incorporated into the Christmas celebrations it was exposed to, and probably absorbed, features of several British folk festival traditions which owed their origins to pre-Christian, European pagan rituals. In their contacts with lower-class Scottish and Irish overseers and indentured laborers, the "Jonkanoo" dancers were exposed to the Morris dances, which were once part of a Spring festival, where young men danced for the renewal and continuance of life. From this the John Canoe complex probably absorbed the "horsehead," a common masked character similar to the British hobbyhorse. Another probable British influence is found in the mid-winter sword dance, which was often performed back to back with the mummers' play, a British folk play. Both of these functions were often accompanied by a cast of characters or actors, some of which have been incorporated into the John Canoe complex, such as the hobbyhorse, the clown, and the woman, who is always played by a man or a boy, and is known in Jamaica as "belly-woman" because "she" is often pregnant. John Canoe dancers today often dance with wooden swords. And at one time, Jamaican versions of the mummers' play were performed as part of the John Canoe complex. Beckwith (Christmas Mummings in Jamaica, 1925) recorded an example of one such play which used to be performed alongside the John Canoe dance at Christmas time.

So John Canoe has its early roots in fertility rituals, both West African and British. The syncretism between these two traditions was probably aided by the similarity in their functions (fertility), and by their possession of similar traits, such as the use of animal masks for the ritual expression of dance.

Later on the John Canoe complex also received French influence from Haiti in the form of French Sets. Beckwith (Black Roadways, 1929) established that, at least in the parish of St. Elizabeth, the John Canoe dance became connected with the practices of the Myal cult, which was at its height in the early nineteenth century, but may still exist in remote pockets. However, the John Canoe dance has since lost its religious



significance, and is danced in the streets all over the island (only during Christmas time) purely for "jollification," or for contributions from people in the street. John Canoe bands often travel fair distances to tourist areas on the north coast, where they can expect to make more money than in the hills.

Dances called John Canoe have been said to exist in British Honduras and Bermuda. And Kenneth Stamp (The Peculiar Institution, 1946, pp. 367-370) quotes a report: "...at Christmas in eastern North Carolina, they (slaves) begged pennies from the whites as they went John Canoe-ing (or "John Cunering") along the roads, wearing masks and outlandish costumes, blowing horns, tinkling tambourines, dancing and chanting." This evidence shows that variations on the John Canoe complex developed independently in different parts of the New World, all of which were colonized by the British, and had large populations of African slaves.

The origin of the name "John Canoe" is not certain, but Edward Long (History of Jamaica, 1774) ascribes its origin to "John Conny, a celebrated Cabecera, or head of a tribe at Tres Puntus in Axim on the Guinea Coast, who flourished about the year 1720."

Today, some of the more common or standard characters in Jamaican John Canoe are: cow-man, devil-man, boar-man, police-man, horsehead, belly-woman, whore-girl, wild-Indian. Sometimes new characters are incorporated into the dance. One such character has been Santa Claus.

John Canoe music is obviously related to the music of the English military fife and drum corps that were common during much of the period of English colonization in Jamaica. But the music would be hard to march to in a serious manner, for it swings. The drumming (with sticks) bears resemblance to some European drumming styles, but seems to show African influence in its emphasis on improvisation and repetitive syncopation. The same is true of the fife-playing.

Fife and drum bands similar to those of Jamaica have been found in Ghana; in Mississippi, Georgia, and Tennessee; and in several parts of the Caribbean. John Storm Roberts recorded a fife and drum band (Caribbean Island Music, Nonesuch 72047) in the Dominican Republic (composed of immigrants from St. Kitts and Nevis) which was called a "Mummies" band. At intervals in between the music, the leader of the band recites fragments of medieval English mumming plays. The music played by the band is quite similar to John Canoe music.

#### Fife and Drum

A. John Canoe Music - (bass drum, side drum, grater, bottle rockler, bamboo fife)

B. Ballerina/John Canoe music - (bass drum, two side drums, grater, pitchfork, bamboo fife) Ballerina is a traditional indigenous fife and drum tune which is well known in the central part of the island.

The sharp noises heard during the John Canoe music are the cracks of a whip, which was held by one of the dancers, and used as part of the dance.





For Additional Information About  
FOLKWAYS RELEASES

of Interest

write to



**Folkways Records  
and Service Corp.**

43 WEST 61 ST STREET NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10023

