

Quelbe!

AFRICAN
AMERICAN
LEGACY
RECORDINGS

stanley and the ten sleepless knights

music of the u.s. virgin islands



NATIONAL MUSEUM of
AFRICAN AMERICAN
HISTORY and CULTURE

Quelbe!



1. **Cigar Win the Race** 5:42
2. **Lagoon Mouth** 3:16
3. **Sly Mongoose** 3:27
4. **Beautiful Girl** CALYPSO (Louis Staakemann) 5:42
5. **Lancers Number 4** 2:09
6. **When You Had Me** JIG 3:03
7. **Ho Bin Sen Yo?** MARENGUE 5:06
8. **Bronco Jig** JIG (Dr. Olaf "Bronco" Hendricks-Eldred Christian) 3:34
9. **Don't Walk Deh** 5:05
10. **Garty Ballantine** 5:50
11. **Hilly** JIG 5:03
12. **Waltz** 2:42
13. **Matty Gru** 3:43
14. **LaBega Carousel** 3:56
15. **Marie Bull** 4:09
16. **Queen Mary** 2:52
17. **Musician Want Something to Drink** 2:07

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Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

*This recording is part of the **African American Legacy Recordings** series, co-produced with the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.*



Ciple playing kerosene pan with his band, 1948. Courtesy of Fritz Henle Estate.

“I remember people saying that it wasn’t good, you shouldn’t be doing [singing] that quelbe. It had a stigma on it.”

— Quelbe musician Stanley Jacobs, recalling his musical life as a young boy on St. Croix

Introduction

Daniel E. Sheehy

When people told the aspiring musician Stanley Jacobs (born October 29, 1941) that the music he loved, today generally known as “quelbe” (kwell-BEH), was something to be avoided, he was puzzled. Looking back in time, he remembers, “That’s all we knew.” For him, quelbe (even though they might not have called it that) was music, and music was quelbe. Born on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques when his father worked there briefly as a photographer for the United States Navy, he was raised on his father’s home island of St. Croix, the largest of the United States Virgin Islands. His mother’s family, the Saldañas, moved from Vieques to St. Croix before he was born, and his father was from the Crucian (St. Croix) town of Frederiksted.

Stanley loved music from a young age, and since his family could not afford to buy instruments, he and his brothers made small guitars out of sardine pans. When he was about six years old, an elderly neighbor taught him to play Puerto Rican *aguinaldo*

(a kind of Christmas music) on the guitar. During his school years, he and some friends formed a band they called Los Charlatanes (The Charlatans). “We always been joking. I used to play guitar, and sometimes I used to play drum.” During his college years in the early 1960s studying psychology at Lincoln University in Philadelphia, he played steel pan music. Then, he returned home and worked at St. Croix’s Herbert Griggs Home for the Aged, where he met elders who told him that the music he admired used to be called quelbe. Flute player Stanford Simmonds, a co-worker at the home, taught him some melodies and then taught him how to make a flute by drilling holes in tubes of metal and bamboo. Stanley was hooked. “Between 1963 and 1964, I must have made about a thousand flutes,” he recalls in a 1979 interview with documentarian Mary Jane Soule. Stanley was drafted into the army in 1964. As a corpsman, he played guitar and sang popular music of the day, such as songs by Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. Returning home, he began to play with the Simmonds brothers’ band in 1966. In 1970, he launched his own band with friends who had been playing together for a couple of years for fun, and they named the band The Ten Sleepless Knights. At that moment, precious few people would have guessed that four decades later, quelbe would climb the social ladder from being a déclassé music, looked at askance by many Virgin Islanders, to being proclaimed the official music of the United States Virgin Islands or for that matter, that Stanley Jacobs and The Ten Sleepless Knights would be recognized as its chief protagonists.

But it happened. On December 16, 2003, the Virgin Islands legislature passed bill number 25-0056, “making quelbe the official traditional music of the Virgin Islands,” as reported in the *St. Thomas Source* newspaper. The December 28 article continued, citing the bill’s language: “Quelbe, the vocal and instrumental style of Virgin Islands’

folk music which traces its ancestry to Africa and Europe, is the official traditional music of the Virgin Islands.”

In January 2004, Governor Charles W. Turnbull signed the bill amendment into law, hyperbolically calling St. Croix “the cultural capital of the Virgin Islands,” and sharing his hope for the future: “In the next 1,000, years I pray that quelbe will still be instilled in the hearts and minds of Virgin Islanders and the world.” The January 30, 2004 *St. Thomas Source* article continues with the words of Tourism Commissioner Pamela Richards: “Declaring quelbe the official V.I. music will serve to propel the Virgin Islands into ‘cultural heritage travel,’ a lucrative niche tourism market. The legislation, she said, will ‘enrich and ensure a sustainable cultural project.’” (In confirmation of this, when I arrived and departed the small Henry E. Rohlsen Airport on St. Croix in 2012, quelbe music was playing over the sound system.) The same bill honored Stanley Jacobs and The Ten Sleepless Knights for decades of contributions to the music’s vitality. In 2010, reporting on a series of events marking the band’s 40th anniversary, the *St. Thomas Source* noted the band’s reputation as “the premier quelbe band in the world” and a “Virgin Islands treasure.”

An excursion into Caribbean history sheds light on quelbe’s origins and social ups and downs. In contrast to the dependable trade winds that made the Caribbean a natural destination from Europe in the era of tall-mast sailing ships, *cultural* trade winds have blown across the Caribbean islands in all sorts of directions at different times over the past five centuries since European contact. The musical results have been widespread similarities *and* differences across the region. In 1493, Christopher Columbus anchored at the mouth of what is now known as the Salt River, St. Croix, in the western Lesser Antilles. While not received warmly at all by the Carib indige-

nous people there, he was nevertheless undeterred from claiming the island and many of the neighboring islands for the Spanish crown. He called the islands Santa Úrsula y Las Once Mil Vírgenes (St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins), eventually simplified to the Virgin Islands. Over the following centuries, Spain, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Denmark, and the United States vied for sovereignty over islands in the region. The vast majority of the Carib and Arawak indigenous peoples on the islands perished during the first centuries of colonization from disease brought from Europe for which they had no immunity. This left little resistance to the European invasion as well as a lack of a local labor force for the colonial sugar cane, cotton, and indigo plantations. As in other parts of the New World, the need for plantation workers was remedied by importing slave labor from West and Central Africa. St. Thomas became a major center of the slave trade, before slavery was finally abolished under Danish rule in the Virgin Islands on July 3, 1848.

Denmark dominated most Virgin Islands territory and for the longest time (about two and one-half centuries, beginning in the late 1600s), until the United States purchased a portion of the islands from Denmark on March 31, 1917. At that time, the United States wanted the islands both as an outpost to protect its access to the Panama Canal and to prevent possible World War I expansion by Germany into Denmark's territories in the Caribbean.

Today, the larger Virgin Islands are divided into two groups. One group of three islands is controlled by the United States (U.S.V.I.)—St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John, in descending order of size and population. The second group of four has the British status of “overseas territory” (B.V.I.)—Anegada, Jost Van Dyke, Tortola, and Virgin Gorda. U.S. Virgin Islanders are citizens of the United States, and many have

migrated to the mainland, especially to eastern cities such as New York City and Washington, D.C. At the same time, migration to the U.S.V.I. from other Caribbean islands has had major impact on local culture, especially in recent decades, with more than half of the population born abroad. Even before this influx, local culture itself was diverse; even today, St. Thomians and Crucians are quick to recognize differences in West Indian speech.

The primary ingredients for *quelbe* music today were present in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Mentioned in the bill language, *bamboula* is an Afro-Caribbean-rooted dance form best known on St. Thomas, having faded away on St. Croix in the late 19th century, according to Soule's elderly interviewees. Call-and-response singing and drumming, and African-influenced dance are its hallmarks. Soule gathered other testimony that showed that the *cariso* was likely rooted in St. Croix by around the turn of the 18th century. The term is used elsewhere in the Caribbean for similar singing styles, which probably influenced the shaping of calypso singing in Trinidad. These unaccompanied topical songs, typically in minor mode and sung by women—slaves in particular—could be acerbic, cutting, and powerful comments on social conditions, individuals, or occurrences. Soule's research also included 20th-century accounts of social occasions in which *cariso* songs were sung to the accompaniment of drumming.

As Mary Jane Soule and ethnomusicologist Margot Lieth-Philipp have written in album notes for the only two other widely distributed recordings of *quelbe*—*Zoop, Zoop, Zoop: Traditional Music and Folklore of St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John* and *Blinky & the Roadmasters: Crucian Scratch Band Music*—in the 19th century, violin might have provided the melody for local dance music. In the early 20th century, the accordion and wooden flute rose to prominence, and the acoustic guitar and local



Left: Frank Charles Band, circa 1917.

Right: A Band on St. Croix, circa 1905, Emilie Langkjaer.

Courtesy St. Croix Landmarks Society.

drums and other percussion instruments were known to have been part of musical life. In the 1930s, international popular music brought an influx of banjos, Venezuelan *cuatros*, and mandolins. At some point, the instrument known as “pipe,” fashioned from a length of car exhaust pipe and played like a tuba by vibrating the lips, supplied a rhythmic base. By the end of World War II, bands with wooden flute, a gourd rasp called “squash,” and large metal triangle called “steel” at their core were typical.

By the 1960s, when Stanley Jacobs was warned away from quelbe music, this homegrown musical expression had been overshadowed by more commercially glamorous styles of music from the United States and other Caribbean islands. Besides, class-based notions of propriety and superiority inflicted themselves on views of life-

ways associated with local, rural people of humble means. Quelbe music was thought by some to be scandalous. The truth is that the lyrics of quelbe songs, similar to those of *cariso*, often contained sexual innuendo and double entendre, frequently telling stories of clandestine sexual trysts and other socially sensational behavior. The lyrics also were laced with local colloquialisms and historical events that gave them a “country flair” at a time when commercial, urban expressions were favored by the popular media. However, these were attributes that made the songs popular in the first place!

When asked what quelbe is today, Stanley answered, “Quelbe is the name given to the music we play and it’s the particular instrumentation, pipes, steel, squash, guitar, banjo, flute. That instrumentation is what produces quelbe music and also the singing, the type of lyrics and the phrasing of the music.” But he points out that the term *quelbe* made a resurgence only during the last few decades of the 1900s; before then, this type of music was often called “scratch band” or “fungi band” music. The most accepted explanation of the origin of the term *scratch band* is that it came from the prominent sound of the squash, a gourd rasp much larger than a Puerto Rico *güiro*, stroked with metal wires inserted into a wooden handle. The belief is that tourists, hearing the loud



rasping of the gourd, filled the vacuum of terminology with the term *scratch band*. “Fungi band,” still used in the B.V.I. to refer to this music, may come from a local cornmeal dish associated with rural Virgin Islanders, or from the use of *fungi* as a common derogatory adjective for something of low value or esteem, like “fungi dog.”

Jacobs recalls the instrumentation of the 1940s and 1950s: “The pipe in those days, it was made out the muffler from a car. The St. Thomians called it asspipe. In fact, the first time I heard that word was when we went to St. Thomas to play. They called it asspipe, but we always knew it as pipe, just pipe. It was a muffler pipe. Then they started making it from regular galvanized pipe, and they used to bend it like an ‘S.’ That produced the bass sound, a low and a high note, and they blow that alternating in rhythmic pattern with the music. The steel used to be made from the brakes from a car. [It] was not like it is now; it was not hydraulic, nothing like that. It was mechanical, there was a metal rod that [went] from the brake pedal to the wheel, to the wheel drum. . . with a long steel rod from each side. . . . The blacksmith used to take that and make the triangle, and also the metal that you beat it with. . . . In those days, it was real steel; that’s why it sounded so good. Now they make [the] steel out of any piece of iron.”

While the steel, squash, banjo-uke, and flute remain at the core of *quelbe*, the pipe has receded to the sidelines as a rarity from the past. Furthermore, Stanley’s band uses an electric piano in place of the guitar and an electric bass to give a more sonorous bottom end. A drum set and conga bolster the steel and squash on percussion. Other *quelbe* bands, such as that led by Sylvester McIntosh (heard on the *Blinky & the Roadmasters* album), use alto saxophone instead of the flute.

Stanley Jacobs recounts the beginnings of The Ten Sleepless Knights. Herman “Green Bug” Thompson, the father of the current squash player Herman “Junie”

Thompson Jr., hosted jam sessions at his house with Stanley and other musician friends who played with other bands. From these occasions emerged the idea of starting their own band. “We decided we were going to do salsa and merengue and calypso and all that stuff, but all we had was pipe, steel, squash, and guitar, banjo. Nobody wanted to play the pipe. I could play, but my lips were not made for that. Edgie (Eldred Christian) made a [washtub] bass out of a barrel, a 55-gallon drum [that made] a low note and high note, just like the pipe. We played for a lot of years without amplification. We went to St. Thomas, St. John, Tortola with that, you know a lot of times, until Larry Larson came. He had a little bass and came into the band, and from then we never used the pipe again. Now we use the pipe. Gilbert Hendricks plays it. We use it to demonstrate. A lot of times, the schools call us to give a presentation about quelbe, so we go with this, and we show them the evolution of our music from the fife and drum thing, skin music, and then add the guitar and the banjo and go from there to what it is now, everything electric.”

He gives credit for their name to their original guitar player, who was older than the rest of them and who, Stanley remembers, had the reputation of a comedian. “Nice guy. When they teased him, he would say. ‘Don’t tease me, because I have spent ten sleepless nights.’... He was referring to the fact that he had ten children and had spent ten sleepless nights making them.” At first, they called themselves The Vikings, but then banjo player Eldred Christian suggested that they name the band The Ten Sleepless Knights. And from that moment on, that was their name.

While the makeup and sound of The Ten Sleepless Knights has evolved with changing musical tastes, Stanley feels that they maintain the core sound of their Virgin Islands tradition by keeping the flute, squash, steel, and banjo-uke at the band’s core. In

addition, even though they know a broad repertoire of music from far and wide, The Ten Sleepless Knights are known for their local repertoire of quelbe songs, jigs, waltzes, quadrille tunes, schottisches, marengue (Stanley prefers to spell this Crucian version of the Dominican merengue with an *a*), and other genres. The band is also linked to dance groups that perform the quadrille dance, another icon of Crucian tradition.

Ironically, it may be that demand for their locally rooted traditional music is a result of the increasing rate of disruptive social and cultural change sweeping through the islands. Says Stanley: “Life in St. Croix now is like life all over America. We have been Americanized to the point where, it’s just like that.” He laments what he feels is a decline in personal interaction; Virgin Islanders don’t visit as much as before, spending more time with television and other electronic media. Stanley relates that when people discuss current events, they are more likely to talk about a snowstorm in New York City than what is going on in their neighborhood. “I don’t think it’s a good thing. The personal thing is better. We’re the last of the Mohicans, my generation. When we go, things will be different.” Stanley and The Ten Sleepless Knights still offer “the personal thing,” the local. The quelbe songs, local quadrille and social dances, and their touch of Crucian humor make their music all the more sought out as a link to the local past and to a special sense of Virgin Islands identity in the face of massive intrusions. Given the recent heightened attention to the music, and given the band’s engagement with younger generations of Crucians through their many school programs, Governor Turnbull’s prayer may be answered, “that quelbe will still be instilled in the hearts and minds of Virgin Islanders and the world.”



Stanley Jacobs

The Musicians

Stanley Jacobs plays the steel flute and leads the band. A psychiatrist friend who occasionally plays with them joked that Stanley's career as a psychiatric social worker was key in keeping the band together for more than four decades. Stanley says: "When I retired, I thought I was going to sit down and drink beer with the guys, but what happened is I'm working more now than when I was at work. But I enjoy it because the music, I just love playing music. When I play music, everything is alright. It's like therapy." **Eldred "Edgie" Christian** was born in St. Thomas and has played lead banjo since the band's beginnings. He also serves as lead singer. His son **Kevin Christian** is a professional firefighter and banjo player. He was born the same year the band started, and he eventually became his father's banjo disciple. Of quelbe music, he says: "For some reason, people stereotype it being old people's music. In reality, it is one of the sweetest musics here in the Virgin Islands." Like Kevin, **Kendell "KC" Henry** is one of the younger members of the band and has music in his family background. His grandmother danced quadrille with the St. Croix Heritage

**Clockwise from top: Eldred Christian,
Stanley Jacobs, and Kevin Christian.**



Clockwise from top: Herman Thompson Jr., Hugh Clark, Kendell Henry, and DeVinci Valentino “Tino” Francis.



Dancers, and his uncle Christopher played banjo, steel, squash, and bass. He works as a professional International Basketball Association (FIBA) referee, working games and training and critiquing other officials. He came into the band playing squash, then he played steel, then congas. He says: “In quelbe music you are forced to play other instruments, when some other musician does not come.” He learned drums, and when the previous drummer left the band, KC took over. **Gilbert Hendricks**, born in St. Thomas and raised in St. Croix from the age of five, is retired from both military and firefighting careers. When he retired in 1994, he joined The Ten Sleepless Knights as its electric bass player. Other than playing music, his main passion is caring for his racehorse, named Joyful Minister. **Herman “Junie” Thompson Jr.**, who plays squash and steel, is the son of the late Herman “Green Bug” Thompson, a percussionist and original member of the band. **DeVinci Valentino “Tino” Francis** was the group’s longtime keyboard player. Sadly, he passed away in 2014, after this recording was made. Born on St. Croix and a longtime calypso musician in New York City, **Harold “Steinbrenner” George Washington Johnson** plays conga. Other regular members are multi-instrumentalist **Dr. Larry Larson**, who also serves as the band’s sound engineer and recordist, and steel and squash player **Hugh Clark**, also known as one of the Virgin Islands’ leading beekeepers.

Track Notes

1. Cigar Win the Race

This Crucian classic *quelbe* song tells of how the horse named Cigar won a race despite the predictions of an obeah man, a diviner out of African tradition. The way Stanley learned the story, the Dutchman was the owner of the losing horse Black and, trying to avoid paying his losing bet, ran away to the bush of Robe's Hill Estate, a former Danish-era plantation on St. Croix. The mention of "dead man's bones" refers to an obeah practice of "throwing bones," similar to throwing dice. Obeah practitioners were sought for many purposes. "For a fee, [the obeah man] will get you any woman you want. He will put some things together—bush, incense, write the person's name, and walk with it in your pocket, and the woman will come to you. Obeah is the supernatural power."

2. Lagoon Mouth

"Lagoon Mouth" tells of a Mr. Ferdinand Colburn, who went too close to the edge of the lagoon, and his cart and all his belongings fell into the lagoon and were lost. Stanley adds: "That was a true story too, you know. He lost all that he was carrying—the bag with the fish and two black bread, the pork and everything went—gone."

3. Sly Mongoose

Many Crucians consider "Sly Mongoose" to be a local *quelbe* song. It *is* an old song known throughout the English-speaking Caribbean, but it is not of Crucian origin. In the album notes to the Smithsonian Folkways recording *Lord Invader: Calypso in New York*, John Cowley quotes William C. White in the September 1937 *Esquire* magazine: "[I]n

St. Croix, Dominica, St. Vincent and Barbados, they know ‘Sly Mongoose Dogs Know Your Name,’ which tells the sad story of a raid on a white man’s kitchen.” Cowley says that the song is of Jamaican origin and that it was reported to be used as a Carnival song in Trinidad in 1923: “Based on the symbolic reference to a trickster with a sexual proclivity, in Eastern Caribbean versions, the mongoose goes into the White man’s kitchen, and steals one of his ‘fattest chickens.’”

4. Beautiful Girl

CALYPSO

This song, considered to be a calypso by Crucians, was composed by a Crucian musician named Louis Staakemann, a masterful saxophone player who lived and performed extensively in Puerto Rico. Stanley points out that the song has a special beat that fits in with Puerto Rican preferences for social dance steps. “That’s how Puerto Ricans played calypso. Anytime Puerto Ricans play

calypso, that’s the beat they use. I guess it Hispanicizes it. You notice the Latin-ness in [the] thing.”

5. Lancers Number 4

“Lancers Number 4” is a melody to accompany a section of the quadrille dance known as “Lancers.” Says Stanley Jacobs: “You can tell [by the sound that] it is European. Our ancestors added the rhythmic pattern to it—our thing, the drum beat and the squash, steel.” Popular in Europe around the end of the 19th century, “Lancers” lives on in St. Croix, practiced by folk dance devotees such as the St. Croix Heritage Dancers.

6. When You Had Me

JIG

This song in the rhythm of a jig is used in quadrille dancing as a Number 4 or Figure 4. Quadrilles were popular in Europe in the 1800s and caught on in many other parts of the colonial world. They enjoyed a revival in the Virgin Islands in the late 1900s and have become a fixture of Crucian cultural life today. Quadrille dances each have a fixed number of figures, or numbers (five or six, usually), each with its own melody. The Ten Sleepless Knights are known for their deep knowledge of the Crucian quadrille tradition.

7. Ho Bin Sen Yo?

MARENGUE

This piece is known as a “flotation marengue,” meaning that it is used as a moment during quadrille dancing to change partners multiple times, and it is appropriately slower paced than a social dance marengue. The Crucian marengue has a different underlying rhythm than its musical cousin, the merengue from the Dominican Republic.

8. Bronco Jig

Says Stanley Jacobs of “Bronco Jig,” “That’s just a melody that Bronco (the nickname of occasional Sleepless Knights guitar player Dr. Olaf Hendricks, a psychiatrist) came up with. Bronco, he made that song. He gave us that melody, and then Edgie put those words on it—about ‘This is way we used to dance.’ . . . That song is a jig. We play it in quadrille dancing as a Number 2 or a Number 4, which [are in] jig rhythm.”

9. Don't Walk Deh

In “Don't Walk Deh” (don't walk there) —also known as “Father Malloy”— certain verses speak of a man who tells his daughter not to go around Father Malloy, because she might “catch a big foot,” or “catch a belly” (meaning to get pregnant). Stanley Jacobs says that others mention that Father Malloy is going to remove his vestments and get married to Mina (Wilhelmina). He adds that “big foot” refers to elephantiasis swelling of the body, and that mentioning how the bite of an insect makes the foot swell can be a double entendre for making a woman pregnant.

10. Garty Ballantine

“Garty Ballantine” is used as a Number 1 or Number 3 in quadrille dancing. Stanley Jacobs explains the song lyrics: “This guy telling Garty that she should go back to her man. Her man has one eye. ‘Because all I want I got it already, and go back to your one-eye man.’ Gilbert [Hendricks, the bass player] did the goat in ‘Garty Ballantine,’ because the lyrics say ‘Me goat is bawlin, so go home.’”

11. Hilly

JIG

“Hilly” is a traditional song in a jig rhythm and says: “Hilly is the girl that I really love, nobody knows but I.” Explains Stanley: “Hilly is this man's woman, and he really love her, but he said the only thing that worry him was he caught her with a man named Bloch. Apparently, she went with Bloch for money, but Bloch told her, ‘Wait til the money beel come.’ Beel is car,

automobile. We used to call cars ‘la beel’, short for automobile. So when people working out in the fields, [on] Friday, the car comes to pay them. So when she asked him for the money, he said ‘Wait til the money beel comes.’ He’s broke, you know, he’s gotta wait until [he gets paid]... That’s what that song is referring to.”

12. Waltz

Traditionally, a waltz begins a quadrille dance. Waltzes were also played during what is called a “round dance” (couples social dance), though dancing waltzes outside of the quadrille dance context is now uncommon. No one in the band could recall the name of this instrumental waltz.

13. Matty Gru

This quelbe song, likely derived from a much older ballad from the Anglo tradition, is used in quadrille dancing to accompany a Number 6. Stanley Jacobs adds that historically, it was also used for a Number 1 or Number 3 in the quadrille set. Outside of the quadrille context, it was part of the King George play, part of the masquerade (folk play with music and humor) tradition. Stanley laments that the masquerade has been abandoned and hopes to resurrect it with the help of like-minded Crucians. The lyrics refer to how the young man Matty Gru is with another man’s wife in her bedroom, and the husband, Count Valentine, is headed home. The singer urges him to “raise up, Matty Gru, raise up,” because the cocks are crowing and the count will be home soon.

14. LaBega Carousel

Often used as a Number 6 in quadrille dancing, “LaBega Carousel” relates actual historical events. Stanley Jacobs recalls the tale of the early 20th-century formation of a labor union and subsequent strike for better wages situation that led to the song’s creation: “That was a protest, a boycott. A man named LaBega used to say that [field worker] is not worth more than half a cent a day. You don’t have to pay them no money, just pay them half a cent. So, when he brought the carousel, they boycotted him. So they made the song: ‘I rather walk and drink rum whole night before I go ride on LaBega carousel.’ So they just didn’t ride on the carousel, so he couldn’t make any business with it, so he had to send it back to Puerto Rico.”

15. Marie Bull

“Marie Bull” (also “Marie Bool”) is cast in a slower-paced flotation marenque rhythm for possible use in a quadrille dance. Based on dozens of interviews with Crucian elders, Mary Jane Soule feels that it is likely the creation of the historic Frederiksted musician known as Ciple (Stanley spells it Ceiple), born Alexander Michael (1892–1957). Soule writes that he was “a legendary songsmith and performer. He went around the streets of Frederiksted singing and accompanying himself by beating a melodic rhythm on an empty five-gallon kerosene pan he had ‘tuned’ by slight reshaping.”

16. Queen Mary

“Queen Mary” is one of the best known quelbes. Slavery ended in St. Croix on July 3, 1848, but abusive labor practices continued on the island, marked by a bloody labor riot in 1878. Stanley Jacobs explains: “That song is about what they call the Fireburn. It was a labor riot, where they didn’t want to pay the workers, so they started burning from Frederiksted come up [east toward Christiansted]. And they made the song from that incident.” Queen Mary was a young woman who took a leadership role in inspiring the people to rise up. Frederiksted is one of St. Croix’s two main towns, along with Christiansted. The Ten Sleepless Knights like to end their performances with “Queen Mary,” partly because it is arguably the best known song from St. Croix, an anthem. “When people hear ‘Queen Mary,’ they know we’re going to finish soon,” says Stanley.

17. Musician Want Something to Drink

“Musician Want Something to Drink” is in the rhythm of a flotation marengue. In a live performance, it signals that a quelbe band is about to take a break. Stanley says: “That’s the song to sing when you telling the hosts, ‘Hey, we ready for a drink, man, you know. We think it’s time for us to have a drink.’ What happen when we start playing that, they will stop the band, [saying] ‘OK, OK, come. Go drink and eat.’”



Further Reading and Listening

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About Smithsonian Folkways

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings is the nonprofit record label of the Smithsonian Institution, the national museum of the United States. Our mission is the legacy of Moses Asch, who founded Folkways Records in 1948 to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. The Smithsonian acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987, and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings has continued the Folkways tradition by supporting the work of traditional artists and expressing a commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding among peoples through the documentation, preservation, and dissemination of sound.

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Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

Smithsonian Folkways

Quelbe!

stanley and the ten sleepless knights

music of the u.s. virgin islands



Quelbe! stanley and the ten sleepless knights

music of the u.s. virgin islands

SFW CD 40568



Stanley Jacobs and The Ten Sleepless Knights wrap the old-time Virgin Islands quelbe sound of squash (gourd rasp), steel (triangle), flute, and banjo uke in the contemporary trappings of electric keyboard, drum set, conga, and electric bass. The distinctively Caribbean, yet uniquely Virgin Islands, sound of quelbe music is an old but new dance music. Declared the “official” music of the United States Virgin Islands, classic songs such as “Queen Mary” and “LaBega Carousel” tell of historical events on the island of St. Croix, while other pieces accompany the local traditions of quadrille dance. **32-page booklet with photos and extensive notes. 67 min**

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10. Garty Ballantine
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13. Matty Gru
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