MUSICAL TRADITIONS OF
ST. LUCIA, WEST INDIES

Dances and
Songs from
a Caribbean Island

Smithsonian Folkways
Musical Traditions of St. Lucia, West Indies
Dances and Songs from a Caribbean Island

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Recordings by Jocelyne Guilbault, Embert Charles, and Manfred Kremser

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Musical Traditions of St. Lucia, West Indies
Jocelyne Guilbault, January 1993

The traditional music of St. Lucia, part of the Windward Islands group of the Lesser Antilles, is remarkably rich in its variety but is very little known outside the region. The people of this rugged volcanic island, with an area of only 238 square miles, are famous in the Caribbean for keeping alive their oral traditions.

They gather at night with their friends to talk about politics, sea conditions, gardens, and the daily news. But their conversations always come round to remembering, criticizing, and planning some musical events. Every holiday, political commemoration, and annual feast-day of local associations is marked by music. This recording is designed to fill a gap in our understanding of the importance of musical life in this society and the great variety of musical genres and artistic achievements in the island.

Planning for this album began more than two years ago in collaboration with Embert Charles, the director of the Folk Research Centre of St. Lucia, a nongovernmental organization that has played a key role in the development, documentation, and promotion of St. Lucian culture. Aware that any collection of field recordings reflects the researcher’s own theories, knowledge, and experiences as much as the musical traditions of the people represented, we decided to combine our own fields of expertise (communications and ethnomusicology) and to make use of the three main recording collections housed at the Folk Research Centre—those of the Centre itself, those of the Austrian anthropologist Manfred Kremser, and my own. Our goal was not only to produce a comprehensive account of the traditional music of St. Lucia, but also to show how music in the island plays a principal role in the lives of St. Lucians. While I selected and annotated the pieces after long discussions with
several local musicians, Embert Charles decided
on their sequence in the album. The transfer of
all selections to digital equipment was sponsored
by the Folk Research Centre. Copyright
payments will be administered by the Centre and
used for community projects.

Hard decisions on the selection of the pieces
had to be made. Regional variations within St.
Lucia exist, but could not be fully represented
here. The pieces were selected according to the
following main criteria: they had to be
representative of the local musical tastes and at
the same time clearly illustrate the formal
structures that are judged characteristic of the
various musical genres; in addition, the
recordings and their duration had to meet to a
certain degree the implicit norms set up by the
widely distributed audio technology on the
market. But beyond these constraints, the
selections were made to acknowledge and
celebrate the particular sensibility of St. Lucian
culture.

The music of St. Lucia reflects the island's
colonial history. St. Lucia changed hands
fourteen times during the Caribbean wars
between France and Britain, 1639-1803, and
gained its independence only in 1979. In 1814,
when the island was ceded to Britain, the French
influence was extensive. Today, the 120,000
inhabitants are mainly the descendants of African
slaves, with a lesser number but still
considerable population of descendants of
indentured laborers from India, brought to the
island after the emancipation of the slaves. Only
a tiny number of Europeans have remained in the
country. Except for the East Indian people, who
have cultivated their traditions in almost strict
isolation, the various European and African
musical cultures have influenced all aspects of St.
Lucian musical life.

The languages used in songs illustrate this.
Although the official language is English, daily
interactions in villages are carried on in a French-
based creole—a language that is largely based on
a French vocabulary but that uses a structure
associated with African languages. In traditional
music, songs are usually sung in creole; only a
few use English.

Some musical instruments played in St. Lucia
such as the violin, guitar, and mandolin originated
in Europe. Others such as the kaj, also called
bébé, drumb (a hollow, barrel-shaped drum held
between the legs of the seated player and played
with the bare hands), and other percussion
instruments including the bongo (a long, hollow
tube blown like a trumpet to produce a
percussive sound), the chakk (ratte), and the zo
(bones), and the gwaj (scraper) are viewed locally
as part of the African heritage. Still other
instruments such as the banjo (the locally made
skroud or bwo paye banjo) and the cuatra (a four-
stringed instrument) are thought—according to
the majority of musicians I interviewed—to be
indigenous to St. Lucia, because they have
traditionally been made on the island.

The musical genres also show various ethnic
influences. The koutumbo, for example, which is
accompanied by the ko drum and uses a call-
and-response form in the songs and a particular
choreography, is the undoubtedly associated
with Africa, whereas the quadrille (kwodril, in
creole), with the contour of its melodies and its
distinctive choreography, is unquestionably
related to Europe. Given these distinctive
influences, the question to be asked is the
degree to which certain borrowed musical
instruments and genres have been appropriated
as part of the creole cultural milieu. How does
one evaluate, for example, the St. Lucian
kwodril—as an avatar of the well-known
European dance or as a new reality, given a new
meaning and distinctive musical characteristics
within St. Lucian musical traditions? During
the nationalist movement in the late seventies and
early eighties, this question became a political
issue as it entered the debate on how to define
St. Lucian identity. It was only a few years after
independence that the kwodril, after nearly dying
out in the late seventies, was revived with the
help of some local organizations and recognized
officially in the school system as truly
representative of St. Lucian cultural identity.

In the post-slavery culture, the legitimacy of
African-derived traditions as part of the national
heritage has never been questioned. But this
does not mean that these traditions have at all
times received full support by St. Lucians.

Negative attitudes toward African-derived
traditions were long held by the upper-class
minority, formerly composed of the white
colonial masters. The association of these
traditions with un schooled people, the lowest
social and economic class had dramatic
consequences for the black population during
the period of slavery: it served to isolate those
people further within colonial society.

Critical views of African-derived traditions
and related activities have also emanated from the
Roman Catholic Church which, historically, has
neither ignored these activities or encouraged its
members not to participate in them. In the same
way, until the emergence of the nationalist
movements preceding independence, the
government disregarded African-derived music.

Even though the clergy today has become more
tolerant and respectful of "folk" activities and the
government is now promoting these same
traditions as symbols of St. Lucian cultural
identity, many upper-class St. Lucians are still
embarrassed to take part in them. One can only
conclude that the old, negative associations may
not have the power they used to have—but
nevertheless are completely palpable.

From local traditions and practices have
emerged the principles by which music in general
is conceived and valued in St. Lucia. In the many
interviews I conducted over the past twelve
years, it became clear that most people assumed
music includes singing, and at any rate it must
include dancing. For a music to be well received,
it needs to be loud and intense. The popularity of
a musical genre is largely dependent on
whether it encourages participation; the more participants, the more successful the presentation. In general, performances are perceived as public entertainment; they must therefore be spectacular, colorful, and expressive. They must connect with and react to the public.

Other qualities more directly associated with individual musicians can elicit varying points of view, even controversy. While a high register and a distinctive, thin vocal texture is preferred by some musicians and participants, for others a talent for improvisation is far more important in evaluating a performer. Having a good sense of rhythm often ranks higher than intonation in determining good musicianship among instrumentalsists. Accomplished musicians, I was told, are recognized by their exceptional sense of timing, convincing interpretations, and controlled rhythmic and melodic improvisation. Although a certain knowledge of several instruments and repertoires is part of West Indian tradition and therefore to be expected, versatility is still highly regarded.

As is generally the case in the West Indies, the roles of women and men differ greatly in musical traditions. Women often take the role of chantél (song leader) and habitually participate in choruses of responders. They also take an active part in dances, but are almost never seen playing instruments in public. (It is paradoxical that many male musicians, in conversations with me, have admitted it was their mothers who taught them at home to play their instruments.) Men have traditionally been responsible for all instrumental accompaniment, but they also participate in chorus singing and dancing and can act as chantél.

Children learn about local traditions by observation and imitation. Except at funeral wakes, where they are rarely seen because the celebration lasts all night, they are usually present at all musical activities. Whereas they often join a chorus of singers spontaneously, children are especially encouraged by adults to take part in the dancing, and those who learn to perform at an early age are greatly valued and admired as adults.

The selections on this recording introduce most of the musical genres found on the island. They are grouped by local categories based on the kinds of activities in which the music is performed (such as game or work songs), the seasonal occasions on which the music is played, the religious cults with which the music is associated, the instrumentation required to play the particular dances, or the names of the social organizations that feature a specific musical repertoire.

In the commentaries that follow, only a few lines of the song texts or a summary of the lyrics are provided. For the original versions in French-based creole with their English translations, please see boxed note.

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Play-Song-Dances

A play-song-dance in St. Lucia is an entertainment as well as an opportunity to demonstrate skills and to make public commentaries. St. Lucians "play" through singing, performing on musical instruments, dancing, acting out their songs, or telling stories. Through these various media, St. Lucians "play on" certain feelings or weaknesses of others, and "play up" what they value most. Everybody, from children to adults, is welcome to "play" doing many things that could otherwise hardly be done at all. They can laugh at social conventions, criticize new laws, gossip about people, or tell the story of some interesting sexual encounter. They can act or look silly, interact with a wide range of people, and make contact with those who in normal conditions are difficult to approach. All this is performed with great spontaneity, genuineness, and high spirits, in order to minimize the possibility of causing offence.

Play-song-dances are performed mostly by people living in the countryside. Although the dances might be enacted on any occasion and be invoked for any reason, they are especially appropriate for beach parties, full-moon gatherings, and débôt evenings. Beach parties and full-moon gatherings occur spontaneously and can be loosely organized by a few volunteers. Conversely, a débôt evening, which consists primarily of performing the débôt dances (see below), is organized by an individual for personal pleasure, or, as is often the case, by the owner of a rum shop or a bar who wants to make money through the sale of drinks. The organizer's only expense is hiring a drummer and a song leader for the evening. The performers usually receive only a meager amount of money, but they are offered plenty of free drinks and food. The dance normally takes place in a clear space near the rum shop or by the house of the organizer.

The play-song-dances include four musical genres: the débôt (also called djou), yonbôt, solo, and jwé pòtè. (The yonbôt repertoire, based on a rhythmic pattern nearly identical to that of the débôt but played over two beats instead of four, has been almost forgotten and I was able to find only two tunes, which could not be included here. See Guibault 1984: 115.) All four are accompanied by the ka drum, when available, and also occasionally by the tamba (a pair of sticks played against the rim of the drum).

The texts of the four play-song-dances most often report events well known to the participants and can focus on sex, individual personal problems, and human relationships in general. Since the song leaders allow themselves to sing things about people they could not otherwise say, the use of the label "play" for these types of songs is in fact most convenient: it not only frees the singers from many social conventions but also protects them against reprisals by the church or the law. However, to further protect themselves from getting into
trouble, the song leaders typically use such verbal tactics in their texts as lang dévé (saying the opposite of what you really mean) or metaphor (using a word to refer to something else), ellipsis (consciously omitting certain names or parts of the story), or periphrasis (rendering an idea through circumlocution).

Most of the texts, based on call-and-response, are elliptical from our point of view and presuppose that the hearers need only a few cues to reconstitute the whole story. By repeating them throughout the song, the song leaders present only the elements of the story they want to stress.

To increase the participation of the audience, the song leaders continuously interact with the participants by inserting their own commentaries. At one point, a singer may congratulate the drummer on his good playing; at another, tell the audience to sing louder; at still another, encourage and praise the skills of the dancers.

The four musical genres use duple meter (that is, two or four units to the measure). In all cases, two or three melodic motifs form the basis of the melody: while the chorus sings a fixed part, the song leader alternates freely between the two other melodic motifs. The song leader usually begins his songs by singing the first line alone before the musical accompaniment comes in.

Although the four play-song-dances share many characteristics, they each have unique features. The débôt, for example—unlike the other three—which normally use only a few words to evoke a picture, an impression, or a story—occasionally contains a first part in which the whole story is told in verses before the song leader switches to the call-and-response form for the rest of the song. Whereas the solo and jwé pòtè song-dances typically employ different tunes for different texts, the débôt songs, in my collection of thirty-three, use only four melodies (as noted earlier; the paucity of yonbòt examples makes generalization impossible here). Most important, each “play” can be easily recognized by its distinctive rhythmic patterns and choreography.

The débôt and yonbòt dances require the participants (1) to form couples and make a circle; (2) to go around the circle during the introductory part; and (3), at the drum signal, to begin the dance. In each dance the partners, facing each other, swing their bodies from left to right and perform a blòtè movement at the end of each swing. A blòtè movement involves thrusting the pelvis forward and doing a touché (making contact) with the partner. Before concluding the dance, the drummer returns to the rhythmic pattern of the introductory part, which signals the dancers to go back around the circle for the finale.

The jwé pòtè dance also begins with couples going around the circle before the dance starts and employs the blòtè as the main dance figure. Here, however, the blòtè is not executed by all the dancers but only by two at a time. One dancer stands in the middle of the circle and, at a given point in the text of the song, goes to a person of his or her choice and performs a blòtè. Although they are free to perform as many blòtè as they want, the dancers usually choose to do only one during the entire dance.

The solo dance focuses on sexual “play” to an even greater extent than the other three. Although it does not employ the blòtè figure per se, it is inspired by it. Couples dance one at a time. The steps of the dance are relatively free and only have to match the basic rhythmic patterns of the drum. The man rests his hands on his hips while the woman holds her dress a little above her knees; or, like the man, puts her hands on her hips. Standing close together, they follow the rhythm of the drum with their feet and undulate their hips and sway their pelvises forward and backward. After a few beats of each phrase, plays a vod sound—that is, a damped sound, though it is not always accented clearly in this recording—which signals the dancers to perform the blòtè figure. The final move around the circle was omitted on the occasion of this performance.


This song employs the technique of lang dévé (saying the opposite of what one really means). The singer ironically tells of his good marriage, saying everyone knows that he and his wife are now separated. At the beginning, in a spoken voice, he invites four couples (in creole, “kat kavaye, kat dami”) to dance. Note how the
and swaying their bodies back and forth on each beat as they reproduce the actions referred to in the lyrics: “Hold me by the neck for us to see/hold me by the waist for us to see;” and so on to the leg, the thigh, and then the whole body. When the singer sings “ay yay yay...” the dancers, change partners and the game starts over. Note how the distinctive, guttural vocal timbre of the singer (who is also the drummer) combined with his expressive inflections are used to enhance the liveliness of the performance.

French and creole words and expressions. Many of the song texts also dealt with topics of French origin, which would indicate that the tradition might be one of the oldest legacies of the French who intermittently occupied the island.

The masquerade and séwinal (serenade) are both nearly extinct. The masquerade was a celebration organized around holidays such as Christmas, New Year’s Day, and Easter. The instrumental ensemble included the same instruments used in merrily-go-rounds, cockfights, and the séwinal—a tambour tenbal (a large, barrel-shaped drum covered at both ends by a skin stretched by cords and held on the side by a strap passed around the player’s neck and struck by a stick covered by a piece of cloth), a snare drum (in St. Lucia called a kettledrum), a chakkoh, and a bamboo flute. The musicians would leave their homes early in the morning to play, sing, and dance. While they walked around playing their instruments, two costumed male dancers, one playing a woman’s role (female mas), the other a man’s (male mas), livened up the crowd by performing incredible contortions. Besides performing for entertainment, the group also aimed to earn some money through voluntary donations from the spectators. The séwinal was usually performed during the two weeks of Advent and, except for Lent, at any other time of the year—such as Sundays, full-moon evenings, or during the Christmas period. The séwinal ensemble could be composed of the instruments used in the kwadril, or the following: a bamboo flute, and any variable number of guon banbou (a hollow bamboo tube stamped on the ground), bônn (a saucepan struck by two sticks), and chakkoh. Unlike the masquerade, the séwinal was performed only during the night or at dawn; no one wore a mask or costume. It was organized solely for pleasure and consequently with no hope of earning any money. The musical genres played in both the masquerade and the séwinal were the same: merengue, march, and moyan (another name for manfo, a fast and lively dance).


This song is about Mr. and Mrs. Mero who go to the seashore, and their daughter Marianne who, left with St. Rose, becomes pregnant. The question is, who is the culprit? The silliest possibilities are here proposed. St. Rose says that it is not she who caused Marianne’s belly to get “bloatet.” Maybe, she says, it is because of the special dance that Marianne danced or the white peas that Marianne ate.


Groups of singers, by custom, go from house to house on holidays in the hope of getting some
free drinks and food. In this song, the singer asks the owner of the house to open his door to let his group in. It is the 25th of December and they are just passing, he says, and he asks the owner to give them all he owns, a piece of meat with a bottle of rum. He adds: “I came to see you, my good comrade/you know me well/open your door/want to eat/want to see you/we did not come to stay.”

7. Mascarade, played by George Michael (kettledrum), Fred William (bamboo flute), Gustin Louis (bass drum), and Wilkinson Girard (chakchak), recorded by the Folk Research Centre of St. Lucia, Derniere Riviere, 2 January 1975 (I:44)

This is a typical Mayon, a fast-tempo music in duple time played by the traditional masquerade instrumental ensemble. Note the nonstop, driving rhythm of the percussion section accompanying the flute.

Work Songs

8. Slav song: “La Volé Mélo,” sung by Lawrence Clifton (song leader), and Michael Gaspard, Hebert Constantine, Semphr Lima, and Blaze Cadet (chorus), recorded by Manfred Kemper, Fond Assau, 13 August 1985 (I:02)

The chanté siny are work songs that accompany woodcutting, which can be clearly heard on this recording. Performed by a song leader and usually no more than two responders, they are typically accompanied by the kò drum and a pair of tibwa. Instead of holding the barrel-shaped drum in the normal upright position, the player here lays the instrument on the ground and sits on the barrel while playing on the single skin with his bare hands. The pair of tibwa are not struck against the rim of the drum as is usual, but are instead played against a bamboo tube or wooden log resting on a stand. These two techniques, associated with the Martinican style of playing are, not surprisingly, encountered mostly in the northeastern region closest to Martinique.

Almost any lively musical genre that uses call-and-response can be used to accompany work activities. The song selected here is usually associated with the bèlé anlé genre (see below under “Funeral Wakes”). It tells the story of a landowner who has planted his garden and wild black birds (in creole, mèf) keep coming to eat everything. He asks a man to watch over his garden, and when the man sees the black birds, he yells, “Chou mét to scare the birds away. “(mèf” (go away). There is no drumming in this recording, but you will hear the tibwa join in to accompany the singing. This is a staged recording because, since the advent of the chainsaw, this tradition has died out.


Organizers of a working bee used to invite a drummer and a chantwòl to encourage workers to keep up a brisk pace at their task or to help them coordinate their movements in particular chores——such as hauling a canoe to the sea or moving a house by drawing on ropes. The song featured here was composed for house moving and was performed especially for this recording. The song lyrics for such an occasion could be about anything, as long as they kept the people working. This text, based on a true story, is about a man named Jean-Pierre Rouleau who stole an ox, and about the reaction of people who no longer wanted to buy their meat from him. The chorus’s part here is totally independent of the song leader’s story, and is based on words solely connected with the task at hand: “henesé,” meaning “lift the house.”

Note how well the main singer reproduces the traditional role of a song leader in a bee, making lively interjections to summon, direct, and encourage the drummer and the imaginary workers in their respective tasks: “Tighten the rope, you there/don’t let the rope get slack/nice drumming, nice drumming/let’s go, the rum is just behind the market.”

Kélè Music

The kélé religious tradition is particular to a small group of people from the Babonneau region, who call themselves djiné, descendants of Africans who arrived around the mid-nineteenth century. Unique to St. Lucia, kélé is strongly connected to the Ogun festival in Nigeria, though it is concerned not with one deity but with three—Ogun, Shango, and Eshu (Anthony 1986:114). Repressed by the Roman Catholic Church until the early 1960s, it had been practiced underground. It was held “at the New Year or the anniversary of the death of a recent ancestor” (Crowley 1957:8), or to ask African ancestors for protection in all matters of importance, including “good crops, good health, and good fortune” (Simpson 1973:110). In the entire island, only one family from Resina, Babonneau, holds kélé and “claim[s] to have authority to perform the ritual and to pass on that authority to their kin” (Anthony 1986:106). The ritual includes the display of smooth stones (Shango’s worship emblem) and of iron-and-steel tools (in honor of Ogoun), the washing of the ram to be offered to Shango, the smashing of a calabash at the end of the ritual (to appease the Yoruba deity Eshu), prayers and incantations (mostly addressed to Ogoun), eating, singing, dancing, and the playing of two drums called tanbou manman (mother drum—a large, double-headed drum played with one stick) and tanbou ich (child drum—a long, narrow, cylindrical wooden body, covered at one end by a skin and played with one stick). These two drums, used only during this ceremony, play four different song-dance rhythms—kogou, èré, kéré, and odæ—or each of which is played at a specific moment during the ceremony.

This music is played at the beginning and throughout the kéle ceremony. According to Etienne Wells Joseph, who is the last remaining high priest authorized to conduct a kéle, this music produces drumming sounds that are meant to make everyone happy. “People here call what we do [during the ceremony] ‘sacrifice.’ We prefer to call it ‘thanksgiving.’ We are thankful for what we have received, and we say our grace. This is why the kogou drumming sound is djuwlas [a lively kind of music]... I do not know the meaning of most of the songs. Our fathers used to speak the djiine language as a secret language. So we were not really taught to learn it” (Etienne Wells Joseph, 3 June 1983). Most lyrics of kéle music are therefore not translatable, but listen for: (Leader): “Fago ribi?” (Chorus): “ri bi yo yo...”

11. Éré: “Olagogo Ogon,” sung by Georges “Démou” Sittoe, accompanied by Noah Delaire (ich drum) and Etienne Wells Joseph (mammon drum), Chassin, 10 April 1983 (1:35)

The éré is performed when the head of the sacrificial sheep is cut off. “Note that it is always the same songs we sing. Our grandparents and fathers used to compose new ones because they knew more about these songs. We can only sing what we learned from them” (Etienne Wells Joseph, 3 June 1983). The text is untranslatable and is rendered as follows: (Chorus): “Olagogo ogon” (Leader): “wé cho lo mbi o” (Chorus): “lagogo gon” (Leader): “wé cho lo mbi o...”

12. Kéré, played by Noah Delaire (ich drum) and Etienne Wells Joseph (mammon drum), Chassin, 10 April 1983 (1:34)

The instrumental kére genre is played when the high priest steps over the blood where the ram was killed.


This music is played when a designated person breaks the calabash at the end of the kéle ritual. This is an important milestone, as it is by looking at the pieces of the broken calabash that the initiates determine whether it was a good or bad ceremony, one that fulfilled the requirements. If the ceremony is judged to be bad, it must be rescheduled and performed again. The only words used in this song, now untranslatable, serve here to identify the music.

Kwadril Dancing

The traditions associated with the St. Lucian kwadril, offshoot of the European quadrille, have changed over time. In the past, a kwadril heightened the prestige of every participant. Unlike most other performances based on only a few easy steps and allowing room for spontaneity and improvisation, the choreography had to be learned, memorized, and practiced before being performed. These three different stages of apprenticeship, which did not correspond to the usual norm of “learning-through-doing,” were highly valued. They symbolized a particular type of knowledge believed by many to be of higher quality and of a more complex nature than the other local traditions. The intricate choreography which, if performed correctly, was thought to demonstrate control over behavior; decency in manners, and skills, symbolized for the dancers a set of special values that had been traditionally linked with the higher social classes.

Until the mid-1980s, the kwadril tradition had been losing popularity; around the time of independence in 1979, it was simply seen as being out of fashion. The general belief, particularly among young people, was that all traces of colonialism and of colonial values needed to be relegated to the past. Several years after independence, however, some people began to realize that the St. Lucian kwadril had long ceased to be simply the reproduction of a European dance, and it has now been transformed to the point of having acquired an identity of its own that is distinctively St. Lucian. Although the St. Lucian kwadril still bears some resemblance to its European model, the “first set” quadrille, it also differs from it in many ways. Both are composed of five dances, and the five are played in the same key and employ the chord progressions I-(II)-(VI), or I-(IV)-(VI), or I)-(V)-(IV)-(V)-I. The dances also employ a similar driving rhythm composed almost exclusively of eighth and sixteenth notes. The tunes are very lively and are based on phrases of four measures. The first three dances are usually played in compound meter, whereas the last two employ duple meter. The two quadrilles keep the same overall choreography—that is, using four couples in a squared-off position. But the similarities between the two dances stop there.

The St. Lucian kwadril is distinguished from its European counterpart by the constant “détaché” style of violin playing, the great emphasis on syncopated rhythms, and the rapid alternation of meters from duple to triple in the course of one phrase or the repetition of the same melodic motif. It does not have any “fixed” melody but rather emphasizes improvisation, especially evident in the unpredictable sequence of melodic patterns and the chakkach’s varied rhythms and percussive effects. Its orchestration is unique, and today includes a violin, banjo (the locally made skraid or bwa pòye banjo), cuatro, guitar (which plays the bass line), mandolin (whenever possible), chakchak (rattle), and occasionally, zo (bones).
The five compulsory dances are named 

*prényé fïdzi, dezyêm fïdzi, swâyém fïdzi, katwiwêm 

fïdzi* (first, second, third, and fourth movements; the fourth movement is also called avantwa or *larmen dwét*), and, finally, *gwon won* (grand round). To these are added two or three 

ballroom dances of the musicians’ choice: usually a polka, schottische, *lokomêt, moudla two fasad*, or *maspô*. Whereas the compulsory 

movements are performed in a square by four 

couples not joining hands, the other dances are 

performed freely around the room by the same 

dancers in a closed-couple position. 

Most *kwadril* evenings are organized by one 

person and performed at a private house or 

rented hall. Invitation cards specifying the 

location, date, hour, and fees are sent to the 

invitees. The number of guests is limited to the 

number of dancers required for the event—that 

is, eight or twelve couples. The musicians are 

hired by the organizer and are paid. A *kwadril* 

evening can be organized at any time during the 

year, though never during Lent. The favorite 

times are during the dry season (January to 

June), because in the rainy season the entire 

evening might be cancelled because of bad 

weather. 

The selections heard here were all recorded 

in a staged setting, in the traditional wooden 

houses or rum shops where *kwadril* music used to 

be performed. The rented halls used today, 

with cement floors and aluminum-sheet walls 

and rooves, produce too much reverberation for 

successful recordings. 

All the pieces were played by Rameau Poleon’s 

group from Morne Cayenne. One of the most 

renowned groups in the island, it has been 

repeatedly selected to represent St. Lucia at 

international festivals. Rameau’s intonation, 

incisive rhythms, and improvisatory skills, in 

particular, are greatly admired by the local 

population. 

14. *Lokomêt dance*, by Rameau Poleon 

(violin), Henry Sinai (guitar), Francis 

Ashdale (banjo), Francis Geffraud (cucu), 

and Peterson Celise (chakchak), Belleview, 9 

August 1987 (2:33) 

To warm up the dancers, a closed-couple dance 

is often played before the *kwadril* begins. The 

*lokomêt* (also called *mazouk*) is the only closed-

couple dance believed to be indigenous to St. 

Lucia. It is characterized by the rhythmic 

pattern, played here on the banjo, illustrated in 

the simplified transcription (a), and sometimes 

on other occasions by the rhythmic variant (b): 

\[ a: \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{3} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{4} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{5} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{6} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{7} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{8} \end{array} \]

\[ b: \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{3} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{4} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{5} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{6} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{7} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{8} \end{array} \]

15. *Kwadril—prényé fidjî*, by Rameau 

Poleon’s group, Belleview, 9 August 1987 

(2:45) 

Note the role of the various instruments. While 

the violin plays the main melody, the guitar is 

used in a picking style to play the bass line. 

The banjo and the cuatro both use a strumming 

style and provide the harmony. Listen for the 

rhythmic figure on the banjo that characterizes 

the end of each phrase. The same rhythmic 

figure occurs in the almost identical second 

dance, which is not included here. Both the first 

and second dances are in 12/8 time. 

\[ \begin{array}{c} \text{12} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{1} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{2} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{3} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{4} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{5} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{6} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{7} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{8} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{9} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{10} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{11} \end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{12} \end{array} \]

16. *Kwadril—twâyém fidjî*, by Rameau 

Poleon’s group, Belleview, 9 August 1987 

(3:01) 

Note the alternation between simple and 

compound meters characteristic of the third 

movement of a kwadril. The fiddler begins his 

tune in 3/4 time and then, after nine bars (1 + 4 

+ 4 or 1 measure + 2 complete harmonic cycles) 

with full accompaniment, switches to 6/8. Listen 

also for the typical riff used in kwadril 

improvisation, which consists of repeating a 

single pitch in syncopated rhythms during a 

whole passage. 

17. *Kwadril—vantwa*, by Rameau Poleon’s 

group, Belleview, 9 August 1987 (3:12) 

The vantwa is always played in duple (4/4) time. 

Rarely do St. Lucian musicians begin a fast dance 

in its actual tempò; rather, as is demonstrated 

here, they start in a slower tempo to establish 

the tune, then gradually move into full swing. 

Note how the fiddler continually transforms his 

tune with syncopated rhythms and how, as in 

the previous example, he uses the strategic 

repetition of a single pitch to improvise. It is 

also common to hear the soloist stop playing for 

a few measures (up to 16, in this case) to let his 

group take over. 

18. *Kwadril—gwon won*, by Rameau Poleon’s 

group, Belleview, 9 August 1987 (4:00) 

This last dance of the kwadril set is always in 

duple time. It is a fast dance, but, as in this 

recording, it reaches its normal tempo only 

about halfway through. The gwon won dance is 

characterized by a special kind of variation called 

*ba*. To do a *ba*, the fiddler makes a full stop at 

the end of a strain and repeats the melody a fifth 

higher (for example, a strain played in the key of 

G is then repeated after a full stop in the key of 

G#) or repeats in the same key, as in this 

selection. Here, the fiddler plays two *ba* before 

concluding the piece.
19. **Moulala twa fasad**, by John Jacobs (mandolin), accompanied by Napoleon Herry on the accordion; by the Folk Research Centre, 2 August: 1986 (225)

This closed-couple dance in 4/4 time is based on melodic phrases of two measures each, the second phrase always ending on the third beat. The choreography matches the melodic phrasing: the partners sway their hips on the eighth notes of the first measure while marking the first and third beats with their feet. In the second measure, the dancers stop their body movements and mark the first three beats by touching the ground with the right foot three times, moving it out, in, and out again. On the fourth beat, the dancers remain still, before the pattern is resumed. On the rest beat, listen for the dry sound produced by a person in the audience knocking two pieces of wood together.

**Music at Funeral Wakes and for Entertainment**

Wake celebrations in St. Lucia are performed on the first and eighth nights after a person has died (why the eighth night rather than the ninth, as in most other Caribbean islands, remains a mystery). Depending on the deceased person's musical tastes and religious affiliation, the celebrations are accompanied by different kinds of music—drumming or hymn singing—or no music at all. Most often, however, music is performed inside and outside the deceased person's house. While the music performed inside is said to be for the dead, the music played outside (tracks 20-26) is intended to make the grieving family forget their sorrows and to keep the guests déjé (merry) and awake.

In the house, a group of men and women sing hymns and sankeys (gospel songs, a legacy of American revivalist singer and hymn-writer Ira D. Sankey). Since these songs have been learned in church, all the texts are sung in English. One person, usually a male singer, "lines out" the words for the audience, saying or chanting the next line for those who do not know the words or who cannot read. The delivery of the improvised chorus is slow, in unison, and unsyncopated. (Documentary recordings of sankeys have yet to be made.)

The music performed outside can include drumming music, the unaccompanied vocal style kont, or both. The drumming can incorporate some débôt and some bélé. Bébé are creole song-dances, including bélé anlina (also called bélé têpê), bélé anlina, and bélé majê, performed by only one couple at a time. (The term bélé, according to many people I interviewed, comes from the French "bébé," or "nice song," which are said to be the invention of the loqobellie. This is a mythical figure identified as a beautiful white woman with a human foot and a cow foot, who, in former times, used to come at night—trying to remain anonymous—to dance and sing with people who were celebrating.) The partners stand facing each other and perform similar movements, several couples replacing one another in the performing space.

Bélé are more formalized than kont: bélé are led by a leader and a chorus. Except for the bélé amlain, which uses a verse-refrain form, all the others are responsive. The lyrics usually deal with the daily preoccupations and sorrows of life—such as unhappy relationships or unacceptable behavior. The four bélé, like the débôt song-dances, are characteristically accompanied by the ka drum and sometimes by the zo or tiwâ. At a wake, the players are usually paid, in addition to receiving food and drinks, since the activities of the evening and night depend entirely on them.

Except for the bélé amlain, the bélé dances consist of two sections. The first serves as a warm-up for the drummer and the dancers. While the drummer plays a smooth, repetitive rhythmic pattern, the dancers do an à lé mouté—that is, a movement back and forth at the sound of the drum, without any set steps. The dancers do not try to match each other's movements but stay apart, not necessarily facing each other. The second section begins on a signal from the drum, which indicates that the dance proper begins. The couples stand close, facing one another and coordinating and matching their steps. The second section contrasts with the first by its very fast tempo. The bélé amlain dance, in contrast with the three other bélé, is performed in only one segment, with choreography based on undulating the hips in a relaxed tempo.

The unaccompanied vocal style kont (not to be confused with listwo, which in St. Lucia, refers to songs sung by a group of men and boys at funeral wakes. Kont songs deal mostly with death, reporting the deceased's last words or relating various events surrounding the death. Other kont, such as the one on this recording, are used to comment publicly on events that have affected or disturbed people's lives.

The kont formal structure normally consists of two sections. The first contains a number of four-line verses introduced by the song leader alone and sung back immediately afterward by the participants. The chorus in kont, unlike that in other St. Lucian music, often sings the ending notes of the first section in parallel thirds. In the second section, the same melody and text are repeated, but each phrase is divided into two parts. The first is sung by the song leader and the second by the chorus. In the last section, the alternation between soloist and chorus can become quite rapid.

Kont singers who demonstrate keenness and wit in their lyrics are particularly appreciated by the audience. Other kont singers are admired not so much for the quality of their lyrics but for their clear vocal tone and the involvement they show in their singing—demonstrated, as was explained to me, by the way they sustain high notes with great intensity and sing with maximum volume throughout the song.

In several villages of the southwest, including La Grace, Laborie, and Paye, a particular funeral
song-dance called koutoumba was always performed at the death of a member of a particular group of people who, like some residents of the Babonneau region, call themselves djoné. (Note that koutoumba also refers to the wake at which this music is performed.) The tradition disappeared in 1986 with the death of the last drummer who could play this music. The koutoumba differed from all the traditional dances by being performed by only one dancer at a time and by its high degree of improvisation. It used always to be preceded by three or four performances of a song-dance called aité livon. Performed in a circle with dancers moving clockwise in single file and moving their forearms up and down, the aité livon was used as a warm-up to the koutoumba and also to end the koutoumba wake.


The lyrics are based on only a few words: “Leo is sick at the hospital, Leo will die/Leo suffers at the hospital, poor Leo.” Listen for the song leader imitating the moaning of the patient. The kont text is first presented by the song leader and then sung back by the chorus, after which it adopts the form of call-and-response. Because this introduction is based on the kont, the bélé is actually called kont bélé até.

Note that the first dance section ends with a series of strokes on the drum. Then the rhythm accelerates and the dance proper begins. The drummer ends the second section by leading the dancers to perform three bòtjé at the sound of three vop (damped sounds) on the drum. After these movements are completed, the next partners take their places and the entire performance starts over. Two couples have completed their dance before the music fades out.

21. Bélé Anlavis: “Prémýé Ich Mwen,” sung by Germain Bebey, accompanied by Jules Popo (ka drum), Germain Bebey (tibwa), and Joseph Walter (chakchak), Bellevue, 6 February 1983 (1:34)

This is a verse-refrain song about a woman who explains that, after having had her first child, she was still able to find enough food to eat, such as crayfish from the river. After her second child, she adds, she was reduced to eating only soup, implying that she did not have enough money to buy anything else. By the way things are going, she is predicting that soon she will have only water to fill her stomach. The tempo of the song accelerates gradually until the musicians find the appropriate one for this dance. In this staged recording, as the tempo became more stable, two observers, unable to resist the moment, started to dance with smooth, undulating hip movements.


This song evokes a particular scene with the help of only a few sentences: “These arms [his lover’s arms] I must leave/leave [because] the rooster is singing/leave [because] it is sunrise.” The two different tempi and drum rhythms correspond to the two different bélé sections described above. In the second section, the dance proper, the two dancers raise their arms in the air and skip to the sound of the drum on one foot, alternating left and right, while the free leg is lifted to the side as high as possible. Notice that there are no vop sounds and therefore no bòtjé at the end of the dance before the performers change turns. In this recording, two couples performed the entire dance and one other couple had started to dance the first section when the song leader decided to end the dance there, by shouting “oboubo,” to which the crowd answered “bwo”—a traditional way of ending a song.


The lyrics here refer to a woman who lost her mother’s house [because of disagreement] in order to follow her lover, Laklé. She says that Laklé gave her everything she owns—a nice dress, a nice scarf. There are no bòtjé movements in this dance. At each vop on the drum, the partners, matching their movements (the man with his hands on his hips and the woman holding her skirt slightly above normal length) alternately lift the right and left leg at knee level.

24. Kont: “Dépi on Fann Kamawdwa,” sung by Jeanine Simone (song leader), and by Zita Cellse, Mary “Youbotte” Polemis, “Tityn,” Jones “Moyo” Ferdinand, and Nelson Floid (chorus), Bellevue, 6 April 1983 (2:21)

Here is a good example of a singer who is esteemed for her clear and powerful voice. In the middle of the night during the wake, she began to sing this sad song about women’s fears of losing their husbands, even at the hands of their best friends. In this selection, the chorus, almost exclusively women, forms a particularly tight group with the female song leader by singing their parts with the same vigor and involvement as she does.

“Once you have a woman [as a comrade/she comes to your house/she sees your room/she sees your kitchen/she goes back to her house/she asks herself questions/she goes back without your knowledge/she takes your husband/she goes back without your knowledge/she takes your husband.”

The alé liwon are animated, dynamic song-dances. Most of the lyrics are generally based on African words passed on from generation to generation, though their meanings are no longer understood. Listen for the song leader giving the call to “kinan, kinan,” asking the dancers to lower their bodies until he tells them to “lévé”—return to their initial position. This call is characteristic of this type of dance.


This song evokes the split-up of many families during the slavery period: “[They] left my mother/we do not have a mother/our mother is in Africa/our mother is not here/our mother will die [before we can see her again].” A few African words, such as “katapole” or “yangé yanga,” whose meanings are not known, are inserted in the song.

In the middle of a circle, the koutumba dancer begins by performing a figure called bwété, taking a few steps forward before he suddenly steps back, as if he were stumbling. Some dancers like to embellish the figure with extra steps, and allow the drummer to become more expressive, as will be heard toward the end of the excerpt. Other dancers prefer to perform this figure only once and then quickly go to someone else in the circle and, with a nod of the head or a single handclap, give that person the signal to take his or her place. The pace at which the dancers exchange roles then becomes very rapid and the dancers are said to “work fast.” By special rhythmic strokes, the drummer follows the various movements of the dancer, and by producing the particular raph sound he accompanies the nod of the head or the handclap of the dancer.

Lamagrit and Lawóz Songs

The St. Lucian societies, Lamagrit (La Marguerite) and Lawóz (La Rose), which have existed at least since the early nineteenth century, are two rival organizations found in almost every village. Although they have always declared themselves to be rivals, the two organizations share a number of features. They both call their organizations “societies,” and they share the characteristics of a society on a small scale. Following the English model, the members create specific roles by electing a king and a queen, a prince and a princess, and also by designating more common roles, such as nurses and soldiers. As members of an idealized society, the adherents share similar religious and economic status. Both societies celebrate their annual patron saints’ days with one-day festivals—the Lawóz on August 30 and the Lamagrit on October 17. Except for Lent, both groups meet weekly, the Lawóz on Saturdays and the Lamagrit on Sundays. On these occasions, the Lamagrit members sing together in a sitting position, except for the song leader who stands. The Lawóz members add dancing and instrumental music, including a tanbouwen (tambourine), chakchak, baha, sometimes a gwoj, and a guitar. Members of both organizations enjoy themselves at these meetings and thereby multiply their social activities. Like most local organizations, the societies function as a social support system, and the members help each other in case of sickness or death.

Apart from the two characteristic lakannét and kwodròl song-dances performed by the Lawóz members—both rhythmically similar to the dances found in kwodròl music—the two societies share similar musical genres such as omon (a type of waltz), manpa (a lively dance in duple rhythm), and marche, all consisting of a verse-refrain sung by a leader and chorus. The lyrics deal with the same topics, namely, their origin and patron saint, their own society and adversaries (the other society), and their flower.

No historical document describes the origins of the two organizations or the circumstances that initiated the rivalry between them. Today one can only observe the profound differences between the two: whereas the Lamagrit members favor reserved behavior, controlled pace of events, discipline, and order in their performances, the Lawóz members encourage exuberance, movement, and innovation. This can be observed particularly in the conduct of their respective performances.

The Lamagrit weekly meetings (called séances, meaning in St. Lucia to sit or meet together) are always conducted in the same way. The members gather at about eight o’clock in the evening and sit on benches placed in parallel rows in a corner of the hall. A chantelé begins to sing. There is no dancing and no playing of instruments. The songs are sung one after the other by different chantelé in turns. At the end of each séance a collection is taken up. As the annual celebration approaches, the members prolong the séances to discuss the arrangements for the fête. Toward 10:30 p.m., everybody goes home.

The Lawóz members, by contrast, focus on the innovation and liveliness of their performances. They eschew the complex melodies characteristic of Lamagrit singing and employ simple melodies readily accessible to the participants, concentrating their energy on syncopated phrases and rhythm. These performances, as noted above, include both percussive and strummed harmonic instruments. They also include entertaining nonmusical events as well, such as mock arrests and faked medical visits (for which the members have to pay a small fee), and even formal speeches. Although these activities may be devised to raise funds for the big fête, they are also used, I was told, as a means of controlling members’ behavior. For the Lawóz, the more actions and the more sound, the better.
Occasionally, and only for a big fête, the Lamargrit members use musical instruments, and the social status of the instruments affects their selection. Whereas the violin, banjo, and guitar are judged adequate for accompaniment, they would never use the baha—a simple hollow tube from which only two or three buzzing sounds are produced—as most of them regard the instrument as primitive and unfrequented. In contrast, although the Lawoz groups welcome such melodic and harmonic instruments as the violin, guitar, and banjo in their ensembles, they prefer percussion instruments (including the baha) because they consider rhythm of primary importance. The Lamargrit groups realize they are not as “hot” as the Lawoz groups, but they take pride in their display of restraint and decorum. By contrast, the Lawoz members pride themselves on demonstrating their prowess in whatever they do.

These rival organizations are said to crystallize major tendencies in St. Lucian society. After independence, the government recognized these two organizations as symbols of St. Lucian cultural identity. Since then, it has sponsored every Lawoz and Lamargrit group on the island and has allowed them to meet at central locations on the days of their annual celebrations.

Lamargrit Songs

27. March: “The Flower, the Flower, The Rose Are in Dismay,” sung by Julitta Louis (song leader) and the members of the Lamargrit Society of Laborie, Laborie, 12 September 1982 (1:29)

The call “Viv Lamargrit” by the song leader, echoed by the chorus, precedes and ends the songs performed during a séance (the same holds for the Lawoz séances, except the words are “Viv Lawoz”). This not only alerts the chorus to listen for the next song, but also confirms members’ support for their society. Often, however, after the calls and responses are made, one or several minutes can elapse before the next song actually begins. The following selections, therefore, do not always begin with “Viv Lamargrit” or “Viv Lawoz.” The refrain of this song speaks about the superior beauty of the marguerite flower and the resulting supposed dismay of the Lawoz members. The verse reminds members why they are there: for unity, peace, justice, and right, and for the celebration of their fête. In this 1982 séance, a guitar player can be heard in the background—a rare occurrence—accompanying the song.


This old Lamargrit song, performed as a solo by a woman in her late sixties, is a beautiful example of some of the intricate melodies heard in this society. The text recounts how the Lawoz members come to watch the manmoy wado (the Lamargrit members) on the day of their annual feast-day and how the latter wish the Lawoz people would wear more decent clothing. It also, ironically, acknowledges the Lamargrit people’s desire to see their rivals at fault.

29. Omans: “Byen l’Bonswe,” sung by Fidèle Emmanouel, accompanied by Clyde Clery (guitar), Laborie, 12 September 1982 (1:51)

This song, recorded at the same séance in which the faint sound of the guitar accompaniment could be heard (track 27), is performed in 3/4 time and witam tempo. The text begins with a greeting to everyone present and tells how St. Markuzize descended from heaven to enlighten the Lamargrit people.

Lawoz Songs

30. Manpa: “Lè Mwen Té Ja Di,” sung by Nora Son, accompanied by Ives Simeon (tambouwen), Maké Joseph (baha), and François “Diète” Fanis (chakchak), Laborie, 29 January 1983 (3:30)

This song features one of the favorite song leaders of the southwest region of St. Lucia. Her strong voice and superb sense of rhythm, demonstrated by her recurring and insistent use of syncopation and her particular way of lagging slightly behind the beat, aroused the admiration of all who heard her during her lifetime. Note that the instruments played at a Lawoz séance depend on the availability of musicians. The baha, for example, is not played in this recording. The song text states that even when people say they will not participate in the séances or the fête, when the celebrations begin, they can never resist.

31. Kwadirl Lawoz song: “Tann Wadlo Palé,” sung by Eric Theodore, accompanied by Ives Simeon (ka drum) and François “Diète” Fanis (chakchak), Laborie, 12 July 1986 (3:19)

Here is an example of a kwadirl song, a genre that is rarely heard nowadays. Note that the ka drum replaces the tambourine normally used in the Lawoz pieces. Listen for the characteristic rhythmic pattern of the kwadirl dance on the drum, played here in 4/4 time.

32. Lakonnmòt: “Ali Di Wadlo, Mi Mwen Mwen Ja Wyvé,” sung by Nora Son, accompanied by Ives Simeon (tambouwen), Maké Joseph (baha), and François “Diète” Fanis (chakchak), Laborie, 19 June 1981 (2:13)

This is a perfect example of the elliptical texts one can hear in the Lawoz songs. It refers to a fight, but we do not know why or how it started; it mentions people without giving any
information about them. The entire text is based on the next few lines: "I arrived, people, I arrived! arrived with honor and rights [law] go and tell the Lamanrig, look at me, I already arrived/give me blows, people, give me blows/and touch me, but don't touch my queen." This type of text, typical in oral tradition, relies on people's memories to reconstruct the event. In this instance, however, the song was passed from generation to generation, but the singers had forgotten the incident to which it refers. The lokommt rhythm used here is based on the closed-couple dance of the same name.

References


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The recordings by Jocelyne Guilbault were made with a Sony TC-DSM cassette recorder and two hand-held microphones TEAC ME-120. The recordings by Manfred Kremser and the Folk Research Centre of St. Lucia were made with, respectively, a UHER and an AKAI 4000 DB open reel recorders. The transfer of all the selections on digital equipment was made at CANARTISTE Studio, supervised by sound engineer Marc Parizeau with his production assistant, Marc Lafontune.

This project would not have been possible without the close collaboration of several people and institutions. Selections 5, 8, 10, and 13 were recorded by Manfred Kremser; 7 and 19 by the Folk Research Centre of St. Lucia; all the others by Jocelyne Guilbault. The album was edited and annotated by the principal investigator, Jocelyne Guilbault.

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About the compiler

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Credits

Mastered by Airshow
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Kwadril Musicians, Rameau Poleon's group (from left to right: chakchak, skroud banjo, violin, cuatro, and guitar.