

SIFFLEUR MONTAIGNE CHORALE RE-VISITED

(November 5, 2002)

I noted some changes when I got home to Dominica in 1981 after years of absence. In 1968 there was a car, truck or bus. By 1981 an automobile had become "a transport." What we knew as "patois" had curiously graduated to "Creole". Saying how-dy had become a hated and disagreeable idea. And, the distinction was no longer made between those who could sing and those who merely loved to sing.

*The obviously talented **Siffleur Montaigne Chorale (SMC)**, for example, no longer existed thanks to migration outward. A number of individual calypsonians, some of whom could neither compose nor sing, became the leading annual entertainers.*

One year there was a major controversy when some calypsonians and their supporters determined that a travesty of justice had occurred. The judges of the competition had "robbed" some calypsonian(s). It became my unpleasant duty to remind people that the artistes - or most of them - had nothing worth the robbery and that they were sub-standard. To rob one assumes one had something for the judge to rob. Nobody can rob zero.

*I reminded them, among other things, that our own people had in the past set excellent standards for us all to appreciate and emulate. The illustration I then used was "**TOUT SA ADAN-I.**" It is a perfect marriage of words, music and voices written and composed by **JEAN LAWRENCE** and performed by SMC.*

This year, there has been a resurgence of interest in the work of SMC. The group's contribution merits a re-visit and review.

HARMONY

*Jean Lawrence was de jure and de facto maestro, leader, lead-singer and pianist. **ZEFINAYA PRINCE** and **KEN ROBINSON** played guitars. **WILLIAM SENHOUSE** was drummer. They accompanied the singers: it was not vice versa. Together, they produced the pulsating rhythms and the harmonies that generated so much happiness. SMC achieved that without the drugs that today are popularly supposed to enhance performance.*

*SMC's work has seldom been equalled since, and has never been surpassed. A lot of noise in the name of music invades my space even as I write. It could do with some of the SMC harmony - which I lack the capacity to describe. It is not too strong a statement to note that the country itself may have lost its harmony, **AND ITS WAY**, at the same time when we lost SMC as a group.*

For the record, I define noise as any sound I prefer not to hear.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW

*"**ESPEWEYANS KWEYOL**", a week-day DBS Radio program, has SMC's "**KACHAKOU**" as its theme-song. Many of us do not know that the lead-voice therein belongs to **Mrs. JENNIFER WHITE**. She plays the some role in "**TI MOUN O LA-OU SOTI**" and in "**PA KITE YO PWAN DOMNIK HOD NOU.**"*

*Mrs. White is the leading resident expert on SMC. This piece would scarcely be possible without her kind help. Information kindly provided by **MS. RUBY BLANCHARD** is also hereby acknowledged.*

Some 9% of those who became members have died. Another 31% currently live in Dominica. Sixty percent form part of the great diaspora.

PATRIOTISM

*SMC was influenced by **Mr. Oliver Leblanc** and by the late **Cici Caudeiron**. Jean Lawrence was not herself a great patios speaker, but she went into the country areas to find facts, material and inspiration.*

*Lyrics include patios, English or a combination of both. The compositions came from traditional sources, or from the head of Jean herself. "**LAND OF SUCH BEAUTY**" was composed by an American Peace Corp Volunteer. "**O DOMINICA**" was the work of the late **Ralph Casimir**, amended by Jean in that she added a chorus.*

That patriotism or love for one's country, explodes in SMC. Some of their songs can easily substitute for the national anthem.

That same patriotism engendered an awesome idealism. I myself never saw Dominica as the paradise which SMC said it was. But artistes tend to take liberties.

MORE THAN ENTERTAINMENT

SMC's contribution transcends mere entertainment. For example, if we are not careful we may miss a facet of business and marketing:

*"Moutche Son-Son, konmen kouliou la liv?
50 cents pou la liv; si zo pa vle
Manman se kitei".*

So, we detect easily that between 1968 and 2002, price per pound of fish rose from 50 cents to six and even seven dollars. What is less clear is the extent to which the fisherman's attitude may have changed in 35 years.

Supply and demand did not then determine price; it does not now. Too often, the seller will not change price if his life depends on the reduction. The price is not negotiable. As Son-Son said: if you do not want it, mama, leave it.

The same "take it or leave it" observation is made in another SMC song about the fruit/vege and ground provision market.

At Scott's Head it was Son-Son. At Mahaut it was Not -You, Pwensipal, or Goudo. They all seemed frothy angry whenever they had a catch for sale.

SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE

The legacy of Mr. Leblanc or of Caudeiron would not be enough to perpetuate certain cultural forms. SMC would have to take the baton...and to pass it on. By singing, performing and recording select bele tunes, SMC enhanced their acceptability in social circles that frowned at those art forms before.

In an odd but interesting way, SMC itself succumbed to some notion of what was socially correct in those days. This is particularly true in terms of language that was deemed to be too sexually explicit.

When a canning factory burned, a song at the time surmised that employees would resort to prostitution to earn a livelihood. SMC deliberately toned that down:

*"Pa ni twavay anko. Sa yo ke fe pou dollar-yo?"
"No more jobs...what will they do for their dollar?"*

NOSTALGIA

- 1. Of course, there is the celebrated natural beauty of the island, much of which is still around despite our efforts to ensure to the contrary.*
- 2. SMC advised us against foreign ownership and control, i.e., **PA KITE YO PWAN DOMNIK HOD NOU**. If the island has still remained with us, it is not because we heeded the counsel. It is because the foreign investors whom we attract tend to have no money to pay for Domnik, however cheap we offer it for sale.*
- 3. The little things that made us love our home - crab drumming in its hole; hunting in the river or the forest; boys catching birds, etc - still create a feeling of nostalgia. Those little things have been displaced by TV and by the narcotics sub-culture.*
- 4. Like myself, SMC revolted against the lack of natural justice whereby Conpe Lapen always was victorious in the folk encounters with Conpe Tig. SMC sang an episode in which Brer Tiger had the last laugh.*

OTHER THEMES

*Sometimes Jean composed to engage people in folk-dance such as the Mazouk. ("**DI MWEN OU ENMEN MWEN KONSA**"). This is a haunting love-song, beautiful and timeless.*

SMC's work also explores certain problems such as the familiar truant behaviour. Children are sent to school, "pour apwann endikasyou", and turn out to be a "cross":

"Ou se yon kwa pou manman Ena."

There is also the girl who delinquently comes home late past sundown. Her mother threatens violence ("pete tete-ou").

Violence in the folk themes is not unexpected. Sometimes the reason for it is not readily identifiable. An example is the case when the singers bid farewell to William. In hardly more than one breath they say that they are going down for pleasure and going up for death.

*"Desann nou ka desann pou plesi
Moute nou ka moute pou lanmo!"*

Sometimes the violence is sardonic:

*"Pou ki sa manman, pou ki sa
Di mwen pouki ou ka moute lajol
Pou ki sa manman pou ki sa?"
"Konbos mwen voye mwen benyen."*

This translates:

"Why mama, why are you going to jail?"

"My rival asked me to take a bath."

Rivalry for love should not provoke me to violence, and ultimately, to prison. I would probably swallow the insult. Be that as it may, your personal copy of SMC's works will be well worth it.

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