

# 1 | Introduction to the Caribbean and Its History

## An Overview

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Turquoise bays, white sand beaches, tropic breezes, picturesque sunsets: this is the Caribbean many tourists know and seek out on holiday. It is the Caribbean promoted in glossy brochures by travel agencies, their pages promising the opportunity to ‘relax, unwind, and get away from all your troubles’ and to enjoy ‘the full spectrum of Caribbean culture’ without ever having to leave the secured walls of your resort. Images of Bob Marley, salsa dancers, or conga drums are often displayed alongside beach-clad images in these brochures. Come dance to the ‘Caribbean beach beats’, invites the Viking cruise line in its advertisements. Let salsa be ‘the perfect soundtrack’ to your ‘unforgettable cruise travel adventure’ suggests another cruise line.

Inventing the Caribbean as this all-inclusive region represents ‘one of the best branding exercises in the history of marketing’, confesses Godfrey Baldacchino, a professor of island tourism. Such branding led to idyllic views of the Caribbean, where the islands were ‘unified [and] bounded’ through fixed images and sound clips that evoke the required familiarity sought by tourists (Baldacchino 2005, 249). It is a marketing strategy that continues to shape the way people outside (and inside) the Caribbean view, see, and hear the region.

I regularly teach a Caribbean music module at a UK university, and each year I meet incoming students who have bought into this marketing approach. Some students joined their parents on an island cruise or backpacked across a few islands during their ‘gap year’. They often arrive in the classroom convinced that ‘if you’ve seen one island, you’ve seen them all’. They speak of the region as one massive country, complete with a single religion, music, and history. Other students in my modules group the islands together with Latin America, viewing the two as interchangeable, seemingly unaware that, geographically, Latin America, itself highly diverse, refers to a set of nations belonging to North America, Central America, and South America, and that the classification of Latin America includes only a few Caribbean countries. Many of the students, too, are surprised at discovering reggae is *not* the only musical art form produced in the Caribbean, but that the region instead includes a host of diverse genres, from dancehall and salsa to *Tambú* and *zouk*.

This book has been written in part to challenge these myths and misconceptions. The Caribbean is *not* one massive, inclusive country; and, if you've seen one island, you've certainly *not* seen them all! Rather, the region comprises a hugely complex spectrum of people, music, and beliefs. Although the islands may be united by the imperial traces of colonialism, slavery, and indentured servitude, each has had a very different experience of contact and conflict, placement and displacement, accommodation and adaptation. These differences in experience have led to the region's present diversities, with the islands' shared imperial history giving way to multiple and multifaceted responses that prompted historian David Lowenthal to proclaim: 'In the Caribbean, the past is a living presence' (quoted in Alcocer 2011, 69).

Being a product of colonial conquest, the Caribbean is difficult to define as a single spatial category. It emerged as an idea: a cultural, historical, social, and geo-political construction that surfaced during the nineteenth century when European rivalries fought for its occupation. There is no country in the region that carries the name of 'Caribbean', be it singularly or in hyphenated form. Even the term 'Caribbean', as cartographic reviews show, was not used with regularity until the twentieth century. That disagreements would emerge regarding which countries and territories form part of 'the Caribbean' is, therefore, unsurprising.

Sometimes the region is introduced solely through its islands. Sometimes it is presented with territories in Central and South America, like Belize, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana. There are some scholars that even attach the southern coasts of the United States, specifically Florida and Louisiana, to the greater region. This book, however, focuses on the island nations, a decision made not because of perceived geography but because these islands allow us a specific unit of analysis for viewing some of the complexities of the region and its musics.

Over some 7,000 individual islands span the region we call the Caribbean. Among these are twenty-eight nations, which, despite their geographical smallness or close proximity, are among the most diverse and culturally heterogeneous countries in the world. These island nations are connected not just by geography but through the similar history of Amerindian chiefdoms, European colonialism, African slavery, and Asian and European indentureship. As already argued, the manner in which each nation experienced those encounters was markedly different, with each embracing a unique yet powerful saga of domination and resistance, travel and exchange, placement and displacement, accommodation and adaptation; and it is this diversity of experience that gives each nation its cultural specificity.

When trying to unpack the Caribbean's diversity, music emerges as a particularly useful tool. Music is a cultural marker of society, which means Caribbean music, like the island nations themselves, is enmeshed in powerful histories. Its study reveals a dendrochronology – a history articulated in layered chapters. Just as sections of an ancient tree reveal secrets of climatology and other life-circumstances in cross-section to those able to interpret what they see, so too does the cultural strata of Caribbean music reveal to ethnomusicologists the changing historical and social contexts of its growth and survival. With each island nation bound to particular political and social stakes and meanings, unravelling the music specific to an island nation uncovers the hidden complexities distinct to that country's unique cultural encounters.

A solid understanding of the islands' history/histories emerges crucial for anyone studying Caribbean music. Caribbean-minded ethnomusicologists, in fact, acquire a sort of call-and-response relationship with history: history calls, and the music responds, demanding that ethnomusicologists in turn seek out what those connections might mean to each island as well as to the region. The answers raise important questions central to the Caribbean experience, and throw light on how the past might have shaped present music-making practices. To speak of Caribbean music is to recognise the diverging impact history has had on its islands and its many different musics. This Introduction thence serves as a broad summary of Caribbean history, emphasising history's binding relationship with Caribbean music – a necessary preliminary task if we are to understand and appreciate the chapters of this book.

Any examination into the Caribbean's history must begin with its native peoples. According to historical and archaeological evidence, the region's native population first arrived from South America around 4000 BC, settling initially in what is today known as Trinidad – a journey made decidedly easier because Trinidad was then still part of the mainland of South America. Repeated waves of migrations continued to bring additional Amerindian nation groups into the region, each contributing to the Caribbean a rich cultural and social diversity. The Guanahatabeys (sometimes misreferred to as Ciboneys, a separate Taíno group also from central Cuba) are believed to be the earliest of these Amerindian nation groups in the Caribbean, taking claim to the western tip of Cuba and south-western Hispaniola (an island that is now shared with the Dominican Republic and Haiti). However, neither historical nor archaeological evidence can confirm their place of origin: some authorities claim they arrived from the Yucatán (in present-day eastern Mexico); some suggest they arrived from

Florida, coming to Cuba across the Florida Straits; and yet others argue that they arrived from Orinoco Valley.<sup>1</sup> What does seem clear, however, was that Guanahatabeys were hunting-and-gathering people, and, like other Amerindians in the region, became victims of brutality under Spanish colonisation when Europeans finally arrived in the fifteenth century (Reid 2009; Saunders 2005).

The Taíno are another Indigenous people from the Caribbean. They are believed to have descended from the Orinoco Valley and, because they spoke languages based on a linguistic family known as Arawakan, are often linked to the Arawaks. The Taíno were among the largest groups of Amerindians to migrate to the region. Thought to have come from South America via several repeated waves over some 1,000 years, they took claim first in south-eastern Caribbean (which included the Virgin Islands, Anguilla, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Antigua, Barbuda, Montserrat, and Guadeloupe) before moving to the Greater Antilles (which included Cuba, Hispaniola, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and the Bahamas) (Josephs 2010; Guitar 2002).

Following the Taíno's arrival were the Caribs, also believed to have originated from the Orinoco Valley. It is understood that the Caribs, as assertive warriors, first reached the Lesser Antilles and successfully pushed the Taíno to resettle in the Greater Antilles. Because the Caribs made frequent raids on the Taíno, often capturing the women and making them their wives, many Caribs are accepted as being part-Taíno (Mendis et al. 2015; Allaire 2013).

When Christopher Columbus landed in the Caribbean in 1492, he came into contact with these Amerindians. Within fifty years most in the region had died, killed by disease, massacres, or failed attempts at enslavement. Their cultural influence on the Caribbean, however, has remained apparent, undeniably thriving in the imagination of many. On Curaçao, for example, the Arawaks continue to be idolised for their perceived strength in resisting Europeans' attempts at enslavement. Arawak gods and goddesses are regularly summoned by followers of the island's religion *Montamentu* when collective strength within the community is sought (see Chapter 6). In the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, too, local efforts to reconnect with Taíno culture have emerged, with primary and secondary schools teaching traditional Taíno stories and dances, and different cultural groups organising and inviting the public to participate

<sup>1</sup> The Orinoco Valley is located in present-day Venezuela and eastern Colombia and is drained by one of the longest rivers in South America.

in Taíno-inspired rites (Aguilar et al. 2017). On Puerto Rico, specifically, the Taíno are appreciated as the originators of the *maracas* and *güiro*, two musical instruments that remain popular in both traditional and contemporary musics on the island (Feliciano-Santos 2021).

Columbus's colonisation of the Indigenous Caribbean led to a Spanish monopoly in the region, with Spain successfully preventing other European colonialists from establishing colonies of their own in the region for nearly 200 years. St Kitts was the first permanent non-Spanish colony in the Caribbean, with both French and British settlers settling there in 1624 and sharing the island in an effort to create a defensive alliance against Spain. Three years later, Britain colonised Barbados, and then Nevis, Antigua, and Montserrat. Some seven years later (in 1634), the Dutch occupied Curaçao, followed by Bonaire, St Maarten (which shares its island with the French colonised St Martin), Saba, and St Eustatius (these islands remain politically tied to the Netherlands). The following year (in 1635), the French colonised two of the larger islands in the Eastern Caribbean: Guadeloupe and Martinique (both of which remain as French overseas territories). From 1672, Denmark established its own Danish West Indies by colonising St Thomas, St Jan, and St Croix (which it then sold to the United States in 1917, becoming part of the United States Virgin Islands). In 1685, Brandenburg (the future Kingdom of Prussia, in present-day Germany) sought to join the lucrative slave trade by leasing part of St Thomas from Denmark and, from 1689 to 1693, controlled Vieques, an island off the coast of Puerto Rico. During this time, the Duchy of Courland, a small principality in modern-day Latvia, too, colonised the Caribbean, albeit on a smaller scale, by occupying Tobago, the small island next to Trinidad, which was transformed into a central port for European trade, exporting sugar, tobacco, ginger, coffee, and cocoa (for more information, see Blouet and Blouet 2009; Hulme 1986; Jekabson-Lemanis 2000).

Like the Amerindians before them, the Europeans travelled with their cultures, religions, and traditions, establishing in the region further cultural diversities. Depending on the wars in Europe and the New World, the islands frequently changed hands, causing Europeans to become as mobile as the Caribs had been. For example, although Martinique was 'discovered' by Columbus in 1492, it was not occupied until 1635, and then not by the Spanish but by the French. The British, too, occupied Martinique on numerous occasions during the colonial period; but after 1814 Martinique returned under French rule, where it has remained – the cultural influences of France, Spain, and England, as a result, all intersect on Martinique (Fieldhouse 2015). Similarly, Tobago changed European

hands numerous times, from the British and the French to the Dutch and the Courlanders. Although British culture may have remained a primary force on modern Tobago, remnant influences from France, the Netherlands, and Latvia can still be found on the island (Boomert et al. 1987). St Maarten/St Martin provides an unusual model of European colonial rivalry: the island began as a Spanish colony, but during the sixteenth century was coveted by the Portuguese, English as well as the Flemish, before finally in the seventeenth century it was split between the French (which christened their half as Saint Martin), and the Dutch (which named its portion Sint Maarten). St Maarten/St Martin today sport two very different communities, divided not only by language but also by currency, cuisine, and tradition (Fielding 2017).

Europeans had come to the Caribbean in search of wealth. Although initially seeking gold and silver, they quickly turned their efforts to agriculture, including tobacco and, its most lucrative produce, sugar cane. The Caribbean became hugely valuable as a result, with European empires fighting intensely to occupy the islands and to assume their prospective economic wealth – thus the frequent change by colonial hands. Emerging alongside burgeoning plantation economies was a system of slavery, which initially involved the region's Amerindians but eventually was extended to include Africans, who were shipped into the Caribbean as enslaved labourers, first in small numbers as domestic servants, but later in huge numbers, coming predominantly from the West Coast of Africa.

To this end, Africans from many cultural backgrounds, social statuses, and spiritual beliefs were captured, chained up, and transported to the Caribbean, where they laboured on plantations or were re-sold to work elsewhere in the Americas. According to Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, the multiplicity of African cultures 'reach[ing] the New World did not compose, at [that] moment, groups' (Mintz & Price 1992, 10). Rather, it was the experience of slavery that united the Africans, however diverse their backgrounds and cultures. While rebuilding their lives in the Caribbean, their rich and diverse African cultures took root, categorically reshaping them and their environment. The term creolisation is commonly used to describe the phenomenon of cultural exchange that occurred among the Africans and, eventually, their descendants. It was, in the words of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 'a miracle begging for analysis' (2002, 189) and 'born against all odds . . . not meant to exist' (191). Nonetheless, as a result of that exchange, new cultural practices emerged, often a conglomerate of different traditions. Upon Africans' forced entrance into the New World, this process of creolisation took different directions,

depending on which individual islands became the Africans' ultimate destination and what particular colonial government and plantation politics they might have experienced. On Curaçao, for example, the ratio of enslaved Africans to proprietors was considerably lower than what was seen on most other Caribbean islands, a circumstance that helped establish a social atmosphere of extensive proprietor scrutiny and control, which served to empower the island's European heritage at the expense of African-based culture. On other island nations, where the ratio of Africans far outnumbered proprietors, such as Cuba and Haiti, very different cultural and social environments took root.

The abolishment of slavery, when it finally came in the 1830s, ignited a labour shortage across the Caribbean. To meet plantation demands, indentured workers were recruited from across Asia, including the Indian subcontinent ruled by the British, and Indonesia, a Dutch territory, as well as from Europe – primarily Irish, Scots, and Portuguese. Indentured labourers lived and worked under punitive conditions: wages were lower than promised and mistreatment was commonplace. They led quarantined lives, cut off from the rest of society, with colonial governments authorising planters to manage and regulate the labourers' every move, from private to public, limiting anything that could threaten the productivity of the plantation. Although worker contracts were generally for five years, many found it difficult to leave the plantation following these initial contracts. Numerous planters, again in collusion with colonial governments, kept labourers in a state of indenture by establishing economic conditions that made it impossible for them to leave the plantations: they were normally required to work through an entire season before receiving any wage, paying for food, clothing, and other essentials on credit from estate stores with money deducted from pay checks following completion of the year's harvest. The exorbitant prices often charged left many financially obligated to the estates in a seemingly unbreakable cycle of oppression.

More than half-a-million Indians (Hindu and Muslim) were also brought to the Caribbean as indentured servants, along with some 18,000 Chinese, 33,000 Indonesians and half-a-million Europeans (primarily of Irish and Scottish decent). Many of these indentured labourers formed collective senses of belonging in the Caribbean, yet also retained spaces distinctly theirs: enclaves where they could continue to speak their native languages and practice their traditional ways of life. Many assumed multiple allegiances, with notions of 'home' and 'continuity' questioned, challenged, and renegotiated.

Some traditional rituals, though initially performed by and for a specific ethnic community, were eventually pulled into the Caribbean mainstream, becoming popular with culturally diverse audiences. One such example is the Muslim celebration commemorating Husayn's martyrdom, a largely solemn event in India and Pakistan. In Trinidad (which became home to over 145,000 indentured Indian labourers), however, the ritual was reclaimed as *Hosay* and was marked by merriment and celebration. *Tassa* drumming accompanied carnival-like parades, with Mosque-shaped tombs (known as *tadjahs*), symbolically representing Husayn's death, carried through the streets before being pushed out to sea at the end of the ten-day event. With *Hosay*, the Indian communities in Trinidad participate in 'here' and 'there': they reassert an Indian identity while celebrating a Caribbean sense of belonging, reminding us that culture and ritual are in constant motion; they are not unchanging or frozen in time, but rather stand as resources for accommodating the past within the present, all the while making room for new ways of survival to take root (Khan 2021).

Another example comes from Montserrat, which, having become home to many Irish indentured labourers, assumed the subsequent title of the 'Emerald Isle of the Caribbean'. Its flag portrays a harp-playing colleen against a British Union flag; its national emblem is an Irish shamrock adorning the Montserrat Government House; and, should you visit the island, your passport upon entry will be immediately stamped with a large green shamrock. St Patrick's Day is a national holiday on Montserrat, and provides us with another vivid example of how borrowing and reshaping cultures and histories give way to new rituals of being: on Montserrat, St Patrick's Day commemorates not just the Christian apostle but also the 1768 uprising by the island's enslaved and indentured communities against the oppression and poverty suffered under wealthy plantation owners. It is a ten-day festival that includes a pub crawl; a tartan-costumed parade, danced to the accompaniment of fife and drum; educational lectures on the island's Irish past; and a junior calypso music competition (McAttackney et al. 2014).

With slavery big-business in the Caribbean, its abolishment sent the islands into financial tailspins, forcing many people to migrate for work. On Curaçao, for example, after emancipation most White Hollanders returned to the Netherlands, while Afro-Curaçaoans had little choice but to travel outside the island for work. With Cuba's rumoured promise of easily attained fortunes, over half the male Afro-Curaçaoan workforce made the decision to relocate to Cuba during the 1910s and 1920s, joining other hopefuls from Haiti and Jamaica to



assume employment on that island's sugar plantations. By the late 1930s, however, prospects for employment on Curaçao improved with the giant Dutch oil corporation Shell building refineries along the island's harbours. With workers needed at all skill levels, the Curaçaoan government, which had up until then ignored the many Curaçaoans living in Cuba, suddenly planned for their repatriation, even providing economic incentives for their return. Although some Curaçaoans elected to stay on Cuba to build their own Antillean community there, scores of others, some with strong family connections to Cuba, began to stream back to their home island. They returned, however, with an acquired sense of Cuban belongingness, which they then celebrated and commemorated through 78 rpm recordings of Cuban dance music that they brought back with them. The *danzón*, *son*, *guaracha*, and *guijra* – rhythms specific to Cuba – quickly took root on Curaçao and helped to raise the island of Cuba to mythological status. Curaçaoans continue to celebrate that shared sense of Cuban belonging at weekend parties called *Comback*, where original Cuban 78 rpm recordings are played and where the dance steps common to 1920s Cuba are purposefully recreated (De Jong 2003).

Post-war Europe brought again new cultural change to the Caribbean. Workers were needed to help rebuild European economies weakened by the war years and to fill labour shortages in areas important to Europe's reconstruction, including manufacturing, construction, public transport, and healthcare. The passenger liner *Empire Windrush*, which arrived at Tilbury on 22 June 1948, marked a mass migration that, over the next thirty years, brought over half-a-million migrants from English-speaking islands to Great Britain. Around the same time, some 160,000 men and women from across the French-speaking Caribbean were recruited to mainland France to work in its construction and healthcare sectors, while Caribbean men and women primarily from Jamaica relocated to the United States to work in agriculture, many on Florida sugar plantations. These migrations established new diasporas across the globe: Jamaican, Haitian, Trinidadian – and with these new diasporas came new transnational practices, where 'home' and 'away from home' again intertwined to create hybrid spaces of belonging (Mead 2009; Milla-Marie-Luce 2009; Brock 1986).

Fast-forward to today: Caribbean migration has become so widespread, the World Bank has indicated that, in the twenty-first century, to every one person living in the Caribbean there is another person living abroad in a diaspora. Yet, importantly, the Caribbean has retained significance

among those living abroad, with diasporic communities continuing to draw upon the islands for individual and collective inspiration. The islands – their images, landscapes, sounds – continue to provide strategies for diasporic communities as they confront the conflicting experience of ‘roots’ versus ‘routes’ (Gilroy 1995).

The Caribbean remains a region of creativity and possibility, where differences meet, adapt, and transform; where experiences of colonialism, slavery, indentureship, and globalisation launch the cultural continuities that bring the island nations into critical relation to one another, allowing for similarities as well as variances. A particular challenge in writing a book on the Caribbean is to relay this phenomenon of sameness and difference coherently. With music, however, we are guaranteed a vehicle for unpacking and articulating these complexities; we have at our disposal a range of comparative possibilities for exposing not only what makes the island nations unique but also what unites them.

This book introduces the music from the Caribbean – and its diasporas – through thirteen chapters, each exploring a musical genre from one island nation or community. Each chapter highlights a particular theme marking the complexity of the Caribbean, from the intricate search for belonging to the divergent negotiation of ‘home’. The chapters can be read independently, and can be read in any order. The themes, although tackled individually through a single nation, can also be discussed in relationship to the other islands; they can be considered in correlation with other musics and other Caribbean communities. In this way, the chapters in this book – as well as the island nations themselves – are presented not in a straight line, but as part of a loop, where essential ideas recur and repeat, to different measures and to different outcomes. The chapters arise as a collage of voices and accounts, suggesting process, not product; meant to reflect the fluidity that marks the Caribbean as a whole.

Robin Moore’s chapter provides an excellent setting to begin our exploration into Caribbean music. In his chapter, the *son* is introduced as a tool for theorising and examining racialised identities in Cuba, with Fernando Ortiz’s theory of transculturation resurrected as a way to explain and interpret Cuba’s shifting connections with race, identity, and nation. Because, as Moore writes, the *son* ‘exists in a changing relationship to other forms and is perceived differently according to the exigencies of particular historical periods’, it can serve as a useful vehicle for analysing the contradictions and conflicts surrounding belonging in Cuba, making it emblematic of a complex give-and-take process that is itself steeped in intricate structures of power, opposition, and resistance.