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NIGEL CAMPBELL

“The scars by which America is marked are deep... The evils are manifest, naked to the view of anyone who cares to see them!”

—OSCAR ARIAS SÁNCHEZ, Nobel speech, 1987.

“Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories!”

—DEREK WALCOTT, Nobel lecture, 1992.

“For me, art is the restoration of order. It may discuss all sort of terrible things, but there must be satisfaction at the end. A little bit of hunger, but also satisfaction!”

—TONI MORRISON, Nobel laureate, interview with Don Swaim, 1987

Whenver T&T jazz trumpeter and composer Etienne Charles releases an album, it is an event. In this case, it is the ten-part *The San Jose Suite*—soon to be performed live in T&T. The album was released in June this year but has not yet been performed locally. It will debut on November 20 at Queen’s Hall, from 7 pm.

This suite dares to magnify the idea of the wider Americas as a crucible for the continuing assimilation and transformation of disparate musical influences. It is a space where the Naipaulian idea of “small places with simple economies bred small people with simple destinies” is turned on its head forever.

Charles uses the coincidence of the name of San José to make a subliminal link between the Caribbean, Latin American and North American cultural tendencies. The real commonality is the idea of the African diaspora intersection with the Native American antecedents to act as the base for a new direction in jazz.

The persistence and resilience of these San José communities—in Trinidad (San José de Oruña became St Joseph), in Costa Rica, in California—and their resulting musical legacies serve as a catalyst for creation. The retentions and the new hybrids in these American spaces are explored with adroit musicianship that captures the newer elements of the African confrontation with European music: jazz, “music beyond the manuscript.”

This is a breathtakingly large project and Charles’ vision is wide enough to handle it. He is the researcher, the traveller, the chronicler of remade sounds and rhythms, not the imitator who artificially resurrects a catalogue of echoes and handed-down music.

He is mining those stories and ideas of Native American heritage, and the later African interlude to rechart the ruins, as LeRoy Clarke



Etienne Charles and the conquest of the Americas

would say, to present the modern listener with an intelligent yet accessible understanding of who we are in the Americas. A people remade as a polyglot mix of Meso-American, African, European languages, beliefs and inheritances. This is an extension of Charles’ Creole Soul in the New World.

These compositions set a new paradigm for local creativity that must be applauded. With the receipt of the Chamber Music America New Jazz Works Grant, funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Charles was able to use his imagination and to explore the broader traditions of creole cultural persistence. As a result, he was freed from the strictures of a “small place” philosophy and its narrowing commercial milieu, to compose melodies and

harmonic responses to the shards of historical evidence of the impact of colliding destinies and racial biographies of the people of this New World.

On this album, we hear the stories of aboriginal peoples of each San José: the Nepuyo of Trinidad, the Boruca of Costa Rica and the Muwekma Ohlone of California. Their epic memory is reborn by music that addresses the dances and the songs of those first peoples. In some areas, imagination leads Charles to mimic earth sounds with his rhythm section of Ben Williams on bass and John Davis on drums to great effect. We are part of that sonic history.

On this album, we hear the legacy of the late 19th century presence of the Caribbean migrant in Costa Rican

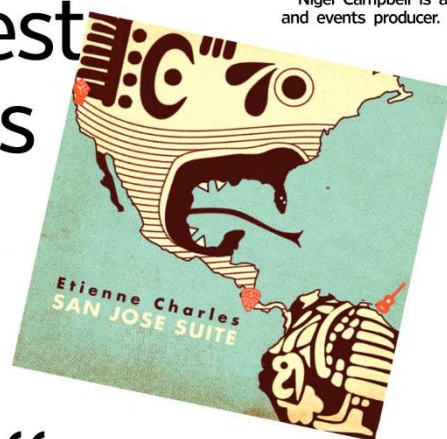
towns of Limón and Cahuita. The calypso is a musical retention that is locked into modern Costa Rica. In 2012, the government of Costa Rica, by executive decree, gave special recognition to calypso as part of Costa Rica’s cultural and historical identity, and declared the style of music “national patrimony.” We are listening to a reflection of our Caribbean past supplanted on the Central American present.

On this album, the African and African-American confrontations of Daaga in 1837 and Dr Harry Edwards in 1968 with the status quo of Trinidad and Californian institutional miasma are re-interpreted as percussive and funky statements of rebellion. Conquests of ideas, of social dictates, of sacred spaces are brought to bear as Charles focuses the listener to understand that the America of our imagination and sometimes narrow fields of view is not circumscribed. This music is the extension of the Creole Soul in the New World.

The Nobel laureates cited above have all defined art, and how we interact with our past. This album is a noble declaration that this Trinidad space can and does understand the historic precedence of all people who have lived here. It contributes an excellent example of how to rise above the ruins, beyond amnesia, beyond limitation and mere simplicity. It is left to Trinidadian Nobel laureate VS Naipaul to note: “The world outside existed in a kind of darkness; and we inquired about nothing.”

San José Suite makes us to see and hear a wider America. We are blessed.

Nigel Campbell is a jazz critic and events producer.



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