

Stories

of

Jah Lemon

part twenty five

A Talk With Tommy McCook

Celebrating Citrus in The Bahamas

Natty Mark Samuels

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Dedication

to

Dan- I

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for his support and promotion of

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through

The Dub

A Talk With Tommy McCook

During your breaks at the Zanzibar Club on Blue Hill Road, Tommy, what was your choice of refreshment? Was it the Fruit Punch? That would have been my choice. That wonderful amalgamation of lemon, grapefruit, orange and pineapple juice, Grenadine syrup and Angostura bitters. After the last cha-cha, before you resumed with a mambo, did you relish a Bahamian fruit pinch?

I would love to have taken a boat with you, from New Providence to the Abaco Islands, to sit in the aroma of an orchard - and drink a grapefruit juice over ice, while I listened to you talk of Charlie Parker. To have gone there Tommy, between November and February, the peak fruiting time for grapefruit. On a day when you're not gigging, to take that fifty five mile journey from Nassau to Marsh Harbour, to watch the grace of the Great Blue Heron, while you talk of the greatness of Charlie Parker and we each drink a cold glass of *citrus paradisi*.

And while we're there when hunger comes, you could take your pick of any other of the eating places, in any of the cays: whether it be the cay called Green Turtle, or the one called Treasure; Bamboo or the one known as Snapper. I would let you pick the spot Tommy and treat you to an Avocado and Grapefruit Salad. I am not an eater of fish, but you may prefer the Grapefruit with Shrimp and Sour Sauce.

In my research into citrus in the Bahamas, as well as interaction with those born here, it's good to have a conversation with someone from elsewhere, who has resided for a few years in that country of islands. After gaining renowned proficiency in the clubs of Kingston, playing the music of Duke Ellington and Count Basie, looking for enhanced opportunities outside Jamaica, Tommy McCook went north to Nassau. From big band jazz, to mambos and bossanovas. Were you a drinking man Tommy? Would you have drunk a Bahamian Delight: one part Campari, one part grapefruit juice? The fusion of the two with ice. Would you have topped it with a cherry?

And Ernest Ranglin. Tell us of the beverage preference of that great guitarist, who came to Nassau with you, returned to Jamaica and came again to The Bahamas, while touring with the famed Eric Deans Orchestra, which you were once a member of. Was Ernest a drinking man? Of gin, sweet sherry and lemon juice, do you think he would have enjoyed a Nassau Sherry Cocktail? And mentioning Eric Deans, known as "The Maestro", which dish did he favour? Possibly the Avocado Soup; avocado, lime, onion and milk. I like the way all the ingredients except the milk are blended together and that the milk is a later addition, mixed in well with the others: chilled, then ready to consume. Ahhh, Eric Deans, who supported and nurtured other great talents, such as Don Drummond, Lloyd Brevett, Roland Alphonso and Rico Rodriguez, via gigs at the Bournemouth and Colony Clubs in Jamaica and tours in Haiti and The Bahamas.

When you first you came to Nassau, Tommy, was your contract strictly for the Zanzibar, or could you perform in other clubs, such as the Silver Slipper, Dirty Dicks or Bama? As in Kingston, did you jam and play with the "cream of the crop" in Nassau? With George Symonette and his Goombay Sextet? Blind Blake at the Royal Victoria Hotel? With Freddie Munnings at the Cat and Fiddle Club? Were you at that venue on those occasions, when Nat King Cole and Dinah Washington performed there? So many questions to ask you Tommy! After Ernest and the others returned to Jamaica, you stayed, clocking up eight years on Bahamian soil. What was your experience, of playing on a private yacht?

Over those eight years, I know there must have been reflective moments, concerning the music made by Roy Coburn's Blu-Flames, when you were a part of their emblazoning. That collection of musicians that included Cluett Jonson, Roland Alphonso and Don Drummond, as well as guests such as Joe Harriet and Sonny Bradshaw. I know you must have looked back and smiled at the calibre of music made; grinned at the memory of an anecdote, which continues to make you laugh inside.

I imagine you the day after a gig, after your morning shower, looking out at the ocean, spoilt for choice with what spread to embellish your bread with. Pumpkin Jam, with juice and rind of lemon; Watermelon Jam with orange peel: Orange Marmalade, with input from lemon, as well as orange. I know that if I resided there Tommy or went on holiday, I would certainly start my day with a citrus blessing. Looking out, while the fishermen are busy in their interaction with marlin, mackerel, tuna and snapper; the sea lions sunbathe and the seabirds gather to converse.

Of the seven hundred islands Tommy, how many did you visit? Did you go to Andros? Was the Crab Festival a summer feature back then? Did you celebrate Junkanoo on Inagua? I have heard that the people have a reputation for retaining and demonstrating their African heritage on that island. I see you on Boxing Day, making your way with the throng, down to Bay Street in central Nassau. How did Junkanoo there, differ from its Jamaican version? Yes, I see you Tommy, in amongst the other musicians - the goombay drummers and those playing conch shell, whistles, cowbells and bugle – enjoying the Junkanoo jam. Did you go to Cat Island? Join in, in the Rake 'n' Scrape ensembles, of goatskin drum, accordion and scraped saw? Did you meet "Ronnie" Butler? I imagine that wherever you went, on New Providence or any other island, that those who knew of you, eagerly invited you into their houses, to partake of something; maybe Baked Papaya, embellished with orange juice, lime juice and shredded coconut. And in the times of conch, what was your favourite? Were you attracted by the salad? With sweet pepper, tomatoes, cucumber, onion, celery and lime juice.

And the mention of lime juice, brings us to "Switcha," the Bahamian version, which is drunk with cane sugar and water. Some like the addition of orange or grapefruit, ginger, mint - or rum. Whatever the meal, wash it down with Switcha! Before the washing down maybe a Sapodilla "Dilly' Crumble.

I must confess Tommy, that before I began my research into The Bahamas, I'd never heard of Sapodilla before. But I do like a crumble, especially a blackcurrant one, so I'd definitely try the dilly, knowing that amongst its contents are lemon juice and lemon rind. At the end of a meal, it must be lovely to wash a dilly down with a switcha.

Every February, they have the Festival RumBahamas, where they celebrate that beverage, offering over thirty varieties. Was there a version of this jamboree in your day? There is Bahama Mama, whose content is non-flavoured rum, coconut flavoured rum, orange juice, pineapple juice and grenadine syrup. I wonder if you tried the ginger flavoured version.

When time is on your side - between the gigs, rehearsals and sound checks - I think of you in an easy chair, after tuning into an American station; sitting, entranced again by the music of John Coltrane, while your mouth is happy to be the recipient of a slice or two of Coconut Cake. Of vanilla essence, brown sugar, eggs, milk, butter and lemon rind. While basking in the glories produced by a master, your insides give thanks for the blessings they have received.

Talking about receiving, the Bahamian nation has received a mixed bag of visitors. From one called Christopher, who went on to leave a trail of decimation, in the wider Caribbean region; Blackbird, a man who excelled in pillage and plundering; Tommy McCook, who came as a conduit to beauty. Some came to take, others to give; so it went and so it goes.

We know you as a saxophonist Tommy, but you were a flautist too. Did the flute get an airing too, in the times of calypso. Do the Bahamians know of mento? This is what the American tourist wanted, as well as the types of music mentioned before. They knew Fletcher Henderson, they knew Glenn Miller: they came to hear the music of The Bahamas and of the other island nations.

And on a Sonny Rollins Sunday, did you eat a Souse? In a time of rest, with a Sonny Rollins session on the radio, maybe you would have treated yourself to the aforementioned Bahamian favourite, of peppers, onions, potatoes, possibly chicken - but definitely a significant input of juice from limes.

Through the orchards of Grand Bahama, Andros, Abacos and New Providence. Me, lost in the sight and the aroma, you, who have seen it before, go strolling along, humming a tune by Miles Davies. And I think to myself, let the Bahamaians always produce grapefruit, lemons and limes.

From the classrooms of Alpha to the cays of The Bahamas, bringing all that you have learnt. As time continues to pass, Tommy, according to a Jamaican academic I met at a recent conference, the wonderful saga of you and your contemporaries, is still not told in music provision in Jamaican schools! So we continue to cry, at the Tomb of the Unknown Musician. They do not know of Sister Ignatius, Leslie Kong, Yabby You, Jackie Mittoo, Sonia Pottinger, Burning Spear, Jack Ruby, King Tubby and so on. What the curriculum does not offer, our projects and initiatives must do so. So don't worry Tommy, some have forgotten your value, but some have not.

And what you learnt in the land of seven hundred islands, over those eight years, helped to make you one of the most sought after session musicians, on your return to Jamaica. Time passes Tommy and we have not forgotten you. Through record sleeve credits, photographs, original recordings and contemporary versions, articles, anthologies and film clips. I bow my head to you, while placing my hand on my chest, in salute to a musical monarch. I raise a large glass of limeade, to pay tribute and honour, to the one who went to Nassau as the one of much potential and returned as a confirmed master. If you ever get the chance, have a talk with Tommy McCook.

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