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ROCK CITY'S ROCK LOUNGE: THE POETICS AND AESTHETICS OF COMMUNITY



Similar to St. John and St. Croix, the Caribbean island of St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands is generally figured as a tourist space. A simple google of St. Thomas produces the nice catch phrases such as “most popular destination” for vacationers, or as a Virgin Islander would say, for those from state-side. It is extremely difficult to find scholarship on St. Thomas that does not frame the island as primarily a tourist venue. Even to the island’s nick name, Rock City, can imply the partying dimension, which in turn can resonate in the tourist discourse already surrounding its bordering waters. What this perception can hide the fact that Rock City and the other islands of the non-continental U.S. territory have a cultural history that resonates outside the parameters of tourism. Like their Caribbean brother- and sister-nations, Virgin Islanders proudly trace their histories to the Arawaks, Caribs, and Africans, whose linguistic and cultural influences permeate daily life. Summarily speaking, much else besides tourism happens. Visual art happens there, poetry happens there, music happens there, and it is not only to support or to be supported by the tourist industry. For example, Rock City’s “Rock Lounge” is spoken word spot that celebrates the diverse Caribbean culture on the island community, which is bombarded with US influence via tourists and white American residents.

A brief examination of the history of the Rock Lounge not only highlights how local artists create and share their art without catering to/accounting for the tourist sensibility, but also enables us to engage with history—struggles and triumphs—of a spoken word venue not located in the continental United States; much of our limited understanding of the poetry lounge as a space remains continental-centric. Since the late '90s, the spoken word movement has taken off as urban phenomena; some spoken word artists, such as writer and actor Saul Williams, have almost gained household name status, record and book deals, while several others have at least gotten their five or ten minutes in the limelight, so to speak, via ventures like *Def Poetry Jam*. Certain spoken word spots, such as the Nuyorican Poetry Café in Losaida, NY, or the Brooklyn Moon Café, have also gained that star status as must-be and must-see spaces. But the struggles of smaller venues to establish themselves and secure continued patronage can go unnoticed.

In a local newspaper's review of "The Rock Lounge," local journalist David Sawissa, in the introduction to his feature article, describes a space that for all intents and purposes could be seen as an "artist colony." He begins, "What brings together a seven-year-old, a college student, a custodial worker, a radio personality, a published writer and a university professor? Poetry." Sawisa questions further, and then concludes,

"What was best? Valerie Pigott's powerful poem about the return of an estranged father, Robert Luke's poignant love poem to the haunting sounds of his bongos? Was it seven year old Franqui Benjamin's "Happy Birthday mommy" poem or her 11 year old sister Tanya's insightful poem "Age is just a number?" Or the proud look on their mother's face before she read her own poem? Or the 30-year-old rapping about her near death infatuation with an 18 year-old ("and I didn't see 'Stella'" she quipped!). Was it Tregenza Roach's essay on good-bye's and memories? It was all the best. No stars. Just poets appreciating each other's work."¹

¹ David Siwissa, "Poets share their poems at L'Hotel Boynes." Special to *FOCUS*.

Sawisa's describes an environment that contrasts on myriad levels the popular perception (and praxis) that poetry lounges operate as spaces of stratification and specialization.² The focus on family in the space goes counter to the idea of age- or generational-stratification. David Sawissa celebrates the Rock Lounge as a space that celebrates and fosters the idea and practice of non-competition. The mere presence and participation of a custodial worker alongside a seven year old, a university professor, a published writer, a radio personality, and a college student images the lounge as a venue where interdisciplinary, inter-generational, and inter-class dialogue flourishes because of heavy no-stars vibrations. Poetry at the Rock Lounge is a Rock City Family thing.

The specters of the family described by Sawissa also permeate the May 2003 mission statement of the Rock Collective, the founding group who imagined the Rock Lounge. The Rock Collective describes itself as "an informal, non-profit organization dedicated to nurturing artistic energy in the Virgin Islands." Its mission: "to provide a free and welcoming space on St. Thomas for the sharing of music, creative writing, and visual and performance art." The collective was founded partly because the members recognized that St. Thomas, "as both a Caribbean and American entity," needed to "actively participate in grass roots performance art sweeping the region and the nation."³ The mission statement specifies, "Through its initiatives, The Rock Collective strives to be successfully in providing the youthful and vibrant artistic community of St. Thomas with a space – both figurative and physically – in which to achieve this end."

One of such initiatives involves the economics and politics of choosing the space. In email-interviews, two members of the founding core, Mary Alexander and Tiphonie Yanique, both confirm that the politics of making that decision relates directly to ideals of business community uplift as well as centrality. Yanique explains, "We've had the event at many different spots... in a central location and also in a place that would benefit from our presence... at an independently owned spot where food was served, so the house could benefit." She continues, "Since the Rock Lounge was about upliftment of the community we felt uplifting restaurant owners, chefs, hotels was in step with our

² Speaking from stateside, one of results of having a proliferation of poetry and poetry spots in urban and college town settings is that the venues become stratified. That is, certain spots come to be known for certain types of poets and poetry. And subsequently, people splinter off to form their own venue/spot. I cannot say that this is a good or bad thing, as there are benefits and drawbacks.

³ The Rock Collective Mission Statement, May 2003

mission.” Alexander also describes the dynamic of uplift and centrality; she further specifies that there is no cover charge for the event: “Every once in a while we “pass the hat” to obtain funds for printing our flyers, batteries for the CD players and other miscellaneous expenses.” Over the years they’ve “passed the hat” and asked performers and audience members to patronize local establishments such as L’Hotel Boynes, the Marisol Restaurant, and more recently the Frenchtown Deli. Of course, one consistent struggle has been ensuring that people view monetary patronage of the host sites as essential to both the survival of the event and the host-establishment/business’s financial health.

The history of business establishments and their relationship with the artistic community of St. Thomas includes efforts at collaboration. Both the business and artist communities, in conjunction with the University of the Virgin Islands, have collaborated in order to create venues for showcasing art on the island. The Frenchtown Deli, the current home of the Rock Lounge, hosted an occasional poetry presentation and art exhibit. Other business establishments also provided spaces for local artists to showcase their work at University sponsored and publicized events. Alexander “first began to organize open mic events in 1997 through the Humanities Division of UVI at L’Hotel Boynes,” but the events ceased after an administration change in 2001. However, the founders of the Rock Lounge still regarded a relationship with UVI, primarily the faculty and staff, as central in the formation of any consistent artistic venture aimed at community uplift. One University faculty member, Dr. Vincent Cooper, served as an advisor to the group. Subsequently, in this developmental stages, they questioned how to centralize and make more consistent the occasional artistic events and efforts occurring on the island.

There is an important distinction to make here. Although the Rock Lounge as an event, and Rock Collective as a collaboration of artists, continued to have a relationship with the University of the Virgin Islands and the business establishments, the autonomy of the artists and the event remain as high as a priority as it was when the Collective decided that the Rock Lounge would be held in those spaces. Yanique retrospectively summarizes the urge for artistic autonomy in her description of the vision for the Rock Lounge: “To create a space where visual art, musical art and literary art can come

together. A space where painters, musicians and poets could feed off each other's vibe. A space for Virgin Islanders to showcase their art selves and build a base for a non-institutionalized artistic community." The need for a non-institutionalized space for Virgin Islanders comes into critical dialogue with the tourist-frequented open mics, or what Alexander describes as the other "musical open mics" on the island centered in local bars. Those venues did not and do not cater neither to the needs of most of the local artists, nor to the concerns of the local community. Alexander cautions that those spaces do not reflect the social and demographic realities of St. Thomas, given that most of the attendees and participants at musical open mics were and continue to be primarily "white stateside folks." In other words, the nature of tourism as an institution, and as it focuses on "local star" art and "local star" art performance, creates a space that invariably precludes the possibility and practice of community in which the seven-year-old primary school student, her mother, the university faculty member, custodial staff, and the published writer, as described earlier by local journalist David Sawissa, can create and participate as fully-realized Rock City artists and patrons.

One pressing concern of the founding and current members has been maintaining a truly egalitarian space, where each poet and artist has ample room to create, and, quoting Alexander, to "share their creativity with others in a non-threatening and non-competitive space." Therefore, ensuring that no preference is given to any one of the arts to the detriment of the others also is of great concern to the Rock Collective from its inception, as seen by the fact that the founding and current members represent artists from multiple genres and artistic disciplines. For example, Yanique is both a local poet and short story writer, and a Fulbright scholar who studied in Trinidad and the United States. Alexander is a poet and an administrator at the University of the Virgin Islands. Also, three of the young men, Kenrick Augustus, Akin Chinnery, and Abraham Muhammad (a visual artist), who were recruited Tiphonie Yanique to assist in developing the Rock Collective and the Rock Lounge, were poets and musicians. Currently the active members of the Rock Collective are Alexander, Jahweh David and Dara Cooper; Cooper and David dabble in multiple genres.

To further ensure that there is representation from the different elements, the

Collective features a visual artist for that month's gathering, who displays his/her work prior to oral renditions of the poetry and song. A chat-back session in which the artist discusses his/her work and fields questions from the audience follows the display segment. The monthly events also frequently feature a local or international musician. And last but not least, there are featured poets. Most recently, a fifteen year old poet, a young woman who had just published her first book of poetry, was the featured reader. Alexander and Yanique both celebrate the success of the event to attract these guest artists. Alexander's recollection of past guests include, "Eltino Pickering, on the steel pan, Sister Khuuma Ama, a poet visiting from NY, Oleik Ledee an accordion player (who also happens to be blind), Erwin Dorsett who performed his original compositions on piano, and vocalists of different genres: reggae, etc." Yanique adds a few more names, such as well known Caribbean poets, Everton Sylvester (of the Green Card Poets of Brooklyn) and Mutabaruka, as well as Gene Emanuel, and recording reggae artist Desiree.

It is clear from the previous list of artists that the Rock Lounge attracts not only local Virgin Islander artists, but also artists from the Caribbean regional and the larger international black community. The fact that local, regional, and more international artists know about the Rock Lounge as a space, is no accident. It is testament to the continued support for the space/event from the local newspapers that frequently profiles the artists and special events, and other establishments such as The Virgin Islands Council on the Arts, and The Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands. A financial grant from the latter two groups provided funds for start up costs and to purchase sound equipment. But Yanique pointed out that one of the major projects still remains ensuring constant financial support, which can in turn bring in more artists who might be a "big African-American [artist] or Caribbean [artist] in America." The "bigger-name" artists often require greater monetary compensation for their services. Financial support is not really a problem for the day to day logistics because passing the hat usually covers buying batteries for the sound equipment, which remains the most pressing need that occurs mostly because the collective operates on strictly a volunteer basis.

For the artists who frequent the space, money takes a backseat to the opportunity to build and perform with each other because most of them are employed elsewhere as

teachers, custodial workers, professors, radio personalities, actors, etc. In her article, “Rock Collective: The cultural pulse of a people,” local writer, journalist, and businesswoman, Mary Blake, describes the members of the collective as “some of the hottest artistic talents and soul-jah’s... [c]ultural revolutionaries bent on freeing the masses from spiritual slavery.” If David Sawissa’s descriptions in his feature of the Rock Collective celebrated their poetics of family and community, Blake’s descriptions chart the members of the Rock Collective as local revolutionaries armed with “spiritual energy.” She contends that this “connection to spirit and respect for culture that has put them in the position to bridge the gap between the elders and the youth.” Discussing further her relationship to Virgin Island culture and history, one of the younger poets, Dara Monifah, describes the “current state of culture in the Virgin Islands as a volcano with a plug in it.” Blake quotes “the soft-spoken soul child,” “Even though it is blocked, you can still feel what is in here. Africa is in here.”

Blake’s feature, in combination with Alexander and Yanique’s descriptions of the Rock Lounge, confirms that the space possesses a very heavy Africa-centric and Rasta-centric vibration, resulting from the combination of the personal, spiritual, cultural and historical sensibilities of the artists and the cultural and demographic background of the audience. The Africa-centric focus, vibe and energy of Rock Collective is not a secret within the larger island community. Another local journalist Amanta Pancham of the *St. Thomas Source* covered the Rock Collective’s 2003 Rock Fling, and described that particular rendition of the annual celebration as a “gathering of local and off-island artists in a verbal and musical embrace of African and Caribbean culture.” Pancham describes the beginning of that year’s Rock Fling, “The audience at Club Amnesia was first treated with the sounds of the Echo People, a St. John group whose musical works incorporate folkways of Nigeria.” She adds, “[T]hese artists also showed their attachment to modern aspects of African culture. The original poetry performed between songs was reminiscent of jazz clubs and urban city living; a slow bongo drum accompaniment easily transformed the club at these moments into a “Midtown” coffee house.”

As can be gleaned from the consistent naming of the events and the collective—Rock Fling, Rock Collective and Rock Lounge—the goal is to celebrate both Rock City and the artistic voices and sounds of the island community. The goal remains simple: to

use the space(s) as a way to retain culture, and to support and encourage the artistic creations of local artists while exposing them to each other's work as well as the work of off-island creative spirit. The primary goal is always community: artistic, business, or Rock City community and Caribbean community at-large. Indeed, some artists have butted heads with the poetics of community when they attempted to use the space for their "personal advancement"; and there were also a few instances situations where members of the audience have felt alienated based on their sexual orientation, race, or religious beliefs. However, in those particular instances created opportunities for the community of scholars, poets, continentals, custodians, mothers, daughters, sons, students, organizers, activists, and artists to challenged itself and each other to ensure that the alienation was merely temporary. The effort of the Rock Collective still remains as their mission statements advocates "to be successful in providing the youthful and vibrant artistic community of St. Thomas with a space – both figuratively and physically – to achieve this end," with this end being "the sharing of grassroots music, creative writing, and visual and performance art."

And the Rock City's Rock Lounge has been successful in those ends, to celebrate and create community. As Bayley K. Garbutt observed for his Humanities 115 class at UVI: "Where the magic lies, is in the people that support the Rock Lounge and the audience [who are] so much involved in the stimulation of creativity. Both times I was there, a new person was inspired to write and was willing to share it with the audience. It is the friendly environment that I'm sure is a testament to the success of the Rock Lounge."

Or as Rock Lounge poet Jahweh David puts it:

"Can we not see that we have been brought through the thighs of divinity?...

We need to visualize the God within ourselves and create our own destiny.

With self-determination."

Calabash

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