

The Islands of The Bahamas

Home of America Cantat 8

Shena Newton

Among the many epithets associated with The Islands of The Bahamas is the joyous title Isles of Song. Nassau, the capital city of The Bahamas, and Atlantis Resort, Paradise Island, will ring with song this August as choirs from North, Central, and South America assemble for ten glorious days. The people of The Bahamas are especially proud that their country holds the distinction of being the first English-speaking country to host America Cantat.

The people of The Bahamas pride themselves on the art of hospitality, and are delighted to welcome to Nassau and Paradise Island all those who have traveled from near and far to participate in and enjoy America Cantat 8: singers, conductors, members of festival choirs, their families, and friends. In addition to beautiful beaches and idyllic weather, visitors will immerse themselves in the music of the Americas.

We welcome you to the Home of America Cantat 8: The Islands of The Bahamas.

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The Islands of The Bahamas

Location and Geography

Located just fifty miles south of Florida, the Islands of The Bahamas extend six hundred miles in a southeast direction to within fifty miles of Hispaniola. This low-lying archipelago comprises seven hundred islands strewn like so many jewels over one hundred thousand square miles of seas of every imaginable shade of blue. The Bahamas takes its name from the Spanish *baja mar*, meaning shallow sea. The islands are formed from coral limestone and enjoy a sub-tropical climate ranging in temperature from mid-seventy degrees in winter to mid-eighty degrees in summer. Summer highs are cooled by the trade winds borne on the Gulf Stream current.

The country's capital city and seat of government are located on the island of New Providence, commonly known as Nassau. Across the bridge from Nassau lies the famous resort island, Paradise Island. The island of Grand Bahama is home to the country's second most important city, Freeport. Many people think of The Bahamas as just Nassau and Paradise Island and Grand Bahama Island, but outside of these hubs lie island gems: Eleuthera and Harbour Island, Abaco, Bimini, Exuma, Andros, Long Island, Cat Island, San Salvador, and Inagua. Each island in The Bahamas constellation of islands is distinctly different, with a personality all its own, offering visitors a unique experience.

A Brief History

The Lucayan Indians were the earliest settlers in The Bahamas. They arrived around the ninth century, having migrated up the Caribbean Islands from South America. It was these gentle people who greeted Christopher Columbus and his crew when they made landfall on the Bahamian island of San Salvador on October 12, 1492. Having no precious metals, The Bahamas held no appeal for the Spanish. They moved on, and by 1516 they had transported the entire population of some twenty-five thousand Lucayan Indians to Hispaniola to work the gold mines. The Bahamas remained depopulated for well over one hundred years.

History by definition records the coming of successive waves of people to a territory. In the ensuing centuries, those who came to The Bahamas included the Eleutheran Adventurers from Bermuda in 1648, who came in search



of religious freedom; swashbuckling pirates and buccanniers in the seventeenth century, who made The Bahamas their headquarters; American Loyalists and their slaves, who between 1783 and 1785 settled in The Bahamas in the aftermath of the American War of Independence. Today's Bahamians are the descendants of enslaved Africans, English colonizers, American Loyalists, liberated Africans, and a host of later immigrants, all living in harmony, building a united nation.

The Bahamas is a sovereign nation, having attained its independence from Great Britain in 1973, proud of its stable government characterized by a continuous parliamentary system that dates back two hundred and fifty years. The economy of the modern Bahamas is constructed on the twin pillars of tourism and banking. Two-thirds of all Bahamians work in the tourism sector. Beginning in the first half of the twentieth century, The Bahamas has steadily built its reputation as a world-class warm weather tourist destination. Today, the Islands of The Bahamas annually welcomes more than six million visitors to its shores.

Bahamian Culture

Bahamian culture is heavily influenced by the historic conjuncture that brought about the encounter between English colonizers and the Africans they enslaved. The spoken language is English, and locals reserve for communication a vernacular of English with its own peculiar syntax whose traits hark back to the languages spoken

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among the peoples of West Africa. Bahamian cuisine draws its main ingredients from the sea: fish and conch prepared in a variety of ways, served with generous portions of savory peas 'n' rice, a scrumptious guava pastry, and a dessert called *guava duff*. People drive on the left, a throwback from the days as an English colony.

Bahamians are a people with an easy-going attitude, no doubt a national personality fashioned from its history, which has been largely free of war and violent conflict. From as early as primary school, Bahamians are taught the art of hospitality. The music has a rhythm that makes the heart merry and the feet glad. The genres of Bahamian music fall into three broad categories: Goombay, Rake and Scrape, and Junkanoo. When asked what one element of culture defines being Bahamian, Bahamians of all walks of life would unanimously respond *Junkanoo*.

To explain Junkanoo, it is necessary to talk about freedom. During the days of slavery in the late 1700s, slaves

were given three days of holiday at Christmas. Enslaved Africans used this short window of liberty as a time to celebrate. They took to the hinterlands and threw themselves a party. Decked out in costumes fashioned from elements from nature such as tree branches and shells, they made music with cowbells and drums and danced for hours. Today, this celebration that had its beginnings in the shadows is a spectacular cultural extravaganza, a dazzling street festival of music, costume, and dance that takes place twice a year (December 26 and January 1) on the main street of the city center.

Junkanoo artisans spend six months of the year in preparation for the big event, designing and constructing costumes, harmonizing their music, and choreographing dance steps. Junkanoo is also a group affair. Rival groups, with names such as Saxons, Valley Boys, Roots, Music Makers, and Colors, many of them with five hundred or more participants, face off in fierce competition on Junk-

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anoo morning for the titles of best music, best costume, and best dance. Junkanoo plays a large role in the mix of what it means to be Bahamian, but being Bahamian is much more than Junkanoo. The following excerpt of select stanzas from an insightful poem by Audrey Dean-Wright, Associate Professor of Music at the College of The Bahamas, paints a vivid picture of what it means to be Bahamian:

I'm Not Junkanoo

Audrey Dean-Wright

I am not Junkanoo,
The pulsating sound of goatskin drums,
The adrenaline flowing, body moving, heart
racing,
Bright orange, green, purple, bright colours
dancing a choreography of life. A renewal!
I am the feel of aquamarine water caressing my
body,
The poignant smell of the sea,
Yearning for a glimpse when in foreign lands.
I am the thought, taste and smell of my native
dishes,
Peas soup and dough, chicken in the bag, souse
and boil fish.

...

I am Rake'n' Scrape,
The true Bahamian rhythm; making music from
saw, comb, grater and more.
That's real creativity. Want to make me stay all
night on the dance floor.
I am the melodious sounds of Joseph Spence,
George Symonette, Beecham Coakley, Pea-
nuts Taylor, and Chippie Chipman, Sammie
Swain Our Boys; and don't forget me- Sper-
id, Bahamian Row, just to name two.
I am good all Bahamian manners, "Please, Thank
You, Yes Ma'am, Excuse me...."
I am the taste and smell of Christmas, Benny
cake, turkey baking, costumes pasting, the
Christmas tree! The smell of pine, and don't
forget the fruitcake!

I am hallelujah time! I get in the spirit and I shout,
clap and sing!

...

I am all of our traditions.

I am not Junkanoo.

I am all that makes me Bahamian!

Choral Music Traditions¹

From the earliest settlements in the mid-seventeenth century, the church has been a central institution in the Bahamian community. Outside of the family, the church was the focal point of both religious and social life. The singing of hymns and anthems was an integral part of the worship service, and the choir, usually comprising at least fifteen members, led the way in worship at the main divine service. Choral music in The Bahamas draws inspiration from two major sources: one sacred, rooted in the traditional hymns of Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, and the European Church; and the other secular, with anthems originating from the Negro Spirituals of the American South. We now look at how the Negro Spiritual traveled from the American South to The Bahamas and evolved into a distinctly Bahamian anthem.

Bahamians of African descent arrived in The Bahamas through four very different circumstances. Some were brought on slave ships directly from Africa to The Bahamas and auctioned off in slave markets. After the abolition of the slave trade by Great Britain in 1812, the British navy rescued captured Africans from slave ships on the high seas and brought them ashore in The Bahamas, where they settled in seaside fishing villages; these were known as Liberated Africans. Emancipation of enslaved men and women took place in The Bahamas in 1838, almost thirty years prior to the abolition of slavery in the United States. Some American runaway slaves came to The Bahamas to avoid recapture. In the aftermath of the American War of Independence, thousands of American Loyalists—particularly from Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas—settled in The Bahamas with their slaves. Among the many cultural elements, these Southern slaves brought to The Bahamas their anthems, the Negro spirituals. A common theme of these anthems was the weariness and hardship of life. Upon being transplanted

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to The Bahamas, these southern anthems took on a more optimistic, celebratory nature, no doubt due to the less harsh conditions of slavery in The Bahamas.

Many other musical forms contributed to the secular anthems of The Bahamas. For almost a century, between the mid-nineteenth century and 1938, Bahamians made a living from the sponging industry, which was developed by Greek immigrants. During this era, The Bahamas exported 27 percent of the world's sponges. Andros spongers would spend weeks at sea harvesting sponges. To pass the time, these men entertained themselves by singing. The rhymer, the lead singer, would herald a refrain, flanked by a melody of background voices. These songs wove full-scale narratives of Bible characters or incidents that occurred in the local community such as, the foundering of a ship at sea or a drowning. These songs born at sea gave rise to the *rhyming spirituals*, which flourished particularly on the island of Andros. The world-famous guitarist

from Andros, Joseph Spence, popularized many of the rhyming spirituals.

Other musical influences that contributed to the anthems sung by choirs are the call-and-response songs sung in the hours before dawn at social gatherings just before funerals. These songs are known as “settin’ up” songs—the rhythmic music produced from the harmonizing of the saw, drum, and accordion produced Rake and Scrape music that accompanied quadrille dances.

Beginning in the mid-1950s, The Bahamas saw the rise of popular community choirs, which were not necessarily connected to the church. These choirs staged concerts that became a part of the annual social calendar. Among the many choirs that comprised the musical landscape were the Dickey Doh Singers, the Region Bells, the BBC Singers, and the Rahming Brothers. Today, choirs such as the National Youth Choir, the Children’s Choir, the Boys Choir, and the College of The Bahamas Concert Choir are traveling ambassadors for The Bahamas, taking the music of the islands to the world.

The Bahamas: Home of America Cantat 8

While The Bahamas famous sun, sand, and sea provide an ideal backdrop, tourism industry leaders in The Bahamas are keenly aware that relying on the sun-sand-sea combination is no longer adequate to propel the tourism-based economy in a global environment where competition for the tourist is fierce. A highly developed infrastructure of luxury hotels and world-class amenities, coupled with year-round perfect weather, gorgeous beaches, surrounding turquoise seas, and unique multi-island destinations has facilitated The Bahamas in developing a reputation as a mecca for sports tourism, meetings and conventions, and strong niche markets in boating, fishing, diving, weddings and honeymoons, and private aviation.

When Cleveland Williams was appointed Senior Manager of Cultural and Heritage Tourism at The Bahamas Ministry of Tourism, he brought to the table a distinct vision: the Islands of The Bahamas would become a place for world-class cultural events. Not only would The Bahamas be the go-to destination for rejuvenation in the sun, but The Bahamas would be first in mind for the traveler wanting to enjoy both a sun vacation and the best in music and the visual and performing arts. An accomplished op-

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era singer with a decade of experience performing in the opera houses of Italy, Williams approached the American Choral Directors Association. It was determined that The Bahamas was going to be the home of America Cantat 8, the first country outside of Latin America to host this prestigious ten-day choral festival.

America Cantat 8 Personnel

The hosting of America Cantat 8 in the Islands of The Bahamas is made possible through the collaboration between ACDA and The Bahamas Ministry of Tourism. Over a period of ten days, August 21-31, some of the world's finest choirs will assemble in Nassau and Paradise Island to perform in the public squares, churches, hotels, and concert venues of this world-class tourist destination. Members of these international choirs and local choir directors will also participate in music workshops led by international and local clinicians. Coordination of the festival requires a well-calibrated international and on-island team.

Leading the coordination effort locally is the on-island festival director, Cleveland Williams. Adrian Archer, director of music at Christ Church Cathedral, is in charge of developing the architectural plans and curating the opening and closing ceremonies. Other Bahamas Ministry of Tourism executives on the festival coordination team include Nikia Deveaux-Christie, who has responsibility for public relations and marketing of the festival on island; Ingrid Bartlett, Director of Groups, has oversight of hotel accommodations for the choir members, choir directors, and guests traveling to The Bahamas for this event; and Charity Armbrister, Director of Events, will oversee planning of various local events connected to the international festival.

Choral Workshops

The choral workshops planned for the Festival will be conducted by choral music experts. Three local clinicians will be among the choral music experts spearheading workshops. They are Audrey Dean-Wright, associate professor of music at the College of The Bahamas and founder of the College of The Bahamas Concert Choir; Cleophas Adderley, director at the Ministry of Youth,



Sports and Culture and founder and director of the world-famous Bahamas National Youth Choir; and Sonovia Pierre, a prolific Bahamian composer and popular performing artist.

Taking Bahamian Music to the World


Each of the three Bahamian clinicians will lead a workshop in a different genre of music. The international choirs registered for these workshops will learn the compositions of Bahamian music presented by the clinicians. At concerts staged at a variety of venues around the City of Nassau and Paradise Island, international choirs will raise their voices in anthems and songs from a repertory that draws inspiration from European standard repertoire, traditional and newly composed Latin American works, Bahamian rake and scrape, Junkanoo, Goombay, and Rhyming Spirituals.

The Bahamas takes enormous pride in being a part of America Cantat, a great choral music initiative that was founded in 1992 to commemorate the Quincentennial of the landfall of Christopher Columbus in the New World. This musical tradition has now come full circle, to the place where the Great European Explorer set foot in the New World.

Conclusion

America Cantat 8 will go on record as an exchange of beautiful memories. The people of The Bahamas will savor for a very long time the memory of the sights and sounds of the music concerts of America Cantat 8.


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At the close of the ten-day festival, participants will take away lasting memories of their time in The Islands of The Bahamas—memories of team work to produce the most exquisite music; memories of sunshine and laughter, gorgeous beaches, friendly people, lively market places, exhilarating adventures, and quiet moments of reflection and rejuvenation. The wonderful thing about these memories is that most of them can be repeated because The Bahamas extends an open invitation to all. Come discover for yourself why many say, “It’s better in The Bahamas.” 

Author’s Note: Special thanks to Audrey Dean-Wright, who generously contributed her time to give the writer of this article an overview of Bahamian musical traditions and advice on further research.

NOTES

- ¹ Edward Clement Bethel, *Music in The Bahamas: Its Roots, Development and Personality* (University of California, Los Angeles: 1978).



The Robert Shaw Award Call for Nominations

The Robert Shaw Choral Award will be given to a choral leader who has made exceptional contributions to the art of choral music. Nominations are encouraged from the ACDA membership. Nominations should include a short paragraph supporting the nominated candidate. Nominations can be made on the ACDA website at <http://acda.org/page.asp?page=shawaward>. The Nominations are due by August 30, 2016. The recipient shall be chosen by the ACDA Past President’s Council. The Robert Shaw Choral Award will be presented during each National Conference.

The following criteria for selection were approved by the Past President’s Council in November 1990.

- The recipient should be a member of ACDA (though there may be exceptions).
- The recipient should be someone whose primary career is/was in the United States.
- The recipient has made a significant contribution to the cause of the choral art in America.
- Such contributions made may have been through teaching, conducting, or leadership.

Past Five Winners

2007 Dale Wareland
2009 Gene Brooks
2011 Ann Howard Jones
2013 Alice Parker
2015 Royce Saltzman