**Jamaican Folk Revue**

**THE BEAT OF JAMAICA**

Toni Marshall Staff Writer SOUTH FLORIDA SUN-SENTINEL

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During rehearsal, the music is spiritually uplifting for members of the Jamaican Folk Revue.

In the church meeting room, they tell stories through lyrics, about love and marriage, dance and games, life and death. Songs are not rushed.

"Folk music is the basis of Jamaican music old and new," Norma Darby, director of the 30-year-old South Florida group, said during a recent practice.

Folk or mento is European-influenced music with African rhythms -- considered Jamaica's first recorded music.

The group is known for traditional Caribbean folk songs, Negro spirituals and story telling. It draws members from and perform in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties.

Darby, of Cutler Ridge, sprinkled a history lesson in between a cappella solos, piano-spiced choruses and tambourine-tinged melodies as members reviewed their music at Sierra Norwood Calvary Baptist Church in North Miami Beach. They were preparing for one of many Jamaican Independence Day celebrations planned throughout South Florida in coming weeks.

Jamaica became independent from Great Britain on Aug. 6, 1962. The Caribbean island nation remains a member of the Commonwealth, however.

Jamaicans in the tri-county area -- who number more than 135,000 -- will be marking their homeland's holiday through balls and church services. Many will celebrate with more contemporary Jamaican music such as ska, a combination of rhythm and blues and mento; rock steady, described as a more romantic style of music with a prominent bass; and reggae, most widely known for its meditative rhythm and chanting. Others will reach back to the roots of those musical genres with the Jamaican Folk Revue, one of the groups scheduled to perform at the Jamaica Grand Independence Ball in Miami.

The group, whose roots go back to 1975, represented Jamaica at the first Calle Ocho festival, Darby said. Throughout three decades, members have performed at community affairs, local festivals, national concerts and were featured in a public television special. The group has an archive of more than 200 folk songs from the Caribbean and African-American experience.

The Jamaican Folk Revue dons traditional folk costumes for performances, said Hyacinth Silvera of West Palm Beach, who was one of the original members of the group.

Members wear "the bandana," a term used for the madras plaid, the traditional fabric of the national costume. The word comes from the East Indian word bandnhu for a head kerchief worn by Indian indentured servants. The British brought the Indians to Jamaica to work in the fields, said Silvera, who has spent many years researching Jamaican folk culture.

During rehearsal, singer Claudette McNeill of Miramar grabbed a tambourine to shake, while Errol Smith of Fort Lauderdale sat atop the rhumba box, a string instrument that plays the bass line, waiting for a cue to start. Darby, meanwhile, explained how the folk tradition has survived. "Because of our history and culture, songs and stories are handed down from one to another, mouth to mouth," she said.

Rehearsals include revival songs such as Dere is a Meeting and songs about Jamaican folk legends.

Jamaica's musical history mirrors its diverse population, which can trace its lineage from the Arawak, the first inhabitants, to Spanish settlers, African slaves, the British, East Indian and Chinese laborers.

They were all musical peoples, and even some of the native Arawak music survived.

But it would be the combination of tunes, mostly from European-influenced quadrille music and African plantation songs, that would form mento.

Contemporary music such as ska cultivated in Jamaica in the early 1960s and came from mento, the Jamaican rhythm that in turn came out of an era when there were village bands and no electricity.

Mento started off as very European in the daytime, but would take on more dance rhythms as the night progressed, said Colin Smith, a bass singer who plays the banjo in the Jamaican Folk Revue's accompanying mento band. The band features acoustic music to help choraliers carry folk tunes.

Even American folk music is influenced by Jamaica, starting with composer Stephen Foster, Smith said. "Some of his arrangements were influenced from the slaves moving from Jamaica to the Carolinas," said Smith, of Sunrise. "Raw folk music is not doctored. It requires clarity of singing and dexterity of playing whatever instrument," he said.

Music was one of the ways Jamaicans overcame the effects of slavery. The country has a long history of soulful folk music, which includes work tunes, songs announcing the arrivals of babies and verses mourning the dead -- songs Christian in origin but for the most part African in style, Smith said.

"When you hear the way some of the old folks harmonize, it is a little bit different, but at first you think it is a British standard," Smith said.

For Vincent Allen, of North Miami Beach, singing that old-time music with the Jamaican Folk Revue reminds him of home.

As a young boy, he lived in a Jamaican countryside home that lacked electricity. During holidays, he and the other children waited for a group of traveling musicians to stop by and entertain them with traditional folk music. The mento band musicians carried a fife made of bamboo, a banjo, a guitar and a rhumba box.

Allen said he has searched throughout South Florida for a rhumba box but ended up having one made in Jamaica.

"The rhumba man would go from village to village. People would gather around and listen and bring him drinks," Allen said. "This group is the closest I can come to that tradition away from home."

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Our Community's Many Faces periodically spotlights one of the dozens of nationalities conducting South Florida celebrations of cultural and historic milestones.

Toni Marshall can be reached at tmarshall@sun-sentinel.com or 954-572-2004.