

THE WORLD CREOLE MUSIC FESTIVAL DOMINICA

The small, tropical island of Dominica hosts an annual music festival which celebrates all things Creole.

Patricia Meschino reports

Even with the vast assortment of elegant, acoustically superb music venues available throughout New York, London and other major cities, there isn't any experience as meaningful to the world music lover as hearing their favourite indigenous genre performed live in the land of its birth, alongside the people whose way of life helped to create it.

Watching internationally acclaimed headliners from the Creole-speaking Caribbean islands of Haiti, Martinique, Guadeloupe and Dominica at Dominica's 2003 World Creole Music Festival, among a mostly Creole-speaking audience, demonstrates how local expressions are morphed into defining song choruses. Homegrown rhythms provide the soundtrack to a festival that celebrates a distinctive regional heritage and folklore as much as it showcases music. Dominica's own WCK (Windward Caribbean Kulture) had the

audience going wild until dawn with their infectious *bouyan* beat. Bouyon (literally a pot pourri of the different ground provisions grown in Dominica) is an uptempo blend of indigenous Dominican sounds including *jing-ping*, *bele* (a traditional chanting and drumming style) and *cadence* (fusing Haitian *kadans ranpa* and calypso from Trinidad). The glorious rhythms and rich textures of Haiti's national dance music *compas* (or *konpa*) was presented by veteran Creole music icons Tabou Combo who also fuse that island's carnival music and voodoo drumming into their hypnotic musical mix. Zouk superstars Kassav (originally from Martinique and Guadeloupe and now based in Paris) delivered their signature driving tempos, layered percussion, sizzling brass sections and engaging vocal harmonies with lyrics sung entirely in Creole, reaffirming why Wyclef Jean (who has recently returned to his Creole roots with his *Creole 101* release)

calls their live performances "untouchable".

Internationally renowned for its awe inspiring natural beauty and eco-consciousness, a festival focusing on Dominica's equally striking cultural richness is long overdue. "Dominica has been promoted as the nature island of the Caribbean and the greatest natural asset we have is our culture and we have selected Creole music as the main element of our culture," commented Edmond Toulon, executive director of Dominica's festival

Dominica Tourist Board

THIS PHOTO: *The Burning Flames entertain the Roseau crowds*
 RIGHT: *WCK (Windward Caribbean Kulture) rock the festival*
 (William Farrington, africanasounds.com)



commission, producers of the annual World Creole Music Festival, back in 1997. Toulon passed away in 2001 but his global vision for Dominican culture continues to provide the festival's objective. "The idea of the festival is to embrace the Francophone family of countries, about 15 million people who speak the Creole language including artists from Africa, Haiti, Guadeloupe, Martinique, even New Orleans and establish this as a world class product. Bands like WCK and their bouyon are keeping Creole music alive and evolving among a new generation of fans."

Nestled in the Windward Island chain between the French-speaking *départements* of Martinique and Guadeloupe, Dominica is the Caribbean's most unspoiled destination

blessed with an estimated 365 rivers, lush interior rain forests, cascading waterfalls, ubiquitous rainbows and the world's only boiling lake, an 18m deep cauldron wreathed in steam. Named Wai'tukubuli (meaning 'tall is her body') by the Carib Indians who controlled the Windward Islands between 1400-1700, the world's largest settlement of Caribs continue to live on Dominica's rugged eastern coast.

Both the French and British have ruled Dominica but the island remained in English possession from 1805 until its independence in 1978. Dominica's official language is English but most Dominicans converse in Creole (a patois concocted as a means of communication between French slave masters and their African captives), which incorporates French alongside fragments of Spanish, Portuguese, English and various African languages. Because people denied educational opportunities often spoke Creole, the language was viewed contemptuously in Dominica (as it was in the French-speaking islands of Haiti, Guadeloupe and Martinique) for many years until the endeavours of folklorists and cultural activists fostered an overdue appreciation among the general population.

Because of their efforts, the Creole language and its wider culture are now celebrated throughout Dominica, particularly in the last week in October which is designated as *Jounen Kweyol* *Domminik* or Dominica's Creole Week with Friday designated as International Creole Day. On this day Dominicans and visitors alike are encouraged to speak Creole, dress in Creole finery (white embroidered blouses and brightly coloured madras (plaid) skirts for women, white shirts, black trousers and madras sashes for men) and indulge in a multi-course traditional Creole lunch which includes Dominica's national dish mountain chicken (that is, a *crapaud* or land frog). Creole Day activities are accompanied by an omnipresent, indigenous rhythm called

jing-ping, (originally used as an accompaniment for the *quadrille*, a ballroom style dance dating back to the French colonial era) usually played by a quartet featuring an accordion, a *tabou* (flat drum), a *shak-shak* (a metal grater-like instrument) and a long, cylindrical natural wood instrument called the *bom-bom* producing a resonant tone that sounds like its name. Since 1997 Creole Week events have culminated in The World Creole Music Festival, a three-night celebration of the diversity of Creole music.

This year's festival will be held at the Pottersville Savannah, just five minutes from Dominica's rustic capital Roseau. The concerts run from 9am to almost dawn with four or five bands performing per night; between band changes concert attendees are treated to traditional drumming and dancing performances on a smaller stage. Although the 2004 festival line-up was not complete at press time, it will feature, as it has each year, the finest musicians and singers from Dominica and the Creole-speaking diaspora, as well as guest artists representing the English-speaking Caribbean genres of *soca* and reggae. Creole food is available from local vendors who line the savannah, as is local rum and the popular Dominican-brewed Kabuli beer, while the mostly local and regional crowd (averaging between 3-5,000 per night) is friendly and quite willing to answer questions regarding the food, drink or music of their island.

"The festival has done tremendous work in putting Dominica on the map," said Steve Johnson, director of the Dominica tourist board in New York. "It has made an impact in letting people know about Dominica and more importantly, about Creole culture within Dominica as well as throughout the Caribbean and even in Europe and North America." ■

The 2004 World Creole Music Festival runs from October 29-31. For more information, visit www.worldcreolemusicfestival.net



FACT BOX

- Dominica – not to be confused with the Dominican Republic – is part of the Lesser Antilles, known as the Windward Islands.
- Although the official language is English, most locals converse in Creole, a French-based language. However only ten per cent of the population is literate in standard French.
- More than two-thirds of the island is covered by rainforest.
- The population is 73,000.
- Ethnicity: Primarily of African descent, with a small number of Carib Indians and European descendants.
- Religion: 77% Roman Catholic, 15% Protestant, 6% other, 2% none.
- Official currency is the Eastern Caribbean dollar, although US dollars are widely accepted.

For more details about tourism in Dominica, visit www.dominica.dm