

## Etienne Interview 2

[Eugene Uman]

Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to welcome to WWV Etienne Charles, he's on the line right now. Good evening Etienne, great to hear from you, how you doing man?

[Etienne Charles]

Good evening Eugene, good evening everyone, I'm great thanks, how are you all doing?

[Eugene Uman]

Very good, we're just enjoying your music so much, it's so inspiring. Thank you for being here, for creating this music.

We're really looking forward to the concert on Saturday night.

[Etienne Charles]

I'm looking forward to it as well, thank you for bringing us in. We have some fun, it's always good to play, especially in new places.

[Eugene Uman]

Well, you're coming all the way in from Michigan, aren't you?

[Etienne Charles]

I am, yeah, that's correct.

[Eugene Uman]

That's dedication my friend, thank you.

[Etienne Charles]

I'd love to, gladly, gladly.

[Eugene Uman]

Great, well I have some questions I'd like to ask you. I've been listening to your music a lot and reading about you. You are a person who has kind of codified this music that to me has been somewhat of a mystery and all kind of messy.

And now just listening to the way that you put it together makes it so much more reachable. I really enjoy it. Your record label and first album are called Culture Shock Music.

And when I think of Culture Shock, I think of like going for a hike in the woods and then emerging into a city. What's your definition of Culture Shock, how do you come up with that name?

[Etienne Charles]

Culture Shock is basically about learning about a new culture from immersion in a sense. So I called the record label, my first album is called Culture Shock because it was a bunch of music I had written while learning how to live in America.

Being originally from Trinidad, it was music that I wrote in my first three years living in the US. So it was about all the different types of things you deal with when you move somewhere. Things like getting lost, things like losing a loved one, things like becoming a little more nostalgic when it comes to thinking about home or where you're from.

Nostalgia doesn't really become a thing until something is gone. So the concept of nostalgia, now you have to be taken away from something to develop any sort of sense of nostalgia from it.

And that was the idea behind the album. And then it became the name of the label as well when I decided to officially form a company and a label. So that was the impetus for, because it's always about that.

And for us, it's not just about processing Culture Shock, but also using what we do musically and culturally, artistically, to then shock other people's cultures. So when you come to a Creole Soul show, you're getting introduced to Martiniquean musical traditions, you're getting introduced to Haitian musical traditions, Jamaican musical traditions. And you, of course, taste the Trinidadian musical traditions, Venezuelan musical traditions.

And so it's kind of like we take you around the Caribbean in a sense. And from that sense, there can be a sense of Culture Shock as well.

[Eugene Uman]

So it goes both ways. You were shocked when you came to the United States, and then we can get shocked into learning about those new cultures from a direct...

[Etienne Charles]

Exactly.

[Eugene Uman]

You know, in the liner notes to that record, you were paying tribute to Ralph McDonald, the great percussionist.

And you say, the essence of the music is in the groove and the essence of the groove is in the feel. And one of the things about your music is that every tune just has a tremendous groove. But you're making some nuanced distinctions there.

Please describe how groove and feel are the essence of your music and if there's a difference between them.

[Etienne Charles]

That's a great question. Yeah, I mean, the groove is very important to me.

It's becoming less and less important in jazz music. I meet so many more musicians that are more on the direction of not dealing with the groove. I mean, I come from the Caribbean where music has to groove.

I mean, it's my upbringing. It's kind of like tucking your shirt in your pants in a sense. It's like a level of respect for the music in a sense.

I mean, the groove is the heartbeat. The thing about a groove is for me as a composer, because there's a groove, it creates almost like a sense of homeostasis. It creates a palette that's balanced from which we can try many different types of sounds that may be unfamiliar.

So it's kind of like, it's the difference between a stranger coming up to you and saying hello. Right? That's one way of doing it. The other way is your friend comes up to you with a stranger that you have met and is like, this is my buddy Alberto.

All of a sudden, there's a level of connection between you and Alberto. There's a little more level of comfort and context and you're going to be a little more receptive to what Alberto has to say. It's the same thing with the groove.

When the groove is there, you can actually work in stranger sounds from the harmonic and melodic standpoint. Simply because they are in a pocket that allows them to be received. It's almost like solicited material in a sense.

It's human nature because the groove naturally communicates to the body and relaxes the mind to then take in information. That's from the scientific standpoint. It feels good to play music and just bounce and know that the groove is there because that's what my ancestors did.

It goes right back to the African tradition. It goes back to the African ostinato. It goes back to the Moroccan trance music. It goes back to Turkish trance music. You go all over the place. The music groups, folk music groups.

That's what we do.

[Eugene Uman]

If I understand correctly, you're a fourth generation professional musician in your family. Is that correct?

[Etienne Charles]

I'm a fourth generation musician as a person who plays an instrument.

As a professional musician, my grandfather wasn't a professional musician. My dad wasn't a professional musician. My great-grandfather was not a professional musician.

But they played music. My great-grandfather played guitar, banjo, violin, clarinet.

My mom's grandfather, both of her grandfathers played music. But then my dad's father, Ralph, was a quattro player. My dad used to play steel pan.

So it's four generations of music. But they weren't professional musicians. But definitely a high-level musician. My great-grandfather would record with the growling tigers. Definitely a high-level musician. Yeah.

[Eugene Uman]

It's interesting that you have the quattro, because I think about that as like Puerto Rican or Cuban. But there's a Venezuelan quattro that you play and that you're introducing Jorge Glemm, who is also a quattro player in your band this time.

[Etienne Charles]

Yeah, exactly. The quattro is a very rich sound, very rich feel. It's a very rhythmic instrument. It's what I grew up hearing in Trinidad. It's a very popular seasonal instrument. And of course, it's the national instrument of Venezuela, the Venezuelan quattro. And Venezuela, as you know, at the closest point is eight miles from Trinidad.

Very close. And so the cultures share a lot of traits. So for me, Jorge Glemm is a great musician.

We've been playing together now for three or four years. And so, yeah, it's great to have him coming up to Vermont to play with us.

[Eugene Uman]

Yeah, I can't wait to hear that combination.

[Etienne Charles]

And you also play quattro, right? I do. I mean, I'm nowhere near on the level of Jorge. I use it on my recordings.

So if you check out Old School from my album, Culture Shock, or Santi Manite from Folklore, that's me playing quattro. And it's funny because Ralph McDonald, that's what drew him to my projects initially. That's what he took an interest in because his father used to play quattro.

(9:26 - 9:36)

And so that's when he heard the quattro, he heard the strum. And so the first time he hired me was in 2006. And that was the day after I moved to New York.

He called me up to come to the studio and he was like, bring your trumpet and bring your quattro. And the first thing I did was go down and record a quattro on a track called You Need More Calypso.

[Eugene Uman]

Is it common for music to travel through families like in New Orleans culture in Trinidad? Is that also a common thing to happen?

[Etienne Charles]

Is it common for music to travel through families?

[Eugene Uman]

Yeah, like father to son.

[Etienne Charles]

Oh, definitely. One is in the DNA, but two is the environment. So it's what you see.

So it becomes a culture. Your environment becomes your culture. What you see daily becomes your habits as well.

And so every holiday season, anytime we were celebrating something, if family was over, somebody would start playing something, whether it was a record player or a quattro or a guitar. Somebody might sing. We might not even know the lyrics to the song.

And we might just la-la the melody all the way through the song. We do that many times just to have a good time. But yeah, there's definitely a lot.

You see it in a bunch of the different families all over the world. But a lot in the Caribbean. In Trinidad, there's some names.

There's some pretty prominent musical families. You have the Jaggersons. You have the Voisins. You have the Marcanos. There are all these different families of musicians in Trinidad.

[Eugene Uman]

And that continues in New Orleans. You have right now the Marsalis's or the Barbers. Yeah, exactly. You have the Barber Brothers.

[Etienne Charles]

You have the Marsalises. You have people like the Brecker Brothers. It's a long list.

Michel Camilo is a fourth generation concert pianist.

[Eugene Uman]

And Chucho Valdez and Bebo. Chucho Valdez is his father and his son.

[Etienne Charles]

Yeah, I mean, Eddie Palmieri, Charlie Palmieri. Yeah, the Cudas Brothers, Luquez and Zakai, Damien. The Strickland Brothers.

The Clayton family. It used to be the Clayton Brothers, now it's the Clayton family.

Yeah, so there's definitely a bunch. It's a great way to learn the Wooten family. Victor Wooten and his family.

Also, you go back to the days of Wes Montgomery. His brother was a great pianist, Mark Montgomery. They had a family bond.

Sly Hampton came out of a family bond as well. Going throughout the history of the music, you had Ernie Wilkins and his brother. They were both in Basie's band.

Thad Jones, Alvin Jones, Hank Jones, the Jones Brothers.

[Eugene Uman]

You attended Florida State and then you went on to do your master's at Juilliard. Then you did some further study at Henry Mancini Institute.

What is your read on the state of jazz education today?

[Etienne Charles]

It's interesting because jazz education has so many assets these days. I teach at Michigan State University. Because of the digital age and because of the speed of YouTube and things like that, students are coming up now familiar with not just the musical content, that people invite, but because of videos, they can learn a lot quicker.

You can watch Freddie Hubbard play 10 different amazing solos on video. Because of that, that's a big asset. It's a big tool.

**Jazz is a family. Jazz is a canon. We're all very welcoming.**

We're all basically in search of the music. That's really all we're doing in academia. We're just in search of more of the music.

In search of how the music is tied into history. I think jazz education is in a good state. I like to see that there are many seasoned players at universities as well.

As well as people who are qualified with degrees. So you get both sides. I think it's very important for students to make sure they get that quote-unquote street cred.

Or they get the bandstand training, which is so imperative and so important for being able to do this music properly. It's a training on the bandstand. I make sure that my students get that bandstand training.

I just had a student play with me in China for three weeks. I try to take my students out on the road with me to play because that's really when you learn. The school is for practicing and understanding theories and concepts.

On the bandstand in front of an audience is when you really start learning how to be expressive and how to be communicative with other musicians. I think the state of jazz education is fine. My one concern is that there are fewer and fewer opportunities for students to play outside of school.

That's the one challenge that I see.

[Eugene Uman]

Yeah, and there are less jam sessions. There are less places for people to just hang out and play.

I think that listening gets focused to a personal experience. Whereas when I was coming up, it was something we would do as a team. It's just like, oh, let's go and listen to records or that kind of a thing.

I think that we still need to keep that light burning bright that the listening aspect is so important.

One of the things that I was thinking about, and your playing doesn't typify this at all, but there's the concept that a lot of people who come through, let's say, Berklee are cookie cutter. They might have learned a certain method and therefore the people who came through that method all sound the same.

I don't necessarily find that to be true, but some people talk about that. I think that what you're saying really helps put a light on it. If they get a chance to play a lot with their elders, that's really what the difference is.

[Etienne Charles]

Yeah, you know the big, big schools, the quote unquote factories as some people call them, people use that term cookie cutter. But it's interesting that people use those terms because it's kind of impossible to be familiar with the playing styles of everybody that comes out of those schools. There's definitely a bunch of different styles that happen at Berklee and at places like North Texas.

I would say the same thing. The people who come out and they have had opportunities to play and they work with as many different people as possible. Every single record, except for my first record, I have one or two musicians from Berklee College of Music on those recordings.

And part of it is because of that school's ability to make sure that their musician students are having playing opportunities and traveling opportunities. But then on top of that, every school has a sound. So like here at Michigan State, we are keepers of the flames of blues and bebop.

We strongly encourage students to groove and swing. We strongly encourage students to study harmony and study the language and to play the language. And so we have a sound.

Students that come out of here, they have a foundation in that. And I think it helps. It's kind of like you study with a master teacher and they're going to show you their way.

And then after you learn their way, then it's on you to figure out your way based on that way. Clark Terry called it imitate, assimilate, and then innovate. And it's kind of my mantra for education and for studying and for everything that I do.

Anytime something interests me, I imitate it first and then I assimilate it based on the imitate. I understand, okay, well, this is how this happened. And then from there, I innovate.

I say, well, let me try it this way. And I strongly encourage that with all my students, private and in my classes.

[Eugene Uman]

Some of your compositions are titled with suggestive names, especially from the San Jose Suite and like *Revolt* or *Gold Rush*.

And then when you talked about the racism in San Jose State and in the sports arena. And I was wondering if you felt that one of the functions of music is to draw attention to current or historical events that need bringing attention to.

[Etienne Charles]

That's a great observation.

[Eugene Uman]

No, no, no. And how you use music as a tool for that, to be an activist.

[Etienne Charles]

That's a great question.

Yeah, where I'm from in Trinidad, the Calypso tradition, a big part of the Calypso tradition or the Kaison tradition is about alerting people to what's going on. Calypso is a musical call to action. You know, growing up, many of the songs were about what was happening, you know, before.

You know, back in the early days, people got their news from a Calypsonia, way back in the 1800s. People would get their news from a Kaison, would take what was going on, figure out everything and then sing it in a song. So everybody knew what was going on.

And I think I just try to continue that tradition, really. It's kind of like a griot tradition. It's kind of knowing the real story.

But with the San Jose Suite, it was about, it was a study of the effects of colonialism. But it turned out from the study and the music that came from it, it turned into, ironically, a way of seeing how, even though things were very different back then, you know, talking about 100 years ago, even more, how they're so very similar still to this day. And so, you know, it was interesting.

That's what, you know, that's why we did *Speed City*, because, you know, an interview with Harry Edwards. I mean, I did an interview with Harry Edwards in 2014, 2015. And, you know, he was talking about, you know, he was talking about, he was telling me about the whole tradition and what happened at San Jose State and how they had to fight to desegregate schools in the early 60s.

And then, you know, fast forward, I was, you know, I wrote that piece, premiered that piece in August 2015. You know, you had the University of Missouri football team getting ready to protest because of racial unrest on campus. And I was like, wow, you know, that was in September 2015.

So, like, imagine that. Back then it was 40 something years ago. Now it's 50 years ago.

And you have Colin Kaepernick and you have all these pro NFL players that are protesting basically the same things that John Carlos, Tommy Smith, Lee Evans, that whole crew. The same thing that they were protesting in the 1968 Olympic Games 50 years ago are still being protested to this day. And so I'm not, I mean, I'm not a, like I say, I'm not an activist and I don't believe that it's a political thing.

I'm just telling a story. I'm just like, this is what happened then and this is what's happening now. And they're the same.

Like I'm showing you that this is this and that is that and they're the same. This happened in 68 and this is happening in 2018. And then so that, so by that you can calculate, the human brain can calculate, well in 50 years things haven't changed.

It's not me stating an opinion. It's not me stating a view. It's just me actually telling the story that I heard, that I learned about.

So I'm basically just trying to tell people's stories. And from that story, people get called to action. Same thing with the Gold Rush song.

So like Gold Rush is really about, it's about Silicon Valley. The reason it's called Gold Rush 2.0 is because we are in a new Gold Rush. If people didn't know, they should know now.

We're in a Gold Rush. All the people that are moving to Silicon Valley, all the people that are moving to the Middle East, we're in the new Gold Rush. And as a result, certain people are homeless, people can't afford to live where they've been living their whole lives.

There's a whole big change that happened because of, when you talk, I mean Gold Rush 2.0 is also about gentrification. Which is an issue in many of the cities in this country and around the world. I mean London has a big gentrification problem.

Paris. And so yeah, the sound of this, it was kind of deep because it started out as a study project based on these three sound of the cities. And then eventually it turned into, I was like wow, once I learned about this and I read about that, I was like wow.

You know, they don't, because these are things that they don't teach you in school. So my job as a composer.

I'm just saying that my job as a composer is to figure out a way to bring this to you. Bring this to people to hear the story through music.

[Eugene Uman]

Yeah, well it seems to me that you're being an activist by being a griot. You know, just telling the story is something that people need to hear and that you're observing that the story needs to be heard. So you're getting the word across.

You're becoming, like you said earlier, like the newspaper, you know, that you're providing the information that people don't have access to.

[Etienne Charles]

Yeah, I mean that's really what, I mean, I take, you know, I see it as a big responsibility as one, as a musician, as an artist, but also as a Trinidadian. Because that's really the link between what I do and Calypso is the storytelling aspect, it's the social commentary.

[Eugene Uman]

Sure. You know, one of the things I really like about, you know, I got five of your records here now and each one of them, you kind of have a theme, especially the newer ones, you know, the Carnival, the Folklore, the San Jose Suite. And in a little way, you know, Creole Soul and each one of them tells a story.

Is that something that you go into an album project now when you want to put across a concept that unifies the whole disc?

[Etienne Charles]

Well, now when I write, that's a great observation, a great question. When I was at Florida State, Marcus Roberts told me, so when you're writing music, sometimes you have to inspire the music, sometimes you have to inspire the song. And instead of thinking in terms of songs, think in terms of pieces or suites, like that's what I got from it.

And so suite is a way to tell a story over a short period of time, right, with music. Right. And so the theme is a great way to manage it, because in every element of life, you have ups, you have downs, you have happies, you have sads, you have easies, you have confusings.

And so it's the same with music. Right there, that's five, six tunes. So for themes, I like thinking in terms of themes because it keeps my thoughts organized.

It gets me to do deeper research. I mean, Culture Shock was a theme. Folklore was definitely a theme.

Taiso was a theme. It was all these calypsos and folk songs that I wanted to arrange specifically with the idea of a jazz sextet playing more challenging style arrangements than an orchestra. It was about highlighting specifically the melodies in those songs and how beautiful they are, that when you extract them from their original recordings, you can put orchestras behind them.

And that's what our album was about. Creole Soul was definitely a theme. It was about the concept of Creole, the concept of being new world music.

And then San Jose Suite was, you know, Creole Christmas was definitely a theme in our Christmas album. And then San Jose Suite was probably one of the most ambitious projects because of the type of theme that it dealt with, it dealt with colonialism, it dealt with resistance, it dealt with communities. And then this next one, Carnival, which was, you know, the official release date is February.

But Carnival was, you know, that's a long term study, but it's really, it ties in all these different themes. Like the theme is Carnival, but it's also because it's Carnival, it's history, it's anthropology, it's culture, it's design, it's art, it's visual, it's dance, it's music, it's musicology, it's all these different things all tied in.

[Eugene Uman]

Well, it's very effective and each album, it makes you listen to it from a different point of view and makes you think.

You know, it's not just like, oh, you want to have a balance of, oh, I'll do a bossa nova on the third tune or a ballad on the fourth tune. It's like each of these albums feels so integrated, so well conceived. And I think that's a real strength that you show and that it's good for those of us who are musicians to emulate.

[Etienne Charles]

No, I appreciate that, man. You know, it's about, like, it's about, you know, you can tell the story, small picture with a tune or with a solo or with a melody. And then you can tell a story, you know, with a bigger arc, with a whole album or with a series of albums over time.

And that's, you know, that's what I'm aiming for.

[Eugene Uman]

You know, I know we're getting to half an hour. We've actually crossed it.

[Etienne Uman]

Nah, we can keep chatting. I'm like, it's 11 o'clock. I mean, let's chat when I'm here.

[Eugene Uman]

All right. Well, thank you so much. Yeah, I got a few more.

One of the things that, as a musician, I know you're from Trinidad where the vernacular style is calypso. But there are many jazz musicians from the United States where we are kind of lost when someone says, hey, man, play a calypso. And we're like, OK, because, you know, we haven't really been exposed to calypso like maybe we have been to samba or salsa or something that has a very specific kind of a style.

And I'm sure that calypso is a music that is deep and has a lot of nuance and different types of rhythms that might go along with it. But could you maybe educate us a little bit about what the core of calypso is and how a musician would approach it, playing it?

[Etienne Charles]

Yeah, that's a great question. You know, the core of calypso is a feel.

More than anything else. The core of calypso is a lilt. And, you know, it's a type of syncopation.

You know, a lot of people ask me all the time, like, how do I play calypso? I was like, well, what type of calypso? What era of calypso? You know, because there's so many. I mean, I play percussion a lot, right? And one of the reasons I started playing percussion was you can kind of dig deeper into black music's roots by being at the drums. Because you can hear certain connections that you won't be able to hear unless you're behind a drum.

And so, you know, there are many different feels that happen. You know, you got calypso when they didn't have a drum set from back in those days. The original, the paseos, which was quattros and maybe an upright bass, a violin and a clarinet and some maracas.

You know, that's like really early style sound. Then you have the vocal sound, which is a certain type of rhythmic nuance. And then, you know, as you evolve and the music started getting arranged, they started recording, you know, larger bands or whatnot.

The style evolved as well. And then, you know, you had the jazz invasion, the swing big band invasion, and that kind of influenced how arrangers started introducing tunes. So back in the early, the way a song would start is it would just start with the melody of the chorus would start the song.

In the old time calypso, right? And specifically the melody of the chorus would be the first thing that you hear, like a clarinet would play it or a violin. And then once, you know, you start the big band thing happening, you know, and they started getting influenced by people like Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, that type of sound. And then the arrangers started doing these arrangements at the top of the tunes and the insiders at the end of the tune.

So it became like this presentation. And so, you know, but all through the field, slightly changed the bass. So some bass players would play like somebody like Slam Charles would play a lot of half notes, as we call them.

You know, or otherwise somebody like Rodney, who's clearly a little more mambo influenced, is a little busier as a bass player. So I think one thing I always tell my students, I tell them the names of the musicians that they need to check out on each instrument in calypso to really understand the style. Because in addition to the interpretive style of actually playing the notes and playing the music, there's also the improvisational styles that happen.

So like with drum set, I always tell people you got to study Errol Wise, you got to study Michael Tobias with autobus. With bass, you got to study Slam Charles, you got to study Earl Rodney. You got to study, you have to study Iman Ekta for electric bass.

You have to study people like Lester Paul, who played bass as well on a lot of recordings. You got to study Ka-chow, because a lot of the calypso bass players were checking out Ka-chow. On guitar, you got to study Fitzroy Coleman, you got to study Postman, you got to study Powell Joey Lewis.

On percussion, you got to study same cast like Errol Wise. On trumpet, you got Errol Ince. On saxophone, you got Frankie Francis.

On trumpet, you also got Sheik Keen. On each instrument, there were people that were clearly ahead of their time. On trumpet, you got people like Ron Barrett.

And then you have the whole school of arrangers in calypso. Ron Barrett, Joey Lewis, Frankie Francis, Art DeCoto, Clive Bradley, Frankie McIntosh, Wati Watkins. There were all these great arrangers. Cyril Diaz. All these great arrangers. It's really a great canon of music.

It's unfortunate that because of, I call it cultural colonialism in a sense, but because of what happens is the powerful countries in the region, they decide what musics are going to become popular based on the people who are there, or their people's capacity to understand that music.

[Eugene Uman]

Or it's what's played at the country clubs.

[Etienne Charles]

Yeah, exactly.

And some musics are specifically used just for certain. Certain musics are put in certain categories. And unfortunately, calypso fell in the category and became a fad for a little while.

But it's a really deep music. And I've been grateful. It's informed all of my compositions.

I have a jazz career strictly as a composer using calypso nuances in my compositions and arrangements. Which is pretty hilarious.

[Eugene Uman]

To this day, right? Even though you've been completely trained at Juilliard, etc.

[Etienne Charles]

Yeah, I hide it. But it's who I am. I grew up playing on a steel barn.

And then the steel barn sound changed the sound of calypso. Because people started writing calypsos with steel barns. But yeah, it's a whole big thing.

You've got Lord Kitchener, you've got Mikey Spire, you've got Roaring Lion, you've got Attila the Hun, you've got Growling Tiger, you've got all these calypsos. You've got Lord Melody, who wrote a bunch of hits for Harry Belafonte. You've got all these writers who had different melodies.

Like Mikey Spoiler, who was probably one of the most lyrical geniuses of all time. Mikey Pretender. All these different singers.

Calypso Rose singing Sandra, singing Francine. All these different singers that had tiny little differences in their styles. So yeah, the playing of a calypso... I mean, salsa, merengue, very similar in the sense that they're codified different styles.

But in calypso, each tune almost has a different groove.

[Eugene Uman]

But it's not like there's a clave or anything like that? So there's clave.

[Etienne Charles]

There's clave in all black music, right? So there's a clave.

So the calypso clave is very similar to mambo. I call it a downbeat measure and a syncopated measure. In mambo you've got 2-3 or 3-2.

It's the same concept, right? One measure of locked in time and then one measure of upbeats. And no matter what type of groove you come up with, the clave has to be in it. But in the 80s, specifically, there was a drummer and percussionist, he's still alive, his name is Errol Wise.

And the true genius of Errol Wise is that every single song he recorded had a different groove. Like he would write a groove, he would come up with a groove based on the song, based on what he heard. And they would go down in the studio and they would record drums, bass, guitar and probably keys in one pass.

And then Wise would record percussion to go along with his drum groove. So he would actually orchestrate the groove as a part of the melody. And still to this day, a lot of people recognize the song based on either the groove or the bass line long before the song actually starts.

[Eugene Uman]

What a great concept.

[Etienne Charles]

Yeah, I mean, they were doing it in the US too in the 80s. If you listen to Michael Jackson's Thriller and Off The Wall, each tune has a different groove.

It came off of the bass line, but yeah, Errol Wise was doing that. He was the drummer on that famous Hot Hot Hot recording as well. He is really something, he's really a genius.

[Eugene Uman]

I think that you're trying to emulate that in the suite that you did in the Carnival, the Black Echo 1 through 5, at least that's what I'm hearing there.

[Etienne Charles]

So wait, so you've heard this album already?

[Eugene Uman]

I got it in my hand, dude.

[Etienne Charles]

Really? Where did you get it?

[Eugene Uman]

I got it on Amazon.

[Etienne Charles]

Really?

[Eugene Uman]

I'm loving this. It's so good. I just listened to it today for the first time.

I just got it and I've been listening to it all day. It's wonderful.

[Etienne Charles]

Wow. Yeah, Black Echo is a little crazy. It's the story of the evolution of our sound as a true audience.

[Eugene Uman]

Well, it's very powerful.

[Etienne Charles]

Thank you. The album comes out in February. It's kind of like in the vein of Sound of the Suite in the sense that Black Echo is about how we were able to musically respond to British suppression of our culture through laws that they passed.

Black Echo is our musical response to British suppression of culture and basically the British, the colonial British, they banned drums, they outlawed drums. Like in the eastern United States, the slaves in the Carolinas, they did the same thing. Yeah, but in Trinidad, this was after slavery was abolished, long after slavery was abolished.

So in 1884, okay, so in 1881, they had these riots in Trinidad. They're known as the Kambooli Riots. And it happened on Jubilee morning, which is the Sunday night before Carnival.

Or like early Carnival Monday morning, Jubilee morning. And the stick fighters, the British police were trying to keep the stick fighters from coming out on the street and they clashed. There's a big fight that happened between the British police led by Captain Baker and these stick fighters.

And at the end of the fight, the governor, the British governor decided that we would get two days, Monday and Tuesday, to do whatever we wanted in the streets for Carnival, as long as we stopped by midnight on Tuesday night. And so what that did, that was the birth of our official, like getting Carnival going. And so when, so the next few years, there were a couple of fights in the streets and whatnot, and the British decided to ban drums in Trinidad.

They outlawed drums and weapons and sticks. So they wouldn't allow stick fights in the public. They wouldn't allow drumming.

It's called the Peace and Preservation Act of 1884.

And it outlawed skin drumming in Trinidad. And so that's why we go from, so that first piece is called Ordinance, because it's the Ordinance.

[Eugene Uman]

It's the rule.

[Etienne Charles]

Yeah, the Ordinance was, you can't do this anymore. Okay. They put an ad in the paper, right? And then it banned the possession of any weapon, instrument, stick, bottle, stone, or other thing intended for the purpose of committing any felony or misdemeanor.

And so because of the banning of drums, Africans still need to play their rhythm. That's when bamboo came on the scene.

So that's when we get to tambu, which is like the transition. And then bamboo is the tambu, that's tambu bamboo. And then from bamboo, they used to have these tambu bamboo bands that would fuel, that would drive the tambu bamboo bands down, they would push the tambu bamboo bands down the street.

And the tambu bamboo bands, they would play. And then one day, a tambu bamboo band was playing, and a guy, there was an abandoned car chassis next to them. And this guy started beating on the metal on the car chassis.

And that's how the iron sound came in to the carnival. Because iron has always had a part of African sound, because the cowbell cuts the evil spirits. Like the drum calls the spirits, and then the cowbell cuts the evil spirits.

And so iron always has a place in the African sound. And so that's when iron began, and that's how it evolved into iron, which is the fourth part. And then from iron bands, that's when we ended up with steel bands.

So that's the evolution for Black Echo.

[Eugene Uman]

Well, I encourage everyone to wait until February, and then buy this album like crazy.

[Etienne Charles]

Yeah, I might bring a couple to Vermont, we'll see.

[Eugene Uman]

All right, I'm sure they'll sell.

[Etienne Charles]

Yeah, I might bring a couple of them. Yeah, it's some fun, it was a huge project.

In terms of like, yeah, it was a lot, but it was so much fun. I learned so much. It was culture shock all over again.

[Eugene Uman]

Well, maybe you could tell us a little bit about the band and the repertoire you're going to be presenting on Saturday. So the band is Julius Rodriguez, the young pianist and drummer, but he's coming to play piano. Brutus Travis is playing bass.

He was my first bass player in New York ever. It's going to be great to have him back in the band. Jorge Glamour on quattro was one of my favorites.

Kweku Sombry playing drums, and Godwin Lewis on alto saxophone. Kweku is from Washington, D.C. Great drummer, great djembe player as well. Godwin Lewis, Haitian-American from Bridgeport, Connecticut.

Really fiery player, great composer as well. So yeah, we're going to have some fun. We're going to play some music.

Anytime we play in a town, we do a bit of everything. We do a little bit of folklore music. We do a little bit from Creole soul.

We do a little bit from the Simon's Day suite. I think we do two sets. So we have time to get into a good few tunes.

[Eugene Uman]

Nice. Well, we're really looking forward to hearing you live, and this is going to be a treat. You know, you are friends. You came and did the Northampton Jazz Festival a couple of years ago.

[Etienne Charles]

I did. That was such a fun gig. September 6, 2014.

[Eugene Uman]

There you go. And a lot of our friends here at the Jazz Center, we're only 40 minutes away from them.

So a lot of people are going to be coming up from Northampton to also enjoy your show up here because they heard you and were so enthralled with the concert that you gave back in 2014. So, there's a connection here between Brattleboro and the Northampton area. Just to give you a little geographical context.

And I'm really glad that you took the time to talk with us. It's been a wonderful conversation. I've learned so much.