

JAMAICAN FOLK SONG SUITE

Introduction

Jamaican folk songs are full of social commentary, censure, and recrimination in a vehicle of humor. They often touch on areas which are almost taboo in the normal circumstances of polite everyday speech, and at other times provide humorous relief in times of adversity. The importance of traditional Jamaican folk songs today is mainly historical, since much of the lyrical content refers to events and relationships which give insight into the human condition of the past and not so distant past.

—Marjorie Whylic

Patois Pronunciation and Translation

Jamaican “patois” is the native language of the island and is an English-based Creole language with West African influences. It also uses many words borrowed from Spanish, Portuguese, Hindi, Arawak, and Scottish/Irish dialects, reflecting Jamaica’s turbulent yet vibrant multicultural history.

1. Train a Blow

Train a blow,
yuh nuh hear de
min’ i’ lef yuh

*trayn ah bloh
yuh nuh heer dih
myn ih lehfyuh*

The train whistle is blowing.
don’t you hear the
make sure it doesn’t leave you

Mass Tom a run,
Miss Mary da come.
What a way de gyal foot dry!

*mahs tahm ah ruhn
mihs may-ree dah kuhm
wuht uh way dih gyahl foot dry*

Master Tom is running,
Miss Mary has come.
How skinny her feet are!

Poor Madda Jane
da try catch de train,
but her fowl
da look fe fly.

*poor muh-duh jayn
dah try kehtch dih trayn
buht hahr fowl
dah look fih fty*

Poor Mother Jane
is trying to catch the train,
but her chicken
is trying to fly away.

Look how de woman
a hide her little bwoy
inna de ker’sene pan.

*look hahoo dih woo-mahn
uh hyd hahr lih-tuhl bwoy
ih-nuh dih keer-seen pan*

See how the woman
is hiding her little boy
in the kerosene pan.

Tap, yuh tink yuh smart,
no, ma.
Yuh nuh wan’ pay
fe yuh son.

*tahp yuh tihnk yuh smaht
noh mah
yuh nuh wahn pay
fih yuh suhn*

Stop, you think you’re smart,
don’t you, ma’am.
You don’t want to pay
for your son.

Port Antoni,
Frankfield, Ewarton

*port ahn-toh-nee
frank-feeld yoo-wahr-tuhn*

Port Antonio,
Frankfield, Ewarton

Gyal an’ bwoy,
young lady, gentleman

*gyahl ahn bwoy
yuhng lay-dee jehn-tuhl-mahn*

Girl and boy,
young lady, gentleman