

THE CARIBBEAN ^{VOL 1}
CHRISTMAS MIXTAPE



JOY LAPPS AND LARNELL LEWIS

Christmas comes with familiar preparations: stuffed stockings, ornamental trees and feasts to please the fussiest of palates. But for many Afro-Caribbean communities that's just a start. For steelpan artist Joy Lapps and her husband, drummer Larnell Lewis, Christmas resonates with a specific quality of spirit and musicality. Capturing this with an imaginative set of reinvented classics, *The Caribbean Christmas Mixtape Vol. 1* celebrates Caribbean artistic ingenuity while unfolding as a musical love letter to family, friends and faith.

Born to parents who immigrated to Canada from the Caribbean islands of Antigua and Saint Kitts, Joy and Larnell grew up in the metro Toronto area among extended families with rich musical heritages. Even before embracing steelpan, Joy's father (a popular party DJ) exposed her to Caribbean genres like zouk, soca and calypso. Eventually Joy recorded several albums exploring steelpan within Caribbean, sacred and popular music before earning her masters degree researching the history and development of composition for steelpan in Jazz. "I have this joke that people think that steelpan can only be played in the key of Calypso," she shared. "So I'm definitely trying to expand people's understanding of the possibilities of the instrument."

Surrounded by multi-instrumentalists within his immediate and extended families, Larnell's life as a "stage baby" informed his empathic artistic sensibility. Given his encyclopedic understanding of rhythm, an education supplemented by a mosaic of styles and live performances, Larnell's eventual role as one of Snarky Puppy's drummers felt preordained. As the musical director of their church, his father introduced him to everything from soul, R&B and gospel, to the Caribbean rhythmic traditions of zouk, spouge and reggae. Playing in church also refined a skillset supporting communal expression. "Growing up as a musician in church, I learned the importance of affecting the attitude and outlook of the worship

experience through music and doing so with purpose," says Larnell. And of course that meant playing a lot of Christmas music.

Joy and Larnell had the opportunity to "workshop" what would eventually become the The Caribbean Christmas Mixtape Vol. 1 through live-to-air performances as part of Toronto's Jazz.91FM annual concert series. After Toronto's Caribbean community routinely rejoiced, they realized it was time to "put the project on wax." By making danceable music without dumbing it down, and infusing songs with stylish Caribbean themed arrangements, the couple realized their signature vibe within this genre of music.

Rummaging through shared histories, culling memories of watching The Sound of Music and listening to the popular 60's Soul Christmas album, the couple leaned into their "mix-tape" philosophy of delighting audiences with the buoyant diversity of Caribbean music. The project also became an opportunity for self-expression. "Here's a side of me that you don't know," Larnell explained. "This was the road I traveled. This is what Christmas sounded like when my family would get together and play instruments and sing and dance." For Joy this process was equally poignant. "Music is part of how we gather, how we engage with and strengthen our community. And also often just to do something good for the soul."

Soca Sleigh Ride immediately sets the tone for the album. This live performance blends soca, the popular calypso inspired Trinidadian genre, with a playful, pop music, dance floor sensibility. Measured but tipsy, Larnell's arrangement of Santa Claus is Coming to Town playfully depicts that relative who might have, sort of, kinda, actually forgot to bring the jerk chicken. Originally written by the French singer and actor Tino Rossi, Petite Papa Noël (Little Father Christmas) finds Joy and her sister Subria Lapps sharing vocals in English and French. With its gentle zouk theme, a style pioneered by the French Antillean band Kassav, the song features Roger Miller's popular lullaby Old Toy Trains.

Immortalized by the film *The Sound of Music*, *Edelweiss* showcases powerful vocals from Justin Bacchus and Subria Lapps accompanied by steelpan and the elegant work of pianist Jeremy Ledbetter. Inspired by the steelpan fusion group *Caraib to Jazz*, Larnell's arrangement of *O Little Town of Bethlehem* mixes Jazz with a subtle dance hall beat, creating a dynamic setting for Joy's best solo on the album. Flavored with a Dominican cadence, zouk returns on *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*, a rendition as enchanting as walking home through soft sand or snow.

Metaphorically in sync, Larnell brilliantly transforms and solos on *Little Drummer Boy*. Dense with its fascinating mixture of gospel, fusion and Afrobeat, the arrangement showcases how Christmas carols can become sophisticated popular music. Riffing on the music of Peter Tosh and Bob Marley is the reggae rendition of *Carol of the Bells*. Buoyed by Joy's crisp play and Larnell's command of the genre, the tune makes traditional versions sound pale by comparison. Tucking us in after an album of so many elaborately wrapped gifts is *O Holy Night*, featuring the trio of Joy, Larnell and pianist Courtenay Frazer.

As part of global culture, Christmas music exists to inspire us throughout our lives. More than just a portable party, *The Caribbean Christmas Mixtape Vol. 1* is an alternative holiday soundtrack. With its playful approach, accessible nature and diverse blend of Caribbean influences, the album flows effortlessly from one musical adventure to the next. Warmly invited, listeners will experience Larnell Lewis and Joy Lapp-Lewis's community with all its flare, sincerity and humor. Stuffed with innovation, ornate with glistening musicality, *The Caribbean Christmas Mixtape Vol. 1* is a feast for the mind, release for the body, and a balm for the soul.