

Features

## A Book Lover's Wanderlust

by Stephen Eichenbaum · Add Comment

Jamaica is an island of distinct spirit. Its patois, ever-present music, and unique spiritual outlook that can only be the outcome of centuries of cultural diffusion all create *that vibe*. Part biblical, part supernatural, and part metaphysical, the idea of spirit dwells in Jamaica like no other place. And a good deal of it lies in the notion of “conjuring” — manifesting ideas from the spiritual plane into the physical.

Amble along the country lanes at night in the quaint seaside community of Treasure Beach, and you can feel it in the silence broken by your steps. With only stars and constellations as your guide and the wind blowing swiftly across what looks and feels like Jamaica's Outback, you get the sense that the unseen is never far away. Down in Treasure Beach, on Jamaica's dry, rocky south coast, something special has been conjured by Justine Henzell, Colin Channer, and Kwame Dawes.

Held at Jake's Hotel, the [Calabash](#) festival has for 13 editions brought together some of the most compelling writers and wordsmiths from the Caribbean and abroad. Although I once read that “Jamaicans love anything with the word ‘bash’ in it” (as in, a *bashment* is a party), it's the world-class literature, authentic Jamaican sensibility, and electric relaxation that has everyone joyfully congregating down to the island.



Photograph by Stephen Eichenbaum

But also, with new-school reggae star and St. Elizabeth native Protoje performing at 1am on a Friday and soundsystems blasting into the next night, it's difficult to convince that Calabash is, well, not a bashment in itself. Hardly taking any sort of party lightly, the hometeam crowd came *dressed inna fashin*. And it's not just the jetsetters and well-to-do Jamaicans who descend on this tiny village for the occasion. Without a cost of admission, Calabash is open to everyone.

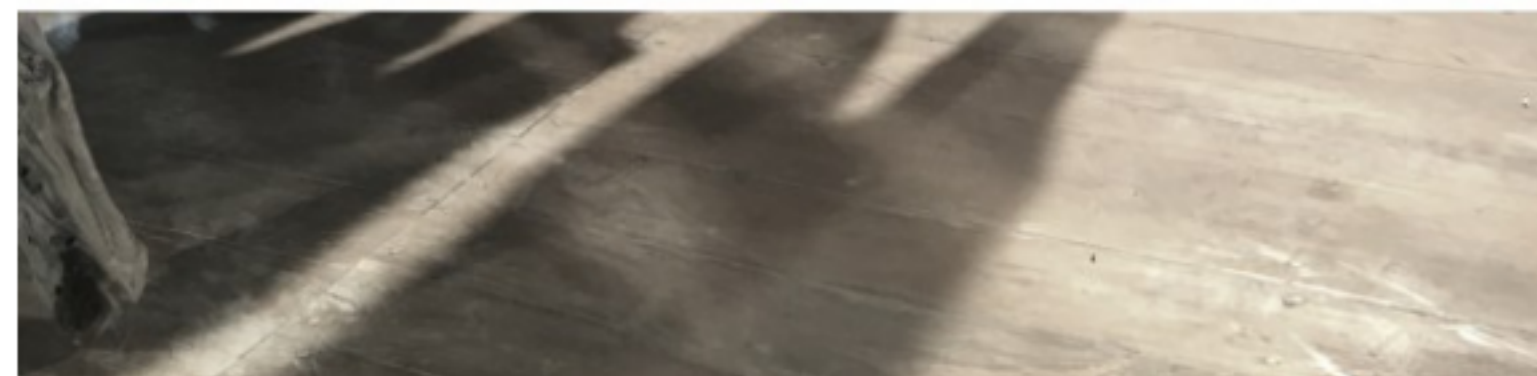
» Local farmers and fishermen mix up with Jamaicans

trekking from Kingston and other parishes. Then you have international travelers and authors coming from as far away as Russia, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Minnesota, along with closer Caribbean locales such as St. Lucia and Trinidad.

Over the course of three days and nights, the 2016 events pulsed with the words and sounds of poets, authors, and musicians who each, at some point, expressed their tremendous delight to be a part of something special. When I informed Henzell — the owner of Jake’s and co-founder of Calabash — that it was my first time attending the fest, as I had just arrived from Miami, she quickly and knowingly finished my sentence with, “and it won’t be your last?” Nearly everyone I encountered (whether a poet or author sharing their work, or a local cab driver or hustler from the community) expressed a similar sentiment.

” When I asked whether Calabash was good for the community, my question was consistently met with a resounding *Yeh mon*.

British author Geoff Dyer, a 12-year veteran of Calabash, opened his Saturday night reading exclaiming that the fest was “completely unchanged, but even better,” and went further to profess what many of us already knew: that it was, in fact, one of the “best literary fests in the world.” He read from his book, *White Sands: Experiences from the Outside World*, leaving the crowd on a cliffhanger, after which they harangued him with both appreciation for a funny and rich story and frustration to be left without closure.



Authors Teju Cole, Paul Beatty, and Geoff Dyer. Photograph by Stephen Eichenbaum

Judging by the consistent crowds, despite alternating rain and heat over the weekend, the festival was clearly a secret we were all in on. That secret was never more glaringly out than the night that 2015 Man Booker Prize winner and Portmore, Jamaica native, Marlon James, read from his awarded novel, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (a phantasmagorical narrative partly based on the true-life story of the Shower Posse, and also with Bob Marley appearing as The Singer). Front-row seats quickly filled up in preparation for his reading, and with a kinetic anticipation in the air, he took the stage as a man who appeared to be deeply enjoying his homecoming, both to Calabash and to Jamaica.

James’ first book, *John Crow’s Devil*, came to fruition (also the theme of this year’s festival, “Fruu-ish-aan”) as a result of a Calabash workshop many years prior. Before beginning his reading of the incredible, tragic, beautiful, and often vulgar and distinctly Jamaican *Brief History*, he warned the audience that there would be “a lot of *bumba ras claat cussiri*” with the joy of a child who has the family’s attention at an impromptu holiday gathering performance. Followed by a second reading from the same book, he prefaced with a gleeful warning that there would be more “coarse language” to follow, and the crowd erupted with a sense of pride and appreciation not seen during other readings.





Photograph by Stephen Eichenbaum

Throughout the weekend, Calabash seemed to conjure in its speakers both a charisma and fire in their voices. Many of the authors — being at their first Calabash or even at a public reading — expressed their reluctance or apprehension at speaking. This remark was usually followed by a joke or a charming comment that seemed to simply materialize and engage the crowd in an exchange of energy that elevated the atmosphere.

The MCs — Calabash co-founder Kwame Dawes and West Indian author Carolyn Cooper — kept everything moving with a fun, Caribbean sense of urgency that added lightness that felt warm and familiar. Eleanor Catton, soft-spoken Booker Prize-winner of 2013, read from her 832-page award winner, *The Luminaries*. With a trippy plot surrounding a prospector traveling to New Zealand's South Island settlement of Hokitika in 1866, where he searches for gold and encounters incarnations of astrological signs — it melted well into the island crowd.

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While some writers sought to find their voices on stage, others knew exactly where to find it and ignited the place with their presence. Jessica Care Moore — Detroit native, veteran poet of the Apollo in New York, and author of *God is Not an American* — read her feminine inferno, “We Want Our Bodies Back.” She finished the powerful reading with a question that can only be asked by an Amiri Baraka student like herself: “Who gonna be the new?”

That question would be answered at the open-mic sessions over the course of the weekend. Many young Caribbean poets, several from University of the West Indies, took the stage addressing the social and political challenges faced by contemporary Jamaican youth. With topics such as gun violence and professions of queer love (homosexual acts are illegal in Jamaica), the younger voices were eager to be heard.

**” A sign that even in these difficult, hate-ridden, and downright scary times, the written word still carried its power.**

The crowd, although certainly impressed by the international array of world-class authors, were equally vocal about their support of the open-mic speakers. There was no bigger moment in which it was clear that Calabash was indeed a community than during these sessions.

**” Eruptions of applause and whistles were heard at points where volume would remain unrivaled through the weekend. Again, this isn't your average literary festival. Here, the vibrant spirit of words and books come alive with unbridled gusto.**



Photograph by Stephen Eichenbaum

When I arrived in Montego Bay, a friend and local named Roddy picked me up from the airport and drove me through the green, mountainous parish of Westmoreland before reaching the dry, rocky parish of St. Elizabeth. He's been a fisherman in Treasure Beach for 30 years. Many men haven't been able to stay working at sea so long. The costs of gas and overfishing have taken their toll on this traditional rural community. When asked what the alternative was, he responded, “Farming.”

**” Farming? You can grow out here?” I asked, taking in the parched landscape.**

"Yeh mon, lotta melon."

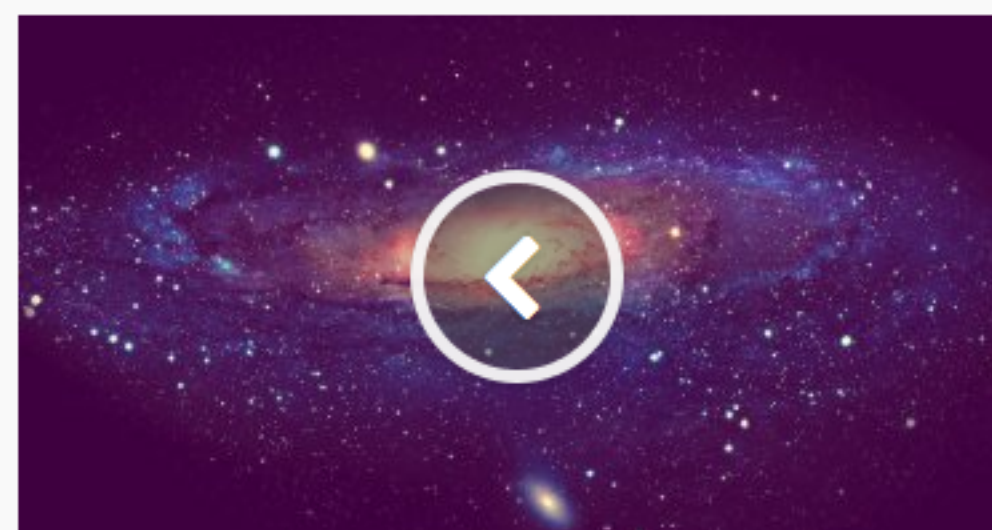
Clearly, there's something special in this land. It just requires some conjuring with the right hands.

Featured photograph up-top by Stephen Eichenbaum.

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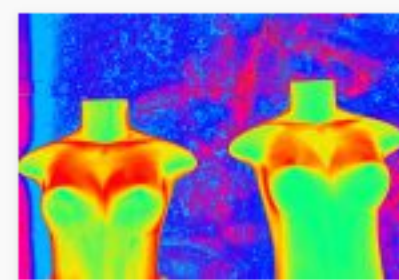


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