

SELECT

BARBADOS

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**TOP OF THE
WORLD**

LaurelAnn Morley

**Restoration &
Rehabilitation**

Sheltered Workshop

Sounds of the Past

The whisperpost Project

THE MONTHLY MAGAZINE FOR BARBADOS



"Who am I?" asks this mysterious derelict building

Whisper**Past** - Whisper**Post**

By Susan Mahon

Standing perfectly still in the heart of Bridgetown – early o'clock on a Sunday mornin' and listening very very carefully - we can hear the whispers of the old-time city telling their tales of long ago when Bridgetown was a thriving metropolis and Boston was just a small village.

Celebrated artist and author, Lilian Sten-Nicholson, encourages us to listen to the city with our souls as well as our minds through an innovative artistic endeavour called "Bridgetown whisperpost". Lilian's personal

whisperpost is located at the carenage where the river meets the sea, and she helps us to summon mental images of settlers and swamp, ghostly duppy crabs and muddy water, morphing through time into the image of a bustling port.

Lilian is one of seventeen artists and historians who have contributed soundscapes to the 'whisperpost' interpretive project which was curated and directed by Joscelyn Gardner. Joscelyn is recognised in Barbados for her original use of mixed media and her focus on the history

of the Caribbean. One of her most stunning and thought-provoking works was installed at the Barbados Museum in 2004 where she recognised the commonalities and complexities of 'White Skin, Black Kin'.

'White Skin, Black Kin - Speaking the Unspeakable' was a first for the Museum in terms of the scope and intricacy of the work which was installed throughout the premises, including the old plantation gallery and the gaol. A haunting mix of modern audio-visual projections was combined with traditional creative arts such as doll-making and

embroidery, and featured audio-stations where listeners heard voices from the past. These audio-stations resemble those installed throughout the city of Bridgetown in the whisperpost project.

Ideas for the whisperpost audio-stations were conceived during a workshop facilitated by the National Art Gallery Committee and supported by the Barbados Museum and Historical Society and the National Cultural Foundation. Chief Archivist, Christine Matthews, assisted with providing context and reference for the whisperposts. Local musician and audio producer, Alan Sheppard of Gray Lizard Studios, mixed the sounds and voices collected by the workshop participants to produce individual soundscapes.

The use of audio techniques to create soundscapes was enthusiastically embraced by the workshop participants, most of whom are visual artists. During the workshop they recorded the city in situ and selected their whisperpost sites. The choice of sites was enlightening. Well-known buildings and landmarks such as the Parliament buildings and St. Michael's Cathedral were bypassed in favour of sites that evoked the artists' personal dreams and stories. The signs for the whisperpost audio stations in Bridgetown have been removed

since the initial project, but you can still view the locations at www.nagc.bb/whisperpost. Please see the end of this article for where you can obtain a CD and map for a self guided tour.

When ships were in the harbour there was "plenty maritime trade" and "Oh lordy! ... Down here gwine be swarming wid His Majesty's mariners tonight."

Whisperpost sites include public areas like the Fairchild street bus terminal, tiny alleyways with monumental significance, and old buildings shrouded with mystery and intrigue. They are populated with vivid personalities that capture attention - by voice or by silence - among them; hucksters and vendors, naval officers and pirates, slaves and their traders, free coloureds, and members of the old and new mercantile class.

There exists a certain synchronicity

between the voices of today and those of the past. Laura-Lin Hutchinson's old-time "sweetie lady", Ida, calls out her story to passers-by on Bay Street amidst the sounds of modern-day commerce. Ida cajoles customers to buy sugar cake, black cake, comfits, and 'glassiees' as she carries her tray towards Hastings, hoping to meet the tram there. Along the way, she proclaims "I goin' to sell my sweets to the better-offs.... This is one of the first little piece o' honest work we women could do for we selves as free black women, yuh. I ain' no huckster. Dem does sell their own provisions, yam, sweet potatoes, an tie up deh head in crocus bag. We proud to be 'vendors'".

Ida meets the mauby woman who sells the bitter-bark drink calling, "Mauby! Mauby! Fresh mauby! It good for yuh worms." Another vendor, Millie, sells conkies, pone, and flat corn biscuits - Bajan specialties still enjoyed - and Becka, the Haberdasher lady, carries a tray full "uh needles, ribbons, hooks and eyes, thread and



One whisperpost tells the haunting story of a tragedy here on Roebuck Street

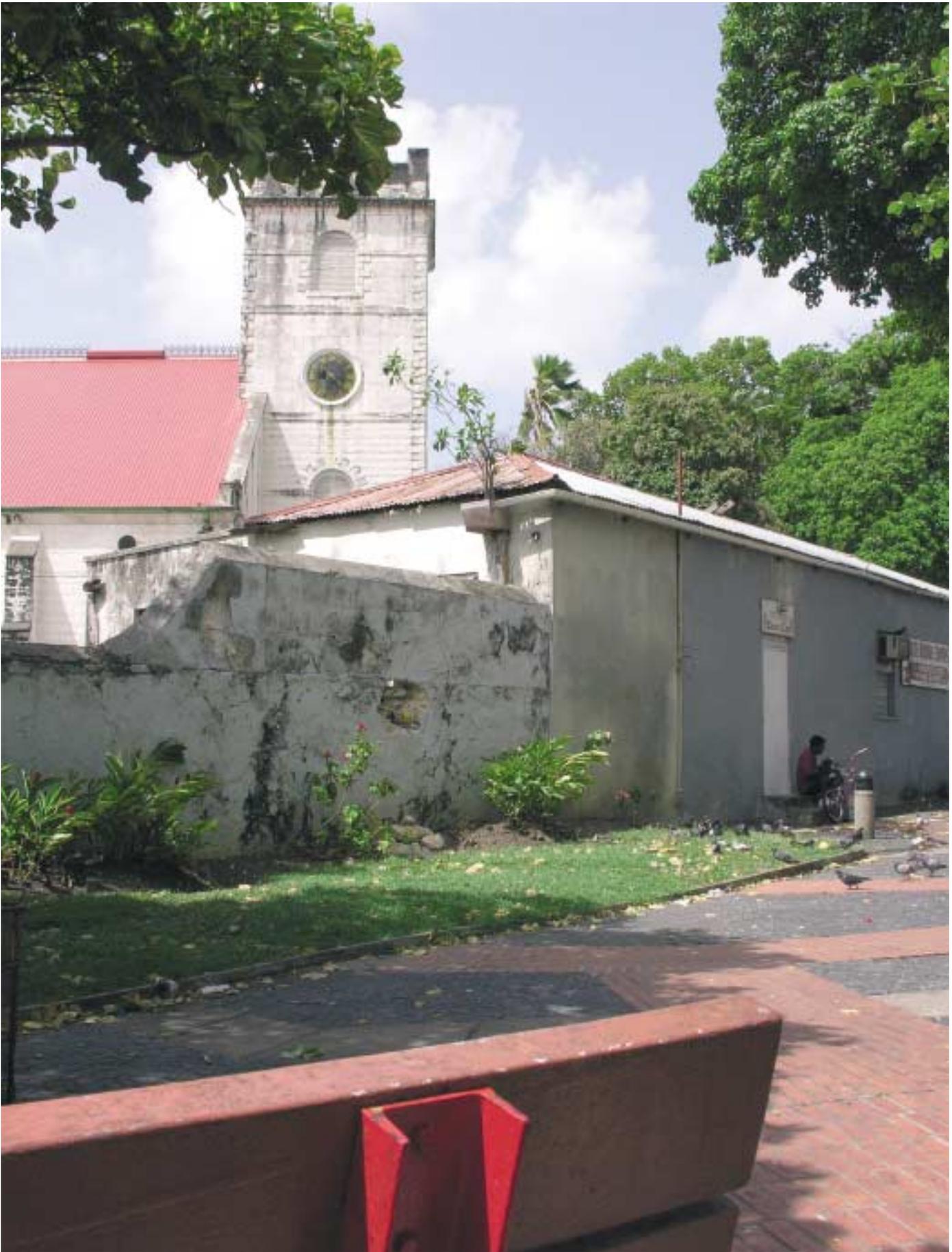
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From the benches behind the Central Bank, you can hear the sounds of Bridgetown today

de like" for sale in the street.

During the period of this scenario, in the 18th and 19th centuries, Ida explains that free mulatto women also owned more than one hundred taverns in Bridgetown. Rachel Pringle and Betsy Lemon were amongst the most famous of these women. When ships were in the harbour there was "plenty maritime trade" and "Oh lordy!... Down here gwine be swarming wid His Majesty's mariners tonight." Not much has changed in the last few hundred years !

"...the two things that echoed in my mind the most were the idea of Bridgetown as the heart of our country, where our culture resonates at its strongest, and the semantic noise that exists in the interpretation of these sounds."

Also along Bay Street, among the old warehouses, is a whisperpost created by Karen Proverbs, Archives Assistant at the Barbados Department of Archives. Karen has scripted the dramatic incident of the torpedoing of the Canadian merchant ship the "Cornwallis" in Carlisle Bay by a German submarine in 1942. Her soundscape begins with the waves gently lapping on the ship. A loud noise and screams are then heard in the background as a female broadcaster announces, "an area well beyond was startled by a tremendous explosion in Carlisle Bay. A second explosion that soon followed, caused a large, curious crowd to gather at the wharf side in Bridgetown, and the assistance of the volunteer fire brigade, formed not long previously, had to be enlisted to clear this potentially dangerous area."

Another dramatic soundscape is told as a family story by the artist herself. Annalee Davis, a provocative spirit who is known in Barbados for her special perspective on Bajan culture, tells of a tragedy on Roebuck Street. In a description of Annalee's creative process (which can be found on the whisperpost website) she states that, "One of my great-grandfathers, P. C. Fields, had a dairy on Nelson Street before relocating to Roebuck Street where he owned several properties. I learnt about a tragic incident which took place at my great-grandfather's business and chose to narrate the story." Sounds of horse-drawn carriages added at Gray Lizard studios contribute to setting Annalee's soundscape in the early 1920s.

We will not spoil the enjoyment of future whisperpost listeners by telling the story of the Roebuck street tragedy here. Suffice it to say, that there are many fascinating synchronicities between the past and present. Several of the principals in the story share names with people engaged at Roebuck Street now - Saint Claire/Sinckler, Hutchinson, and Fields - these are names that remind us of the strong interconnectedness of family histories that is such a fundamental characteristic of modern Barbados.

Nearby to Roebuck Street are two more whisperposts



A scenic whisperpost in the city centre that speaks of Time

designed by then-student-artist Laila Degia, and Cultural Officer of the National Cultural Foundation, Rodney Ifill. Rodney recounts a story about a mysterious building in the Central Bank complex. His melodic voice invites the listener to guess the identity of the building as he gives his clues..., "I'm bound betwixt and between a city church located on St Michael's Row and a tall financial structure... My walls are old and gray; my shutter windows, once pure white, now dingy and broken. Sometimes

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Where the river meets the sea... time travel to the once bustling port of Bridgetown

the pigeons make me their home. I have been designated a Barbados National Trust property, thus my blue and white tattoo. I contain many secrets, many silent secret symbols, but for only those who were initiated behind my gray, sacred, mystic walls... Who am I?". We encourage the reader to visit the spot and to guess the answer.

Opposite this spot in the same Central Bank complex is the bench where Laila Degia sat to record the sounds of the city. Hers is not a narrative, but a collection of today's commonplace sounds. Laila states, "When I started this piece I was uncertain how to represent Barbadian "town culture" with sound. I went into town trying to absorb and record every sound I could and to understand the layers behind them - until then I had never really listened to these many layers of sounds when I walked through

town. Upon re-listening and remembering this experience, the two things that echoed in my mind the most were the idea of Bridgetown as the heart of our country, where our culture resonates at its strongest, and the semantic noise that exists in the interpretation of these sounds. In composing this piece I wanted to show the layers of discrepancies between ordinary town sounds and how I have heard them as a pulse, a pulse that was there from slavery until now and needs to be heard and kept alive."

In this connection, other sounds of the Bridgetown pulse that are kept alive are those chosen by accomplished photographer Eric Belgrave; and versatile visual artist, educator, and curator, Denyse Ménard-Greenidge. Both these whisperpost contributors chose the same general theme and neighbouring locations for their

soundscapes - the wharfside entrances to Philadelphia Lane and Liverpool Lane. The entrance to Philadelphia Lane is the site of "The Gates" where there was a trading post during the time of slavery. Denyse describes her soundscape in this way: "The chains were rattling slowly and painfully announcing the line-up of slaves that were to be delivered to the masters who had just concluded purchasing them. The auctioneer (slave seller) who had to proceed to the delivering of this "substantial shipment" was impatient and yelling after a slave who could not care less about the efficiency nor the modality of the operation. The hinges of the gate were reluctantly squeaking and squealing fearfully at the delivery of each slave, concluding with a loud scary bang that indicated the finality and the sad fate of this individual."

Eric Belgrave's soundscape layers the



sounds of voices eerily counting and chanting.... "One, two three,..... three hundred thousand, three hundred thousand

and ten.... Africans, Africans, Africans.... Negroes, Negroes, negro slaves" and finally, "heal, heal heal." Eric has chosen not to highlight much about himself as an artist and contributor to whisperpost, but rather to write a poem about The Gates on the whisperpost website

"A place that exists but not to some
 A place where Africans ended and slaves began
 A place where languages were lost
 A place where family names died
 A place where spiritual connection was severed
 A place where amnesia was sown
 A place to heal"

Whisperpost is, therefore, not just the Bridgetown of history books ... it is the soul, the essence, the core, the psyche - the consciousness rhythms of a lyrical city - as interpreted by seventeen artistic contributors. The other contributors, so far unmentioned in this article are Natalie Atkins, Allison Callender, Ingrid Gall, Juliana Inniss, Judy Layne-Banks, Gail Pounder-Speede, Ricardo Skeete, Malin Straker, Alberta Whittle.

Each of these contributors has created a soundscape for a location at the Fairchild Street Bus Stand; the Nut Place on Suttle Street; Cathedral Gardens near the Central Bank; National Heroes' Square; Swan Street and Middle Street; Broad Street and

Liverpool Lane; Chamberlain Bridge; Jubilee Gardens at Cheapside; Rockers/Shippers' Alley; and Bolton Lane, respectively.

Together the whisperpost contributors have mapped Bridgetown's pulse along a route that we of today may walk. Copies of a whisperpost map, that shows the locations of the eighteen stops and provides some background on the project, are available on the internet at the whisperpost site, and from the National Art Gallery Committee on 228-7523. You can also contact nage1998@yahoo.com, or the Barbados Museum and Historical Society on 427-0201, for more information.

The soundscapes are available on CD from the National Art Gallery Committee, and as a web version by clicking on the sound icons on the map of Bridgetown at www.nage.bb/whisperpost. Click a node and listen to the soundpiece while viewing an image of the part of the city that inspired the work and reading about the person who created it.

The most serene time to walk the whisperpost route is on a Saturday evening or a Sunday morning - with a CD player in hand or connected to your ear. You prefer to blend the sights and sounds of the past and present? Then any day of the week is good. Find yourself a friend or a group and listen to the whispers of Bridgetown !!

SB

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