

## Contact: The Changing Bahamian Culture - II

**Ian Strachan, Head of the English Department at the College of The Bahamas, playwright and cultural activist was a recent guest on Contact. Contact is aired Wednesday evenings on Love 97 and is hosted by Mike Smith.**

Mike Smith: Mr. Strachan, why is Culture so important?

Mr. Ian Strachan: If we look at what institutions convey to a young person's sense of self and a sense of right and wrong, we know that there is the family, there is the church and there is the school, but it is my opinion that many young people today — the home isn't giving them the types of values and modeling the type of behaviour they need. The school bores them, and the church is cynical or become sort of anesthetized to that message. So they are turning to their peers and their peers are really getting their images and their ideals from the media. From music videos, music on the radio, movies that they watch, games that they play etc.

Mr. Smith: There is also a technology divide between the last generation and the generation coming up. Before young people would look to their parents to get guidance, now the parents have to look to young people to get guidance on how to function in this new technological era. They don't understand what My Space is, they don't understand for the most part or even know how to use the email to a large extent, some parents that is. So, there is this total lack of communication in this new world that the young people are operating in from those people who should be guiding them to an easier way into their adulthood.

Mr. Strachan: When you put it that way it seems even more insidious. That is the truth that there is this divide that young people are growing up with and so they are not intimidated by it. But, I guess the point I was getting to is that the media really is defining for the young people a sense of who they are. I don't think it is new, for instance, forty years ago when Sir Sidney Poitier would have played ("Guess Who's Coming To Dinner"), his images he portrayed in film — "In The Heat of The Night," "Black Boy Jungle," — he was very deliberate about the kinds of roles he took on and what they conveyed about people, what they conveyed about black men etc. Contrast that to today's Black male image and you see that whereas Sidney Poitier, even for his time may have been a worldwide image, a positive, competent, intelligent, articulate, strong black man. Now what we are getting is this image of a criminal who is unafraid, willing to die and to kill etc., that to me is a real serious inversion not that there aren't others out there trying to continue in the tradition of (Sir Poitier).

Mr. Smith: Can't they separate that fantasy image because that's really what it is? Puff Daddy is as much a Sunday School boy as any body else, but can they separate that bad-boy image from real life?

Mr. Strachan: No they are not separating it. And it is interesting to see men — and its so widespread — the idea of machismo that we sort of have and its how we are defining man generally and how everybody wants to wear this particular kind of shades, and walk this particular kind of way and you can't have anybody confront you and lose face on any issue. It is this kind of aggressive, adversarial, cold, and callous kind of notion of manhood, which has obviously really serious implications for the family and the society at large. And I think that is also a large part in what is going wrong in the country.

Mr. Smith: When you wrote "God's Angry Babies" which was very sympathetic to the illegal immigrant population, my information now is the significant amount of sympathy that was there before has been some what eroded by the new image of the new illegal migrant. Any impact from that group on the new Bahamian?

Mr. Strachan: I think that the history of Haitian migration in the Bahamas is a lot longer than the casual observer might imagine. Really, the connection stems back 100 years, what we have now though is a more pronounced separation in terms of living conditions between the Bahamian of the 21st Century and the Haitian peasant who is risking his life to come here, their living conditions haven't changed much in 50-70 years.

Mr. Smith: But there is also a new Haitian.

Mr. Strachan: I think he is a new Bahamian. That's my view.

Mr. Smith: Point taken.

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Mr. Strachan: If you study migration &#8211; if you look at migration and to countries and how it works, chances are if people are coming in who are very poor, to meet the needs of an economy from the bottom, they&#8217;re going to come in and they are not going to assimilate always very well and neither are they very welcomed. So that&#8217;s going to create a certain disenchantment and alienation and you see them acting out against authority and I think that its safe to say that a large number of young men who come in a society where their parents are hated because of their origin, something which they cannot really control, and they face&#8230;

Mr. Smith: Is hated? &#8230;

Mr. Strachan: Hate is a strong word, its complex, but lets just say that its not very prestigious or honourable to be of Haitian parentage. And you are coming in and you are poor and you are seeing a society which is very affluent, and maybe there are language barriers to your learning, which sets you back from the very beginning &#8211; a disadvantage in that way &#8211; and of course you may not have the full rights of citizenship even though you might have been born here, which creates other disadvantages, you can pretty much predict certain kinds of antiestablishment behaviour that will happen. Given that, I don&#8217;t like to see the immigrant or the children of immigrant population being scapegoated because I think that the issue of how we define manhood and how the average Bahamian male his sense of responsibility, his attitude towards hard work and honesty etc. is problematic even if you remove the immigrant population from the equation.

Mr. Smith: No question about that. This is the ending of the Junkanoo Season, and I know that&#8217;s one of your favourite topics, I just want to get your impressions as to what is happening relative to Junkanoo and the arts now as we move at this particular point in time?

Mr. Strachan: Obviously I&#8217;ve made my share of enemies over the last couple of years &#8211; speaking about Junkanoo. I just find it frustrating &#8211; I am not a Junkanoo leader, I&#8217;ve really been a spectator for most of my life, but I still feel that the spectator and the general public owns it just as much as the people who are on the street performing, and I think that gets lost. I am offended by the fences on Bay Street, I am offended by the bleachers on Bay Street to a degree.

Mr. Smith: We are in agreement there.

Mr. Strachan: And I just don&#8217;t understand why we are persisting with it. I am frustrated by what seems to be the increase willingness to cancel and postpone Junkanoo. I do not remember this happening in the 80s and 90s to this degree as it has happened in the last five to six years &#8211; I don&#8217;t know how to explain that. I still maintain that Junkanoo is a beautiful and wonderful form of expression. Is getting attention - corporate attention, government attention &#8211; in terms of support and sponsorship to the detriment of other forms of artistic expression? Not that we are not to support Junkanoo and finance and back it, but we need to support other forms just as much, and it goes back to how we started this conversation &#8211; about identity formation, about the media, about abrogating responsibility to use these institutions to shape identity. Junkanoo in its present form will not serve all the purposes that we need our arts and culture to serve in the national life, it can&#8217;t, it can do more, but it will never be able to do everything that films, music, television programming can do &#8211; it just can&#8217;t.