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Music Icon Jamesie Brewster Dies

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Music icon James “Jamesie” Brewster, who was born in 1929 on St. Croix, was mourned Monday as news of his death reached across the territory.

“Jamesie’s quelbe music is synonymous with Virgin Islands culture,” Gov. John deJongh said. “He was truly a music giant from the Virgin Islands who mastered the music form that is today the official music of the Virgin Islands.”

He said Brewster was an ambassador for the Virgin Islands because he introduced quelbe music to the world on frequent trips to Denmark and through his recording of a pair of albums with a Danish band.

“But it was here at home that he was best known as he led the bands Jamesie and the Happy Seven and The All Stars,” deJongh said. “He made the fungi band, scratch band and quelbe music an integral component of our culture. I can vividly recall Jamesie’s lively stage performances over five decades of performing across the Virgin Islands, the Caribbean and beyond.”

Senate President Shawn-Michael Malone said Brewster recorded two albums in collaboration with a Danish band. He said he was known for his lively and humorous stage presence during his 50 years as a performer.

Malone said that in 2002, Brewster was honored at a Summit of Tradition Bearers for his lifetime contributions to the Virgin Islands’ musical heritage.

“We have lost a true musical giant and Virgin Islands culture bearer,” Malone said. “Quelbe is integral to our heritage as Virgin Islanders and Jamesie was integral in creating what we think of as the traditional quelbe sound. His music will continue to be played and recognized for many generations.”

Sen. Alicia “Chucky” Hansen said the Happy Seven was one of the most popular bands in the Virgin Islands and is remembered for great songs such as “Ram Goat,” “Sardine Pan,” “Wash Yo Tail Light” and many others.

Brewster was the subject of a 70-minute 2006 documentary by St. John filmmaker Andrea Leland. Called "The Jamesie Project," it followed him performing in both the United States and Europe.

"He doesn't compromise his music. He plays old-time scratch music," Leland said in a 2006 Source interview.

She could not be reached Monday for comment.

According to a website about the project, when Brewster was young, his father allowed him to play percussion but not guitar. Wanting to prove his father wrong, he made a guitar out of a sardine can and a piece of lumber. With a hand-carved keyboard and key-head and strings made out of twine from an old sack of flour, this guitar has become his signature instrument.

Over the years Brewster developed a unique style of playing and performing. He developed his style by taking part in the festivities at Christmas on St. Croix. Scratch bands would stop at house yards one by one on their way around town, serenading as they went. This type of performance provided the musicians an opportunity to show off their musical, oral and theatrical gifts.

