

TiCorn -a voice from Haiti

The Haitian singer-songwriter TiCorn - Cornelia Schütt

TiCorn

Whenever, in the course of my life, I introduced myself as a Haitian singer-songwriter, I met at first with incredulous looks. The colour of my skin did not fit the image of a singer from the Caribbean island of Haiti. But to convince, I just needed to grab my guitar and sing some Creole songs, and this is exactly what I have loved to do all my life, at all kinds of occasions and in many different countries.



Haiti - home

There was nothing in my home surroundings that seemed particularly motivating for me to learn an instrument to accompany my singing. The only instrument there was an old, termite-infested accordion that nobody knew how to play. But in Haiti, the island where I grew up, music is present everywhere. In the hot tropical nights you hear the sound of the voodoo drums from the mountains, the work in the fields is accompanied by the rhythmic songs of the peasants, the street vendors praise their wares singing, all work seems easier to accomplish and even the terrible poverty easier to bear with music.

Parents - the foundation

My German parents both grew up in Berlin. My father, Carl Otto Schuett, came to Cap Haitian at the age of 18 to join the family trading-business, established there already since 1832. During World War II he was interned in a camp in the USA and at the end of the war sent on to Germany. There he married my mother and soon after took her with him back to Haiti. The new environment must have been quite a challenge for my timid, educated mother (an architect), but she felt fulfilled in her role as a mother and greatly enjoyed helping her husband build up a coffee-farm. She

loved the simple pioneer-life and the beauty of tropical nature.

Young years - the inspiration

I am the youngest of four siblings. My brother and two sisters still live in Haiti today. My parents wanted us to have a German language education, so we were taught at home by our mother. In contrast to my sisters, this was no easy matter where I was concerned. Up until the age of six I hardly spoke any German, my language was Creole (a mix of French, African and Spanish). My mother had answers to all our questions. She quoted poetry, knew much about history and was also interested in science. When we children got ill, she first asked our cook to make some bitter medicinal herb-tea. When I had mumps a sheepskin was wrapped around my throat and chicken pox had me floating in some purple bath water. And when that was not enough, she got out her big book "doctor in the tropics" and we figured out together what might be wrong. Instead of learning to read and write, I preferred to take care of our animals. Rabbits had to be fed, the parrot wanted to come to the swimming pool with us, where the turtle was already waiting for salad, some cute chicken had to be saved from the cooking pot and then there were all the tropical fruit ripening in our big wild garden just waiting to be plucked by me ... I was a very busy child that simply had too little time for lessons. My mother gave up and just tried to teach me the essentials: reading, writing and basic math. She trusted that, with my vitality and willpower, somehow I would manage to make my way in life. My dearest animal-companion was a small black stallion. Karl May novels the only books I looked into from time to time. But their old fashioned Gothic font discouraged me already after a few pages. Instead of reading I preferred to play with the children in the neighborhood. My parents were not worried when we roamed around there. We were protected and welcomed by all, always receiving a little taste of whatever food was just being prepared. Inside the huts it was dark and cool, the air smelling of straw and damp earth. Then back at our house we would paint, sew or build something, using all possible materials.



Traveling - the longing for far away

Numerous voyages also marked my childhood. I crossed the ocean for the first time when I was two months old. My mother had been concerned about complications and had gone to Germany for giving birth to me. My father was also port-agent for the HAPAG shipping-company, and so we would travel to Europe by freighter almost every summer for three months. The smell of tar was imprinted in my memory, and in the different Caribbean ports I loved to watch the coffee, cocoa or sugar bags being hauled into the hatches. The endless sea and the star-covered nights gave me a feeling of spaciousness. The freighters usually had several passenger cabins, and the captain and crew were happy about youthful company. They played shuffleboard on deck with us and sometimes I was even

allowed to do the steering on the bridge. My mother read Agatha Christie novels to us in English and we waited impatiently as she translated sentence after sentence. An interesting way to pick up the language. At every crossing I also developed a secret crush for some young dashing white-clad officer, which made the three week passage even more exiting.

Germany - the new land

In Germany I would be right away put into school as a guest-student for the length of our stay. My grades in spelling were disastrous. But as "the little one that comes out of the bush", I was treated with indulgence by the teachers. The other students enjoyed my exotic stories about the boas living in our attic, tarantulas walking through the living room and scorpions having to be shaken out of shoes. But it was only after I was back in Haiti that I really felt "at home" and happiest.

Anna - the music

My musical world was not so much the German songs learned from my mother as the powerfully expressive folksongs of Haiti. Anna, our Haitian nanny, would carry me around as a baby for hours, singing and dancing with me in her arms. She called me "TiCorn" (petite Cornelia), a name that soon was used by all and that I have kept as my artist-name. She was a proud woman who commanded respect with her natural authority and knew how to handle me, an important person in my life. She was also a fantastic storyteller. Sitting on the dark porch at night, fascinated, I let myself be transported into her creepy world of ghosts and spirits. She told of people who, at night, get out of their skins, which they roll up and hide. Then, if you find such a skin, you must rub the inner side with hot pepper, so that the "lougrou" will betray himself when he wants to slip back into it. Every night I would look under my bed and check that none of her frightening story-creatures was hiding there. One day, after having long pestered her to do so, Anna took me with her to a voodoo ceremony on the near mountain in honor of the "Marassa" twin-spirits. The drums took up a more and more intensive rhythm, and suddenly I saw how her face became frozen and her whole body jerked. She had fallen into trance. When we walked down the mountain, I sensed that she felt somehow embarrassed about it, and I talked with nobody about that experience.

Politics - the threatening

My childhood time in Haiti was overshadowed by the Duvalier dictatorship. Papa Doc and his Tonton Macoutes filled all the levels of the population with fear. At the frequent road controls and in other sensitive situations we felt at least slightly protected by my father's status as "honorary consul of Germany". In spite of our parents' attempt to shield us children from feeling unsafe, we still sensed the danger.



Singing - the dream

When I was ten years old I asked for a guitar as a present. Guitar-lessons followed. My teacher was very patient and managed to encourage me enough, so that hurting fingers and the beginners' difficulties, of doing something different with each hand and of singing at the same time, were successfully overcome. Fortunately we had a record-player at home and a number of albums we listened to over and over: so I sang along full blast with Edith Piaf's "allez venez milord", imitated Dalida's special accent, repeated softly Françoise Hardy's popular hit "tous les garçons et les filles de mon âge", crooned "catch a falling star" with Pat Boone and dreamed of becoming a star myself sometime. I sang some false notes, but with persistence I trained my voice. Another directly motivating factor for my musical persistence was the existence of a group of boys that were already singing and playing their guitars quite well. At the end of the day they gathered at the seaside promenade and hit the chords. Their role models were mainly the French chansonniers that were played on the local radio stations. I felt shy amidst this group of young people from the Cap Haitian "society". Since I had not learned to speak proper French I felt like an outsider. One reason more for music to become a means to express my emotions.

Boarding school - the nostalgia

At fourteen I was sent to boarding school in Germany for further education. I really liked the "Odenwaldschule", just as my sisters had, before me. Art and music were given much importance and I enjoyed the choir repetitions. Voice training and breathing techniques came easily, but reading music from the page was something I never quite mastered. At school festivities I sang the songs of Haiti, full of nostalgia. We usually went back home there for extended summer vacations. I used these times to collect new songs or to compose some by myself. I also took dancing and drumming lessons to get the various voodoo rhythms better "into my blood".

Hotel-apprenticeship - the sideline

After finishing high school (Abitur) I moved to Heidelberg to learn hotel-management. Even though I saw music as my future, I still considered it prudent to have training in a profession that would allow me to work anywhere in the world. The three year apprenticeship taught me a lot of practical know-how, that later proved most useful in other fields.

Stage experience - the communication

The next few years were spent in Munich, where a time of informal but intense music-apprenticeship began for me. I performed almost daily at the "Schwabinger Brett!", a popular small artist stage. The experienced French Chansonnier Robert Frank Jacobi, who was directing this setup, gave me a lot of valuable suggestions, especially concerning the interaction with your audience. Apart from my Haitian repertoire, I also sang songs from Harry Belafonte, Joan Baez, Edith Piaf and others.

Production - the making-it-real

After the (for me) painful separation from my longtime boyfriend, I completely took refuge in my music and, with the help of a producer in Hamburg, made my first LP album, simply called "Haiti". My sister Laetitia designed an attractive cover for it in the style of naïve painting. With the appearance of this LP in 1979, I immediately became well known in Haiti as a singer. Even before I got to Port-au-Prince to present my LP personally at the radio stations, some of the songs had become "hits". I had the good fortune to meet a musician who introduced me to the music-scene of the capital. Henry Celestin had had his own



band, "les Difficiles", and knew all the important people. He took care of arranging interviews, checking the technical stage set-up, negotiating my artist fees, and he was also an excellent photographer. To organize concerts in Haiti is an adventure: up until the last moment you never know whether you will have electricity, whether your musicians will arrive on time for the show, whether the weather will spare you sudden disrupting rain-showers, whether "false" entrance tickets have maybe been sold. My guitar was my only anchor then, and holding her firmly in my grip I always felt safe. On stage I had my own personal style from the beginning. I usually accompanied myself on the guitar, sang almost exclusively in Creole, dressed in colorful folklore costumes and barefoot. Many Haitians, who had only heard my songs on the radio, were at first surprised to see a white woman on the concert stage. But I felt fully adopted by the audience. The imagery of my songs appealed to them, spoke of their problems, expressed their feelings. I also loved to work with different Haitian composers, like Marcel O. Gilles or the poet Jean Claude Martineau, who both wrote songs for me to sing and with whom I have been linked in long-

lasting friendship. Over the years several other albums were produced, one of them sponsored by the German "Welthungerhilfe".

Video and movie - the face

At the end of a concert in Port-au-Prince, the Haitian script writer Rassoul Labuchin came towards me all excited and said "you are my "Simbi". When I impersonated the singing sea-goddess Simbi in his movie "Anita" (produced by a Dutch team) my voice was given a greater Haitian public. One year later "Tele National" made a series of music videos with me that were regularly being rerun on Haitian Television.

Sailing - the adventure

On the island Antigua in 1980 I met my future husband Jean Louis Richard, a French professional diver who lived on his sailing-yacht. We spent five years sailing together all through the Caribbean. This also gave me the opportunity to visit radio and TV stations on the French Antilles and present my music there. With the boat we reached even the most inaccessible coastal areas. It was a dream of a time, that I love to remember. Again and again we returned to stay in Haiti for a while. But the insecure political situation made living and working there difficult. With regret in our hearts, we decided to sell the yacht and move back to Europe.

Europe - the new orientation

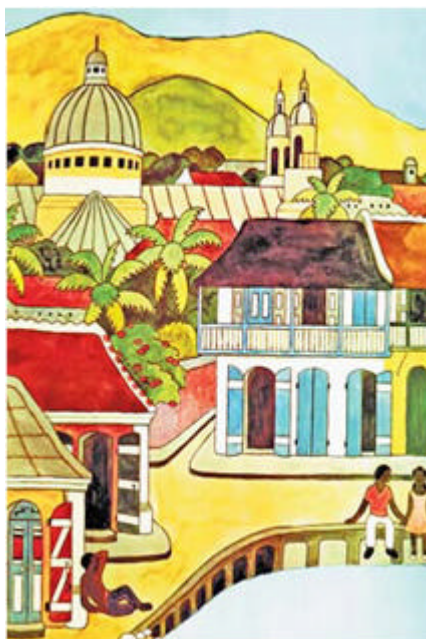
In Europe we started a new period in our lives that I will only briefly sum up. It was important to both of us to maintain our freedom of movement. We lived part-time in Spain or France, with our main residence in Hamburg. I went to trade-fairs where I presented Haitian artistic handicrafts and a collection of silk-jackets that I had designed and given to produce in Port-au-Prince. My husband worked as sales-broker for several companies in the organic food business. On a trade-fair in the USA we made the acquaintance of the traditional Japanese incense manufacture "Shoyeido" and I began to introduce their products to the German market. Step by step and with the help of a dedicated team I succeeded to gain the main distribution of Shoyeido for Europe.

Haiti - the chaos

Family, music, the sea and sun never ceased to draw us towards the South. I continued to visit Haiti regularly, but when I was there I preferred to keep away from the media. The dictatorship of Baby Doc had fallen in 1986, but this was followed by years of political chaos and a trade-embargo that plunged the already poor country into even worse misery. In what concerns music, the popular Compas dance rhythm still predominated, but Root-music, Rap and Hip hop had also been introduced and the texts were often politically highly charged. The time was not propitious for me to plan any concerts in Haiti. Because of the insecurity many people also avoided going out in the evening. Only in the USA did I give some concerts for the Haitian Diaspora during this period. A highlight for me was the joint performance with the legendary Haitian folksinger Martha Jean Claude (then 80) at the Miami Arena.

Songs - the message

It pleased me that always again opportunities presented themselves for me to perform in Europe. Such as in France, where I sang on several occasions for an organization that facilitated the adoption of Haitian children and that organized a great yearly meeting. It was a moving experience to reprovide these hundreds of kids (who were already forgetting their Creole) with a link to their homeland through music. In 1996 the World Prayer Day of Women was dedicated to Haiti. At a special church



service in Berlin, that was broadcast on German TV, I sang again in Creole, and the songs were later published on a benefit-cassette.

Today - the revival

For quite a while already I had been toying with the idea of having all my recorded songs remastered and brought up to the latest technical standard for sale through downloads from the internet. Together with Brahm Heidl, an experienced all-round musician, I produced a new CD in 2009 that I called "Cap Haitien," after my hometown. In June 2009 I was able to display the complete remastered CD collection at a concert in Miami's "Performing Art Theater". Accompanied by the band leader Robert Martino, I let the audience hear again the favorite old songs. Many still remembered me from their childhood and I felt a deep connection with them. For Easter 2010 a concert is planned in Haiti. Another project that I had long been working on was also realized in 2009: an album with Haitian songs that I had adapted in English. This CD "Labadee Bay" came out in September. The beautiful bay of Labadie in the north of Haiti is regularly being visited by the Cruise-ships of RCCL. In December I sang there at the inauguration cruise of their newest addition to the fleet, the "Oasis of the Seas".

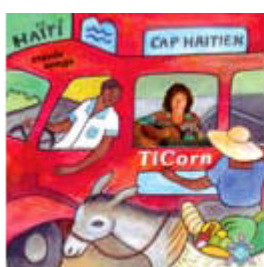
Future - the continuation

A songbook of my songs in Creole is in progress and waiting for sponsors' help with the publishing expenses. Some newly composed songs in German are already recorded and also waiting for publication. I feel excited! In the coming years I would like to perform more often in Europe. I enjoy taking people along on a musical trip to my beloved Haiti even in a smaller cultural setting, to tell them something about this country of many facets and its special magic. For my world is the song that overcomes all barriers.

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Facets of Haitian Music

The rich variety of Haitian music is due to the turbulent history of this country. The island, originally inhabited by Taino indians and discovered by Columbus in 1492, was dominated for centuries by the Spanish and later French colonial power until the slaves, imported from Africa in great numbers, revolted, fought and attained their freedom and national independence in 1804. After that Haiti was long isolated from the rest of the world, with the effect that the traditions of Africa were kept alive with more authenticity than on any other Caribbean island. Since the slaves came from different regions of Africa, their new home developed into a musical melting-pot, enriched also by elements of European culture. Thus the "Meringue" rhythm, so characteristic for Haiti, originated out of the French dance "la Bergerette". The poetry of the songs expresses all the special charm of the melodious and colourful Creole language, a mix of old French, Spanish, African and Amer-indian.



The CDs with autographed card can also be ordered directly from www.TiCorn.com

CD-1 Haiti,
CD-2 Cevolan,
CD-3 Ballades Caraibes,
CD-4 Cap Haitien,

CD-5 In Labadee Bay.



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