

BEACH



(COW) BOYS



Strumming banjos, line dancing, bolo ties – no, this isn't the American South, it's miniscule St Lucia, where the country and western lifestyle has a surprising foothold thanks to a local music scene that puts a Caribbean spin on the Wild Wild West. **Zoey Goto** meets the island's buckaroos

PHOTOGRAPHS: ARON KLEIN

IT'S A DUSKY EVENING AND THE HOEDOWN IS IN FULL SWING.

Stetson-wearing men perch on weathered bar stools; onstage, the main act swaggers out, dressed in tattered cowboy boots and a 10-gallon hat, his oversized belt buckle glinting under the lights. As the crowd whoop and holler their appreciation, Shervon Sealy cradles the microphone and, in a rich Southern drawl, belts out the opening bars of *9 to 5*, by Dolly Parton. The crowd begins to two-step along to the melody, serenaded by the twang of the steel guitar. It feels like a scene out of a Nashville honky-tonk. But look closer: the stage is framed by palm trees swaying in the warm breeze and the horizon is fringed by blue-green mountains. Because we're not in the beating heart of Tennessee but instead on the tropical island of St Lucia – a place where the country and western lifestyle has found an unlikely group of boot-stomping stewards.

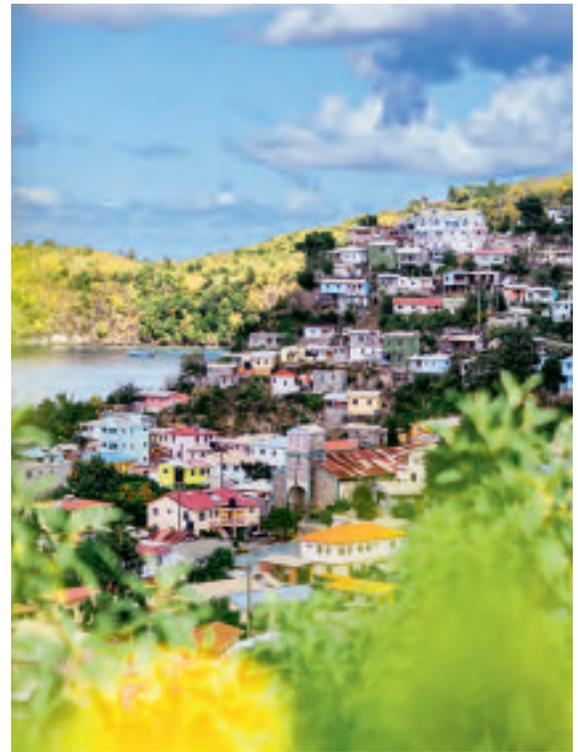
Country and western music first won the hearts of St Lucians back in the 1940s, when the US set ➤



Previous page: St Lucian country and western favourite Shervon Sealy at Gros Islet beach
 This page, from above: The LM Stone Family Band; Soufrière port



This picture and right: Linus Modeste with his children. Together they form the LM Stone Family Band



up two military bases on the island, filling the radio with the sound of banjo ballads and down-home ditties. The airbases are long gone, but the culture of the Wild West continues to strike a chord among St Lucians. Today, shops still play Hank Williams over the speakers, kids learn how to hot-step to Johnny Cash and the local airwaves are dominated by back-to-back country hits on Sundays.

“The [country and western] scene is bigger than ever, as more young people grow interested,” says local singing cowboy Linus Modeste as we walk through the port town of Soufrière, with its rainbow of painted wooden cottages. Local enthusiasm is so strong that the musician has overheard St Lucians say they’d rather live without food than country music.

While St Lucia’s love affair with country music isn’t entirely unique within the Caribbean islands – the legendary Jamaican musician Bob Marley is said to have found

song-writing inspiration in classic country tunes – it’s celebrated here with unmistakable devotion. According to Linus, who heads up the LM Stone Family Band backed by his four children, country ▶



music resonates on the island as there's a synergy between America's Old West and St Lucia. "Life could also be hard here and when there was free time, people wanted to make music. The lyrics of the songs, about cheating hearts and family secrets, that's the life we were living. And there's also similarities with our traditional folk music, kwadril, which uses fiddle and acoustic guitar."

Following a childhood where Charley Pride and Tammy Wynette were played on heavy rotation, Linus became a country star in his own right when he won a prestigious Nashville talent competition and went on to tour the globe. "There were about 50 contestants and I was the only Black guy. I came out singing George Jones and won hands down!" he says, laughing, as we pass street vendors grilling fish plucked straight from the sea.

While Linus favours the older classic country tunes from the 1950s-1970s era, there's a new breed of young bucks who are putting a very contemporary spin on country and western. To find out more, I head across the island - cutting through rainforests buzzing with hummingbirds and parrots - to meet Zuwena Joseph.

"US DANCE HAS A LOT OF SWING BUT OUR WESTERN DANCING IS VERY SLOW AND INTIMATE, SIMILAR TO ST LUCIAN KWADRIL"

Having grown up listening to reggae in a Rastafarian household, Zuwena finally found her calling as a rhinestone cowgirl when she started working as a country dancer at the island's resorts. As we walk along the palm-fringed beach, waves gently lapping the shore, she's keen to point out the subtle differences between American line dancing and St Lucia's version. "US dance has a lot of swing but our western dancing is very slow and intimate. It's similar to St Lucian kwadril dancing, where you hold your partner really close," she says, holding an imaginary partner near to her plaid shirt.

Zuwena is part of a younger generation of islanders who want their country music served with a generous helping of Caribbean flavour. "I still like the lyrics of songs to have a Southern twang, but nowadays the driving beat is very Caribbean," she says as we

Scene stalwarts Zuwena Joseph and Gillie at a bar in the fishing village of Laborie





TAKE ME HOME, CARIBBEAN ROADS

WHERE TO CATCH ST LUCIA'S RHINESTONE COWBOYS



Coconut Bay Resort

Catch Shervon Sealy working his magic onstage every Tuesday night, accompanied by a high-stepping, line dancing entourage at this all-inclusive resort.

Twist Bar

This local hangout is the place to hear the island's leading country and western DJs doing their thing, plus the occasional live act, while also filling up on stewed pork and grilled shrimp fresh from the BBQ. Look out for epic barn dance nights.



Anse Chastanet Resort

This luxury beachfront resort is all about romance, with hillside cottages, exceptional scuba diving and candlelit al fresco meals. Guests staying on a Monday night will be serenaded by the LM Stone Family Band playing a lovelorn set.

Pandarosa Bar

If you fancy trying your hand at a few Loretta Lynn numbers, head to this rustic karaoke spot, where on Saturdays you'll find an open mic night. Take a perch on a plastic chair in the canary yellow and blue courtyard and let the good times roll.



have an official name yet and it's not something they sell or promote. But you'll recognise it as soon as you hear it in the bars and it sounds fantastic."

To discover the next big name in St Lucian country music, you'll need to head to one of the popular karaoke bars that speck the island, Shervon suggests. "That's how country fans here connect as a community. You'll find all ages singing country music and it creates a really gentle atmosphere where everyone is welcome," says the musician. Shervon plans to open his own western wear clothing shop on St Lucia soon, catering to

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customers who want to add a little local colour (and lots of sequins) to their get-ups.

I hop back in the car and take to the country roads once again, passing signposts for hot springs and the world's only drive-in volcano. I notice handwritten flyers tacked to lampposts advertising country and western dance nights. I recall something Linus said during our chat earlier: "St Lucians may flirt with other music, but for us country music always feels like coming home."

■ For more information visit stlucia.org

✈ Fly to St Lucia



pass a colourful rum shack with a jerk pit smoking at the front. "When you're out in the evening in St Lucia, you'll notice that DJs in bars and at parties will play a country song but with a calypso-style soca or dance hall beat behind it. It's very fluid as there's not a club or DJ that specialises in this style of music, but keep an ear out and you'll hear it."

This musical mash-up is also on singer Shervon Sealy's radar, he tells me as he steps off stage following a thunderous encore of Garth Brooks' *Friends in Low Places*. "The local DJs are being creative and playful, mixing country and Caribbean styles together. This style of music doesn't even

From top: Shervon Sealy at Ma Blanc's and the Irie Bar, both in Gros Islet; the LM Stone Band on the pier at Sugar Beach, A Viceroy Resort



ADDITIONAL PHOTOS: COCONUT BAY BEACH RESORT & SPA, ANSE CHASTANET