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***20th Anniversary of a Haitian Ritual in New York
Marked by PBS Documentary, Festival
Performances, and a Somber Reunion.***

New York, NY (May 26th, 2010) This July, the underground Haitian “Rara” band **DJARARA** (pronounced JAH-rah-rah) will celebrate the 20th anniversary of the essential ritual in the Haitian-American community. Every Sunday night of the summer since 1990, crowds have gathered in south-west corner of Prospect Park for a ground-shaking procession that’s a mysterious combination of grassroots carnival, social protest, and Vodou ritual.

It’s a tradition that, despite its considerable noise, is little known to outsiders. Rara itself is a tradition cloaked in mystery and subterfuge. No two scholars or musicians can agree on its origins, and people often describe its carnival-like exterior being a foil to hide either Vodou practice or social protest organizing from persecution. It’s also connected to funeral traditions – and is in fact a direct Creole cousin to New Orleans’s “Jazz Funeral” and “Second Line” music.

New York’s Rara tradition is no less complex and nuanced. The first New York Rara burst onto the scene in the ebullient days following the first election of Jean Bertrand Aristide, when a group of young musicians directly heeded Aristide’s call to embrace Haitian peasant culture. After Aristide was overthrown by a US-backed coup in 1991, the band became deeply politicized, playing in the pro-Aristide protests outside the UN, and later in the larger “Haitian-American Civil Rights” marches against AIDS discrimination and police brutality against at Haitian immigrants. In the past decade, the band reinvented itself again as a tool for engaging the maturing diaspora, promoting the vital link to the homeland for Haitian-American youth. They recently incorporated as a non-profit, and provide free workshops for teens and throw Holiday parties for children. They’ve also practiced incessantly, and become a tight, virtuosic ensemble. In recent years, crowds of up to 10,000 fans charge through the darkness of the park in an unparalleled musical stampede.

But following the January earthquake in Haiti, the anniversary year bring with it very mixed emotions. On one hand, the bands story will finally reach a broader audience with a PBS documentary titled “**The Other Side of the Water**” is scheduled for broadcast this fall. The film, produced over a 7 year period by filmmakers Jeremy Robins and Magali Damas, explores the origins of the music and chronicles DJARARA’s dramatic story. The band has also finally had some success in mainstream “World Music” scene – they’re scheduled for big-stage events at Lincoln Center Out of Doors and Celebrate Brooklyn!. And with the recent popularity of the HBO series “Treme,” many Americans suddenly are starting to understand and become interested in Creole music traditions.

Yet the progress is hard to enjoy given the losses in the recent months. Nearly all band members lost family and friends in the earthquake – one musician lost ten members of his immediate family. The band played dozens of benefit concerts, and has been helping rara musicians in Haiti come up to find temporary work in New York. However, they will go forward with their anniversary plans – gathering the original members for a reunion performance on July 4th – which is now planned to be a memorial for those lost in the earthquake. And if anything, the band sees their work of preserving and celebrating Haitian culture as being all the more important.

As band founded Yves Bien-Aime puts it “Rara started as a funeral music. This year, with all we’ve lost, its like a funeral for our whole nation.”

For more information about the band, the documentary, and to see clips of performances, visit www.othersideofthewater.org or send an email to: othersideofthewater@gmail.com or call 917-501-1502

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