

The Song of Statia

In June 1996, Dutch photographer and social scientist Jeanette Bos landed in Statia and it was love at first sight. Two years later, she returned with 300 rolls of film, determined to make a book about the island in three months. But life had other plans for her: it delayed her project and made her come back year after year for six weeks, up to six months at a time. People on Statia kindly took her in; they taught her how to sing Statia songs and play the island's traditional music. She even became a member of Statia's only remaining string band, Killy Killy Band, and joined a group of women singing hymns with mourning families during wakes before a funeral. Statia became her home, and its people became her family.



the island's beautiful nature."

The Daily Herald spoke with Jeanette about her book.

What made you decide to come to Statia the first time? My first big photography project (a book about the lives of Antillean people in the Netherlands and their backgrounds on the islands) took me to Saint Martin and I dearly wanted to see the small islands too. I had read about Mont Scenery and about the Quill and seen some impressive photos and videos of the landscapes. So I took a small roundtrip to these two islands. I found Saba very beautiful, but it was Statia that I fell head over heels in love with.

What made you fall in love with the island? The people! It was a Friday afternoon and lots of people were sitting around in town on the low walls that still were there. I was instantly captured by the friendliness

I met that afternoon and by the atmosphere in town. So in 1998, I came back to make a book about Statia and again I was enchanted by the many stories I heard, the music, the families that took me in, the life I was allowed to join.

What do you think makes Statia so special?

The real beauty of Statia and what sets it apart from any other place I've ever been is the way its people live with each other, the intimacy of this one-big-family. Statia is a tiny island, surrounded by wide waters. Until some 30-40 years ago, it was quite isolated and had a small number of inhabitants. Everybody knew everybody and grew up together nearly at the same street corner, so to speak. The tremendous familiarity this generated has permeated every aspect of social life, I feel. When I came here for the first time in 1996, it was very strong and it still is there among the traditional Statian families – the families that have been living in Statia for centuries.

You have been here now on and off for 20 years. Have you seen big changes in these years?

Oh yeah! A lot of changes! Do we call it modernisation? Globalisation? In 1996, Statia just reached the number of 2,000 inhabitants of which traditional Statian families were the big majority. During those 20 years, the population has nearly doubled, hardly from natural increase but mainly from immigration. The terminal has expanded, the medical school came and went with hundreds of students, many people came in from the Dominican Republic, and then there was 10-10-10. Nowadays, about 45% of the people in Statia were born in the former Netherlands Antilles and Aruba. This category includes those who were born in Statia, but also all immigrants from the other Dutch Antillean islands. So the traditional population of Statia, the families who have been living here for centuries and who in 1995 still were by far the largest group, now account for significantly less than 45%. Of course, that has a lot of impact on social life. It's easy to be nostalgic about what got lost, but you can't stop history. And these changes bring many good things too, when you think of health care, housing, education, income, etc. Life has become better for most in Statia, I think. However, I sure am not the only one to miss the fife and the baho, the old time Christmas Nights and Nigger Business, to mention just a few things.

Every photo has its story. Can you perhaps mention one or two?

I love the colour image of Riëna Arnaud in her blue jacket raising her hands against a fiery red background, sitting next to banjo player George Duinker and singing to the band in 1999. She was not a member of the band then, just enjoying herself on the steps of the Old Gin House together with a big Statian crowd like every week in those days. Statia had a lot of traditional live music back then. And look at the image of Steve Spanner with his small red jeep, and in his red shirt supporting his sister's political party, cutting grass in 2000. There was a drought, cattle died everywhere, the goats had eaten the island

The book is a wonderful testimony and record of traditional community life on Statia. But are you hoping it

can also mean something for the future? Is there a message you are trying to get out with your book?

At least it is meant to preserve memories of what I feel is so valuable: the old time Statia, a culture and a way of life that are disappearing quickly. And it's not only a culture dwindling. We all are products of our cultures, so when a way of life vanishes, certain types of people disappear too. The book is meant to be a tribute to those people, to traditional families of Statia. Like I said, I'm not nostalgic; but I wanted to preserve visual memories of what I feel is so valuable. Do I have a message? Well, I sure want to spread some of my love for the people of Statia. Outsiders who look at Statia always look either at nature and wildlife or at its famous history. Books about the island typically deal with these topics too; but I hope I can open some eyes to the beauty of Statia's people and their lives.

How many photos did you have to choose from when you started on the book?

Oh, thousands and thousands! I've been photographing in Statia for nearly 20 years, so there was an ocean of images; but what I needed were the ones that stood out and were more telling than others about life in Statia, that portrayed Statia's people best.

How did you make your selection?

We have some excellent photo-book designers in The Netherlands, who work for the best photographers worldwide. One of them, Sybren Kuiper, designed STATIA SONG. I first brought down my ocean of images to a rather wide selection of 175, choosing all the images that I thought were good enough for the book. This gave the book designer a good set of images to make his final selection of images that would work well together, have a good flow, and tell the story.

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bare and the farmers were allowed to cut grass for their animals in the early morning at the airport – the only fenced place where the goats couldn't come and grass could grow tall. One of my absolute favs is the portrait of three very special ladies in the Methodist Church: Mrs. Elsie Thomson with Mrs. Eva Timber and Mrs. Cynthia Thompson. And the image with the gesturing young lady represents some of Statia's changes – here Statia's youth is mingling cheerfully with new inhabitants and visitors from Holland, playing domino and other games on Bas van de Horde's back porch.

happy to have the best of both worlds in this book!

When can we see you on Statia again?

You don't notice it, but I'm back nearly every day! When I'm doing a chore that does not occupy my mind, usually in the kitchen, my mind drifts and I suddenly find myself in Statia, in Golden Rock or in town chatting with Statia people, or walking down Scrupon Road – beautiful moments from which I wake up all too quickly. But really coming back is another story, for when you don't have a driver's license; you need your feet in Statia. And a nasty foot injury is keeping me down since nearly two years now. Actually, I can't travel at all, not in Europe either. But as soon as the foot is healed, I'll be on a plane! I can't wait to be back here and join Statia life again!

What made you decide to go for black-and-white photography in favour of colour?

These series stem from different periods and were made with different cameras. The colour images were made on film in the years 1999 till 2004 and the black and whites were made with a digital camera in 2013-2014. Originally, I was a black and white photographer, but for Statia, I turned to colour, back in the 90s. Of course, I could have left the digital images in colour too, but that didn't work well. The types of colour images remained too different and didn't really match. Moreover, I had gone back to black and white in 2007 and it affects the way you see, so my later pictures worked much better in black and white too. All in all, I'm

STATIA SONG is now available in the Museum in Statia, and in Mazinga on the Bay. The price is US \$39.50. Although the book may soon be available at Philipsburg Jubilee Library, Statia Historical Society has informed WEEKender that it is not yet available in St. Maarten. "We can accommodate those interested in purchasing a copy. They can send an email to us."

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Now, after 20 years, the book is finally ready. STATIA SONG was published with 87 photographs – each spread over two pages, measuring a foot by a foot and a half. The images are in colour and in black and white. They are images of Statia's people and of the landscapes they live in. Bos wanted it to be "a strong and compelling portrait of the people of Statia and of

