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Celebrating Our Cultural Heritage

## Eusi Kwayana

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### CELEBRATING OUR CREATIVE PERSONALITIES

#### Eusi Kwayana

By Dr Vibert C. Cambridge

Eusi Kwayana - the librettist of Guyana's political opera or the political musician. When we begin to write objective political histories of Guyana, Eusi Kwayana will have to be given a central place. He has been at the epicentre of some of the most important moments in Guyana's post World War II political life. One image that is seared in our national consciousness is of him in a group photograph of the cabinet of the first government elected by universal adult suffrage in 1953. Here he is, a young minister, part of a dapper group, all clad in white sharkskin suits and white shoes. Other images are his fasting for racial peace during the turbulent 1960s, and more recently, his unequivocal call for the cessation of criminal violence in Buxton.

When an objective political history of Guyana is written, historians will have to consider the body of creative work produced by Eusi Kwayana, the poet, playwright, singer, and lyricist. He wrote the lyrics for the songs of the People's Progressive Party (Oh Fighting Men), the People's National Congress (The Battle Song), and the Working People's Alliance (People's Power). Eusi Kwayana grew up in Buxton, East Coast Demerara. In this village, music had other purposes beyond entertainment. Folk songs such as Makantani, Itanami, Timber Man, and Janey Gal are among his favourites. For him, these songs encapsulate history, give advice, and articulate aspirations. His engagement in the performing arts could be traced back to initiatives started by Rev. D.W.H. Pollard, a Congregational minister in Buxton, and the Diocesan Youth Movement. His contemporaries in Buxton's vibrant drama scene included Maude Gardner, G.S.L. Payne, Martin Stevenson, and Mrs. G.S.T. Hodge (nee Seaforth). It was during his membership of the Diocesan Youth Movement that he wrote his first play -The Prodigal Daughter.

His commitment to utilising music and drama to raise political consciousness and promote social change was further honed in the Demerara Youth Rally (DYR) on the East Coast of Demerara. Among Kwayana's colleagues in the DYR was the late Cecilene Baird, musician, scholar, and Minister of Education. Eusi Kwayana and Cecilene Baird collaborated on the production Christ the Messiah, which included original music. The play and lyrics were written by Kwayana, and the music was composed by Cecilene Baird who hailed from BV. The aim of the work was to demonstrate Christ's connection with the masses-a connection that had relevance to political struggles that were taking place in British Guiana during the mid and late 1950s. He also wrote the lyrics for The Song of the Demerara Youth Rally, the theme song for the movement.

Clearly, Kwayana's early works were oriented to mobilizing youth on the East Coast to be in the vanguard in Guyana's political future. The late 1940s to early 1950s was a period of active grassroots mobilisation in British Guiana, and music was an important tool in this process. The Demerara Youth Rally became the youth arm of the PPP on the East Coast. Drama and music were central elements in this process. In addition to local compositions, such as Kwayana's The Song of the Demerara Youth Rally, DYR used the songs of Paul Robeson. Robeson's songs had been brought to British Guiana by the Jagans when they returned in the late 1940s. Eusi Kwayana has recalled the popularity of Robeson's renditions of Go Down Moses, Deep River, and Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child among the working people who lived in the villages and

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estates of the East Coast.

The struggles that Robeson sang about resonated with the conditions of working people in Guyana. Robeson's aspirations were in harmony with those of the Guyanese working class at that time. Those were Cold War times, and the political song had central places in the political systems of the USA and the USSR. That immersion informed Kwayana's lyrics. If we look at the party songs as a body of work, we see a consistent narrative: mobilisation for independence, independence for Guyana, the celebration of human dignity, and resistance to domination. Consider the lyrics of the pre-independence PPP Party song- Oh Fighting Men: Oh fighting men! Oh fighting men! Give us the sign Oh fighting men! Now is our call for bravery We'll break the bonds of slavery. The mighty land Guyana we Shall make a land of liberty We're staying with the PPP To keep the red flag flying.

The PNC's Battle Song, originally written before independence, was revised for the first congress of the PNC after independence in 1966. Consider these lyrics: Out of ages of oppression Independent now we stand Newly born again, victorious Reigning masters of our land: On the peak of Mount Roraima Or beneath the raising sun; From the mark of Pointa Playa To where eastern currents run All were given liberty By the might of the PNC This song for the WPA reflects the changes that had taken place in Guyana in the post-independence era and was a call for remobilisation around another national project. Consider the lyrics of the penultimate and final verses of People's Power:

*Revolution on the way!  
And we are here to stay  
Let's join our hands and say,  
Together come what may  
Together Portuguese Chinese and Indian  
Together African And Amerindian  
Take the fight for freedom into every place  
Struggle for the freedom  
Of the human race  
Take the fight for freedom into every place  
Struggle for the freedom  
Of the human race  
For people's power  
And no Dictator  
For people's power  
And no Dictator*

Eusi Kwayana makes it clear that he is not a musical composer and recognises his debt to the melodies of the Anglican Hymnal and Socialist Europe. The music for the PPP and the WPA party songs are of European origin. The melody for the PPP's song is similar to the British Socialist Party's song and the Christmas Carol O Tannenbaum. The WPA's melody is the same as that used for the Italian Communist Party's song, "Avanti populi, Avanti populi, Bandera Rosa". The PNC's Party Battle Song is truly home grown as the music was composed by the distinguished Guyanese composer Valerie Rodway. So, there is so much more to Eusi Kwayana. The Sage of Buxton is indeed a Guyanese creative hero. His body of work makes the point that there is so much more to music than just entertainment. These realities must be examined when we begin the necessary task of writing objective histories of post World War II Guyana.

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