

GuyFolkFest.org

Celebrating Our Cultural Heritage

Ken Johnson

[Home Page](#)

[Search](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Home Page](#)

[About Us](#)

[Art By Guyanese](#)

[Awards 2011](#)

[Awards
Nominations](#)

[Come to My
KweKwe](#)

[Events Calendar](#)

[Family Fun Day
2011](#)

[Film Festival 2011](#)

[Performing Arts
Festival](#)

[GCA Newsletter](#)

[Guyana Folk
Magazine](#)

[GCA Supports
Artistes](#)

[Heritage Summer
Camp](#)

[Literary Hang 2011](#)

[Merchandise](#)

[Mother's Day 2011](#)

[Past Events](#)

[Press Releases](#)

[Sponsors](#)

[Storytelling Night](#)

[Symposium 2011](#)

[Tributes](#)

CELEBRATING OUR CREATIVE PERSONALITIES

KEN SNAKEHIPS JOHNSON

by Vibert C. Cambridge

Guyanese creative artistes have played and continue to play important ambassadorial roles on the international stage. Their world class works have helped to keep the flag of Guyana flying high and undermined the notion that Guyanese were unsophisticated mudheads. An outstanding example of that tradition is Kenrick Reginald Hymans Johnson.

Kenrick Reginald Hymans Johnson was born in Georgetown, British Guiana on September 10, 1914. He attended Queens College and grew up at a time when the colony had a vibrant music scene. Radio, which had established a presence as early as 1915, was making American popular music accessible. By 1918, students were sitting the examinations of the Royal Academy of Music, the Royal College of Music and Trinity College of Music. In 1919, the Demerara Symphony Orchestra was performing at Assembly Rooms and the newly formed B.G. Musicians Band held a moonlight concert in the Promenade Gardens to raise funds to procure up-to-date instruments. An advertisement from Pradasco Cycle store in the *Daily Agroscopy* of Sunday, July 6, 1924 announced the arrival of new dance music from Gennett Records, an American recording company that specialized in popular dance and Black American music. Dance Halls were sprouting up across Georgetown. The program for the British Guiana Militia Band Sea Wall concert for January 2, 1926 included Dowell March Little Drummer Boy; the Overture from Suppe's Poet and Peasant; and Gershwin's Tell me more. The Colonial Transportation Department promoted a Morning Cruise on the S.S. Querimam for New Year's Day 1929 featuring piano and jazz music.

When Kenrick Johnson left B.G. in 1929 to study at the prestigious William Borlase School in Marlow, Buckinghamshire he had been exposed to wide range of musical styles and played the piano and the violin.

In the U.K., he was trained in dance by the innovative American choreographer, Buddy Bradley. As a result of his height, 6'4", and his fluid and flexible style, Kenrick Johnson earned the nickname Snakehips. By 1934, Ken was in the United States appearing in movies and starring in Hollywood cabaret. This 1934 trip to the United States exposes him to swing music as popularized by Cab Calloway and Fletcher Henderson. He returns to England and forms a number of swing/jazz bands. His most successful is The West Indian Orchestra which has been described as the first regular black band of any size in Britain. The band becomes London's leading swing band in the late 1930s and 1940s. He and his band were the toast of London's cafe society. He died at the age of 26, performing at London's exclusive London's Cafe de Paris when it was bombed during a German air raid on March 8, 1941.

To commemorate the 60th anniversary of the bombing of the Café de Paris, Britain's National Sound Archives and Topic Records released a CD to celebrate the history of swing music in England. The CD featured two recordings by The West Indian Orchestra. Ken Snakehips Johnson, a Guyanese who pioneered jazz in United Kingdom, fostered West Indian unity and left a legacy to be proud of.

Upcoming Events

Vendors

GUYANA FOLK FEST

GUYANA CULTURAL ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK

**1368 E. 89 STREET SUITE 2, BROOKLYN
NEW YORK 11236, U.S.A.**

TEL: 718.209.5207 FAX: 718.209.6157

WEBSITE: www.guyfolkfest.org

E-MAIL: info@guyfolkfest.org



© Guyana Folk Fest 2003-2011
All rights reserved.