

# GuyFolkFest.org

Celebrating Our Cultural Heritage

## The Muttoo Brothers

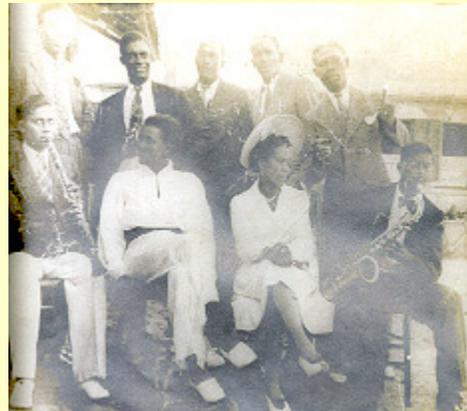
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## CELEBRATING OUR CREATIVE PERSONALITIES

### The Muttoo (Mootoo) Brothers Calypso Orchestra

By Dr Vibert C. Cambridge

Superlatives have been used to describe the contributions of George (1910-1978) and Charlie Muttoo (1915-1955) to calypso music in Trinidad. For three decades, these Guyanese-born musicians accompanied some of the most innovative calypsonians in the history of the art form - Beginner, Destroyer, Lord Iere, Lord Zigfield, The Commander, Small Island Pride, Dictator, Atilla the Hun, Terror and The Roaring Lion.



*The Muttoo Brothers with fellow Guyanese musician Fitsie Bonsie in Trinidad with calypsonians Small Island Pride ( Grenada), Dictator, Atilla The Hun, Terror, and The Roaring Lion in a 1940 photo.*

(Photo taken from <http://www.rootsofcalypso.com/mootoo.html>)



*The Muttoo Brothers as backup musicians to top Trinidadian calypsonians Beginner, Destroyer, Lord Iere, Lord Zigfield, and The Commander. Photo taken in 1943 in Trinidad before a tour. Female backup singers are Peggy Daniels and Lady Iere.*

(Photo taken from <http://www.rootsofcalypso.com/mootoo.html>)

The Muttoo brothers were born in New Amsterdam, Berbice, and were introduced to the world of music by their mother, Mary Elizabeth Muttoo (nee Bowen), who was born in Essequibo. She taught them and their five siblings to play the harmonium ("mouth

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organ"). Their father, Joseph, who was born at Enmore Estate, Demerara, was a "real businessman" who operated grocery stores and later served as a travelling sales representative for the Indian company Amritdara House of Medicine. The correct spelling for the family name is Muttoo and not Mootoo.

George expanded his musical skills, including reading music, from serving as a member of the Militia Band in New Amsterdam for about four years. In the band he played the clarinet. George taught himself to play the saxophone and he taught his brother Charlie to play the clarinet. Charlie, who could not read music, because of impaired vision, has been described as a musician who was "sensitive to sounds" and played anything that was given to him by George.

After moving to Georgetown, the family lived in various locations in Cummingsburg. The brothers' decision to pursue careers in jazz and calypso did not go down well with the family initially. Their mother's brother, Reverend Bowen, was the president of the Lutheran Church. So there were expectations of more conservative careers. No attempt was made to dissuade the career ambitions of George and Charlie, however. By the late 1930s the brothers had established the Muttoo Brothers Orchestra as one of the leading jazz and dance bands in BG. Among the members of the band were Randolph Proffit on piano, Jack Mello on Bass, and "Bonus" on banjo. The Muttoo Brothers Orchestra was part of the creative ferment that was taking place in BG in the mid and late 1930s. Their contemporaries included Ted Roy, Sam Chase, The Princess Band, the Washboards, and the Jack James Orchestra. Their rendition of Destroyer's A Mother's Love is still remembered by older Guyanese.

Their innovative musical style attracted the attention of calypsonians and impresarios across the West Indies, including Trinidad and Tobago's Johnny Khan. Johnny Khan connected the Muttoo Brothers Orchestra with Hollywood, and the orchestra made a 20-minute movie that was shown in cinemas across BG, Trinidad and Tobago, other parts of the West Indies, and the United States.

In 1941, George and Charlie moved to Trinidad and Tobago where they continued to be musical innovators. In the preface to Raymond Quevedo's (Atilla the Hun) book Atilla's Kaiso: A Short History of Trinidad Calypso, published in 1983, Errol Hill credited George Muttoo for scoring 41 of the calypsos performed by Atilla the Hun. Among them were West Indian Rhythm, Congo Bara, L'Annee Pensee (the melody used for Rum and Coca Cola), Brown Skin Gal, and Graf Zeppelin. The scores can be found in an appendix to the book.

The brothers also performed on recordings of the day. Kim Johnson, the Trinidadian music critic, considered the clarinet, "with its mellow sound... integral to calypso in the first three decades of [the 20th] century." In the Trinidad Express feature "Unbearable beauty on a Bass Clarinet," he acknowledged that the "virtuoso" on the clarinet was Guyanese-born Charlie Mootoo of the great Mootoo Brothers band."

The Muttoo Brothers were part of a tradition of musical exchange that has been taking place between Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago since the start of the 20th century, if not before. According to The Roaring Lion in his book, Calypso from France to Trinidad: 800 Years of History, Guyanese musician Phil Madison was one of the early participants in this exchange. Madison is reported to have visited Trinidad initially in 1908. From 1912, he brought vaudeville shows from British Guiana to the cinema stages of Trinidad and Tobago. The Roaring Lion has argued that it was these Guyanese-organized vaudeville shows that helped to make calypsos acceptable to cinema fans in Trinidad and Tobago. In those early days of silent film, cinema owners provided various forms of live entertainment on the stage as a way to augment revenues. Efforts to promote calypsonians as separate acts in Trinidad and Tobago were not successful until the acts were integrated into vaudeville shows.

Phil Madison's successful vaudeville formula opened up a space for other Guyanese performers and musicians such as Madame Olindie, Sam Dopee, and Lord Coffee. Guyanese calypso historian Dr Gordon Rohlehr, has chronicled the movement of the Bhagee style of music from British Guiana to Trinidad and Tobago. He described it as "very infectious." One of the famous exponents of the Bhagee style was Bill "Bhagee" Rogers (Augustus Hinds) who preferred to call the style "Shanto." The Muttoo Brothers were also recognized as exponents of the Bhagee style.

By the 1940s, the Muttoo Brothers Orchestra was the top draw in Trinidad and Tobago. They even performed in calypso tents. Their popularity continued into the 1950s. In a recent article, "Unity of Dougla Music," Kim Johnson referred to the Muttoo Brothers Orchestra as "one of the most important back-up bands for calypsonians in the 1950s".

Clearly, the Muttoo Brothers have left a mark on music in Trinidad and Tobago. Their story is part of the larger story about the circulation of musical ideas in the Caribbean. It is also a story about music transcending social constructions such as race, class, and origins.

I am very thankful for the support I received from the Rev Dr Francis Muttoo, a brother of George and Charlie Muttoo, and from the distinguished Guyanese scholar and theatre professional Henry Muttoo in preparing this feature. Dr Francis Muttoo resides in Ontario, Canada. Henry Muttoo, who is the Artistic Director of the Cayman National Cultural Foundation, is the nephew of George and Charlie Mootoo.

There is certainly much more to the story of the Muttoo brothers. We hope that the symposium that will be part of Guyana Folk Festival 2003 will provide more information on the Muttoo brothers and on other aspects of Guyana's musical heritage.

The Muttoo brothers' story, like those about our other creative heroes, must be told as accurately as possible. We, the members of the Folk Festival team, are committed to making a contribution.

Your comments, ideas, and recommendations will be appreciated. Please send them to [cambridg@ohio.edu](mailto:cambridg@ohio.edu).

#### Sources:

- (1) Gordon Rohlehr Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad. (Port of Spain, 1990).
- (2) Rafael de Leon (The Roaring Lion) Calypso from France to Tinidad: 800 Years of History. (San Juan, Trinidad, ca late 1980s).
- (3) Raymond Quevedo (Atilla the Hun) Atilla's Kaiso: A Short History of Trinidad Calypso (St Augustine: University of the West Indies, 1983).
- (4) Kim Johnson Unity of Dougla Music (Available online at <http://www.triniview.com/douglamusic.htm>).
- (5) Kim Johnson Unbearable beauty on a Bass Clarinet.
- (6) E-mail correspondence with Henry Muttoo, and
- (7) Telephone interview with Rev Dr Francis Muttoo, July 30, 2003.

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**Sing De Chorus - Calypsos of Trinidad & Tobago**

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