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Celebrating Our Cultural Heritage

James Pheonix

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CELEBRATING OUR CREATIVE PERSONALITIES

James Alexander Pheonix and the British Guiana Police Male Voice Choir

By Dr Vibert C. Cambridge

Music in Guyana owes much to our uniformed services, especially the Guyana Police Force. The exemplar is the British Guiana Police Male Voice Choir founded in 1944 by Warrant Officer James Alexander Pheonix. The story of this influential musical group starts in Springlands, Courentyne, Berbice. In 1942, then Sergeant Pheonix was transferred to the Springlands Police Station. There he founded the Skeldon Music Lovers Choir—a mixed voice choir. The choir attracted attention. On his transfer back to Georgetown with promotion to the rank of Warrant Officer (Inspector), he organized a choir that included two of the founder members of the Skeldon Music Lovers Choir—Edgar Mann and John Fredericks. The new choir was made up of 20 policemen and rehearsed at the home of Constable 4377 "Teach" Harding in Murray Street. Other founder members included Cyril "Saggie" Jarvis, George Cruickshank, Eric Rodney, Samuel McCammon and Henry Burrowes. The Police Male Voice Choir's early repertoire emphasized Christmas carols, and its first public appearance was in December 1944, performing for patients at the public hospitals.

By 1945, when the choir held its first concert, the repertoire had expanded and included the Blue Danube Waltz to the accompaniment of two pianos. By the 1950s, the choir had established itself as one of the premier groups in Guyana and the Caribbean. In 1956, the Police Male Voice Choir "emerged champions at the Trinidad Music Festival". Throughout the 1960s, the choir dominated male choirs in Guyana and, in the process, established very clearly the musicality of Guyana's folk songs. Through the inclusion of Guyana's folk songs in its repertoire, the Police Male Voice Choir made music more inclusive.

The choir represented the newly independent nation of Guyana at Expo 67 in Toronto, Canada. As more women joined the Guyana Police Force in the 1970s, the choir continued its tradition of inclusiveness and became the Guyana Police Force Mixed Voice Choir, returning to the founding ideas of James Alexander Pheonix when he formed the mixed voice Skeldon Music Lovers Choir in 1942.

The Guyana Police Male Voice Choir is an icon for a generation. We still find every opportunity to take out, dust off, and play the LP [Jane Engage](#) (sponsored by the National History and Arts Council), one of the greatest recordings of Guyanese folk songs. The spirit of the choir is kept alive by the Guyana Ex-Police Mixed Choir in New York. The Guyana Police Male Voice Choir is a recipient of one of the 2003 Wordsworth McAndrew Awards.

When we reflect on this important Guyanese musical institution, we must never forget the role played by James Alexander Pheonix. He retired as Assistant Commissioner of Police and established an equally distinguished career as Reverend James Pheonix. James Pheonix developed his music foundations in the police force. According to John Campbell, James Pheonix was "a piccolo player in the Police drum and fife band and he composed the march Ellisum." Writing on the 30th anniversary of the founding of the choir, John Fredericks described James Alexander Pheonix's founding of the choir and its achievements as "The Success of a Great Thought."

Upcoming Events

Vendors

In addition to founding the choir, James Alexander Pheonix started the Police Scholarship Fund which enabled children of policemen and women to pursue higher education in Guyana and overseas. James Alexander Pheonix is a Guyanese cultural hero.

Sources.

John H.T. Fredericks. The Success of a Great Thought. Boston: n.d. (circa 1974) and John Campbell. History of Policing in Guyana. Georgetown, Guyana: Guyana Police Force, 1987.

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