

# GuyFolkFest.org

Celebrating Our Cultural Heritage

Vincent De Abreu

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## CELEBRATING OUR CREATIVE PERSONALITIES

### Vincent De Abreu: A Pioneer

By Dr Vibert C. Cambridge

In 1950, Sgt Vincent de Abreu of the BG Militia Band was awarded a full scholarship by the British Council to study music at Kneller Hall and the Royal Academy of Music in the United Kingdom. The scholarship covered "all tuition, boarding, and lodging expenses." At that time, he had completed 28 years of service with the band.

This trip was not his first trip to the United Kingdom, however. His first visit was in 1923 when he was a 16-year-old apprentice bandsman in the 40-piece BG Militia Band contingent that attended the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley. The British Empire Exhibition was organized to: "stimulate trade, to strengthen the bonds that bind the Mother Country to her Sister States and Daughter Nations, to bring all into closer touch, the one with the other, to enable all who owe allegiance to the British Flag to meet on common ground, and to learn to know each other. It was a family party, to which every member of the Empire is listed, and at which every part of the Empire is represented."

British Guiana's participation in the exhibition was important for promoting economic growth. In the early 1920s, there was significant labour unrest, and external investment was considered part of the solution to British Guiana's social and economic problems. The BG Militia Band was an important element in the British Guiana participation at the exhibition and had a successful tour. It "played daily at one of the bandstands around the Exhibition" and gained recognition as one of the top bands in the British Empire. Clement Nichols' Dear Demerara march became popular and attracted much critical acclaim. So, the BG Militia could be seen as playing a role in public diplomacy. This would not be the last time that Guyanese musicians would become the nation's ambassadors.

De Abreu's mentor was the bandmaster, Capt AW Fawcett. De Abreu became an accomplished performer on the clarinet and the French horn. In addition, he was also accomplished in conducting, orchestration, and composition. In 1948, he became conductor of the British Guiana Philharmonic Orchestra and by 1950 was considered a "musician of much praise."

In England, De Abreu earned advanced musical qualifications, including the LRAM and ARCM. On his return to British Guiana, he continued his relationships with the British Guiana Philharmonic Orchestra. Clairmonte Tait, who was a member of the orchestra, remembers De Abreu as very focused and dedicated. He recalls De Abreu copying, by hand, all the parts of a certain musical work for the BG Philharmonic Orchestra.



## Upcoming Events

## Vendors

According to John Campbell in *History of Policing in Guyana*, the British Guiana Militia Band was "drafted into the Police Force" in 1957. The members of the band were given the option of being sworn in as policemen or resigning. Unlike Major S. Henwood, "ninety percent swore in." Among them was Vincent De Abreu. This allowed him to become the first Guyanese bandmaster of the British Guiana Police Force Band. He had risen through the ranks from apprentice bandsman to superintendent of police.

Under his leadership, the band navigated the more restrictive rules of the police force, one of which prohibited members from playing at non-band functions. This effectively brought an end to units such as Charlie Knights and the Boptets and the presence of bandsmen in popular dance bands. These rules would subsequently be modified. His competency in this new situation must have been facilitated by his family's connections with policing in Guyana. His brother Frank De Abreu was Assistant Commissioner, Crime.

De Abreu made important contributions to Guyana's cultural life. His career illustrates some of the opportunities for Guyanese to become musicians during an earlier era. He was part of a group of very creative and well-trained musicians that included Clem Nichols, Harry Mayers, Allan Briggs, the Rogers brothers (Bert and Eddie), Ian Davis, Harry Whittaker and Charlie Knights to name a few.

A closer examination of Vincent De Abreu's career also reveals the important contributions of the BG Militia Band and the Police Force Band to musical development in Guyana. These bands provided training in many aspects of music.

Through the popular band concerts and route marches, the BG Militia and the Police Force Bands exposed Guyanese society to a wide repertoire of music, creating in the process a reasonably musically literate society. They made classical music and Broadway show tunes accessible to all Guyanese. They demonstrated that Guyanese can compose world-class military music like *Dear Demerara* (Nichols) and *Sons of the Soil* (Briggs), and *Regimental March* (De Abreu).

The British Guiana Militia Band and the Police Force Band played an important role in every major music development in Guyana during the 20th century. Their woodwind and brass sections were central to all classical orchestras in Guyana since the 1940s - the BG Philharmonic Orchestra and the Princesville Orchestra. The band's role in the music festivals and Mass Games also must not be forgotten. In addition to performing classical and military music they have demonstrated creativity in folk music, calypso, reggae, and jazz.

De Abreu was the first Guyanese bandmaster. He stood on the shoulders of Sgt Griffith, Capt AE Carroll, EA Carter, Capt Fawcett, and Major Henwood.

He died too soon, a young man in his early 50s. His death did not create a vacuum. He left structures for Eddie Rogers, Barney Small, Maurice Watson, and Assistant Commissioner Bovell to build on. Vincent De Abreu is a Guyanese cultural hero.

A note to the Commissioner of Police: Could the Guyana Police Force Band consider releasing a CD of the music composed by its stalwarts for its 50th anniversary in 2007? There is enough lead time to mobilize Guyanese musicians in the diaspora to join in such a project. The model used by Dr Joycelynn Loncke for the UNESCO-sponsored project 'One Hundred Years of Classical Music in the Guianas' could be useful. The Guyana Folk Festival team stands prepared to support such a venture.

*Sources: (a) 1950 newspaper article 'Sgt Vincent De Abreu Gets British Council Scholarship,' from Hugh Sam's scrapbook, (b) John Campbell. History of Policing in Guyana. Georgetown, Guyana : Guyana Police Force, 1987, (c) Interviews with Charlie Knights (USA), April 21, 2002 and August 4, 2003; (d) Interview with Clairmonte Taitt,*

(Barbados), June 19, 2003; (e) Interview with Mike Rogers (Canada), July 1, 2003, (f) Jeffrey Richards. *Imperialism and Music : Britain 1876-1953*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001, (g) *British Empire Exhibition 1924-British Guiana Pavilion* (<http://members.lycos.co.uk/bee1924/history1.html>)  
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