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Celebrating Our Cultural Heritage

Charles Knights

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CELEBRATING OUR CREATIVE PERSONALITIES

Charles Knights, LRSM, ARCM (1927 -)

By Dr Vibert C. Cambridge



Charles Knights was born on May 24, 1927, in very humble circumstances in a range yard-Bacchus Range—in Pike Street, Kitty Village. He grew up in a community of music—the lullabies of East Indian women, the sacred music of the choir at the Pilgrim Holiness Church on Sandy Babb Street, and the sound of legendary masquerade bands. Among his “grow matties” in Kitty were Forbes Burnham, Jessie Burnham, Hassan Khan, Eric Blyden, Clinton Bostwick, Ivan Yearwood, Gurvey Russell, and Eric Caesar.

Charles Knights grew up to make solid contributions to all aspects of music in Guyana. As a performer, composer, and bandleader he contributed to classical, military, jazz, dance, sacred, patriotic and folk music in Guyana. His musical career started as an inquisitive 4-year-old boy who ventured into the Pilgrim Holiness Church on Sandy Babb Street, drawn there by the hymns. He was invited into the church by its founder, Mr. Bacchus. He continued to explore the world of sacred music joining the Boy's Meeting choir organized by Brother Sewell's church in Gordon Street, Kitty. Another step in Knights's musical odyssey was as a tenderfoot bugler in the St. George's Boy Scout Troop.

Life was very tough for working class people in British Guiana during the 1920s and 1930s. World War II only made the situation worse. By 1939, at the age of 12, Knights had left Comenius Moravian School in Fourth Standard and was working as an errand boy in establishments in Charlestown, earning a wage to support himself and his widowed mother. One of his duties was to collect his boss's lunch every day. He recalled that one day, when he was 15 years old, he had an accident. He dropped the food carrier spreading the boss's lunch of rice, boulanger, and shrimp on freshly tarred Princess Street. For this accident, Charles Knights was fired from Barrow's Hardware Store in Charlestown.

A little boy made his way from Charlestown to Kitty taking an indirect route home. The plan was to ride his bicycle up Camp Street and take the Sea Wall to Kitty. He stopped by the Portuguese Sports Club on Camp Street and Non Pariel Park to listen to music that was emanating from the band room of the British Guiana Militia Band. He was fascinated and stood spellbound for about half an hour. He then continued up Camp Street and came to the junction of Camp Street and Kelley/Palprrie Dam, where he heard the sound of bugles. Again, he stood and listened. This time his reverie was disturbed by Corporal Gouveia of the B.G. Militia Band, who asked him to leave.

Knights informed the Corporal that he was on the public road and therefore did not have to leave. Corporal Gouveia, who was at that time conducting auditions for buglers, asked Knights whether he knew how to play the bugle. Knights said yes. He auditioned and was recruited as a bugler in the army's Bugle band. His squaddies included Cecil Gravesande, Pat Smith, Cedric Robinson, and Jerome Pitt. The little boy from Kitty entered the uniformed services and served throughout most of World War II as a bugler with the South Caribbean Forces. He was a “child soldier.”

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In 1944, prior to the end of World War II, Knights was encouraged to join the British Guiana Militia Apprentice Band. He would launch his classical music career within six months. His debut was a performance of "Romance and Bolero" at a concert at St. James-the-Less in Kitty. Other performers at the concert were Hugh Sam and Joycelynne Loncke.

Knights went on to play at the Sunday afternoon concerts promoted by promoters such as Ms. Armstrong at Susamachar Church, Ms. Rodrigues at the YWCA and Ms. Mansfield at the Dorcas Club. Classical music concerts were not confined to Georgetown, so Knights performed around the country. "I performed on every concert stage in Guyana, including the Ursuline Covent, the venue for the first music festival," said Knights. In addition, he played the clarinet and oboe with the Princessville Orchestra, violin with the B.G. Philharmonic Orchestra and sang as a tenor with the Dawson's Music Lovers' Club.

As a member of the B.G. Militia Band, Knights travelled across British Guiana playing at public concerts, supporting musical developments such as the Schools Music Festivals. He also performed at functions for visiting dignitaries such as General Eisenhower, Lord Baden Powell, Nigeria's Prince Eze, and Indira Gandhi. Many visiting artistes, such as the distinguished baritones Lawrence Tibbits and Lawrence Winters, visited the band room and rehearsed with the band. Knights' mentors included Clem Nichols, Vincent De Abreu, and the Rogers brothers-Bert and Eddie.

At the age of 22, Knights began playing tenor saxophone with jazz and dance bands. He developed an equally influential career in popular music, playing with Nello and the New Luckies and Tom Charles' Syncopators. He was a foundation member of Fascinators.

He formed his own band, The Charlie Knights Boptets, which won the British Guiana Small Bands contest at the Plaza Cinema in 1954. The band (Charlie Knights, tenor saxophone; Gaston Farley, trumpet; Vibert Wilson, piano; Stanley Bishop, drums; Fitzherbert "Wobbler" Canterbury, bass; and "Bongo" Charlie, bongos) played Knights' composition "Five Brothers."

One outcome of that victory was regular performances on the radio through the Vivian Lee sponsored, Happiness Show. This was not Knights' first exposure to performing on the radio. He had played third saxophone with Harry Mayers Band on the Ovaltine Show and oboe on the British Council Half Hour.

Knights' band performed at the opening of the Woodbine Hotel and the Blue Room. In addition, the band performed at the inaugural dance of the Penumbrian Club, which was held at the Bel Air Hotel in 1954. His band attracted the attention of visitors from the Caribbean including Everton Weekes and Fitz Vaughn Bryan.

Based on a conversation with Bryan, Knights was about to add strings to his band and create a new sound in Caribbean music. This ambition had to be aborted in 1957, however, when the Militia Band became part of the British Guiana Police Force and all bandsmen were prohibited from "playing out." The new sound that Knights had contemplated was delivered by Byron Lee and the Dragonaires.

This decision by the British Guiana Police Force led Knights to refocus his career. He emphasized composition, arranging, and formal musical qualifications. In 1965, he became the first member of the band to earn an L.R.S.M. with distinction. His teacher was Mrs. Lynette Katchay-Bunbury.

As a result of his earning the L.R.S.M., Knights became a member of the British Guiana Music Teachers' Association. He was also awarded a scholarship by the British Council to study for the A.R.C.M. at the Royal College of Music in England. He

successfully completed that program in 1966 and returned to Guyana where he was promoted to the rank of sergeant.

Among Knights' important compositions is Weroon (words by Martin Carter), his entry for the national anthem competition. He is most proud of his arrangement of Hugh Sam's Amalacava for the B.G. Militia Band.

Charles Knights was a mentor for many bandsmen, including Keith Waithe, Souflantis, Lloyd Watson, Maurice Watson, and Danridge Pearson.

In March 1970, he migrated to the United States. He developed a successful career as an insurance executive but never strayed far from his musical roots. He eventually returned to the field and worked as a music educator in the Newark, New Jersey school system.

Charles Knights still has an active musical career. At this time his instrument is voice. He sang with a number of choirs over the past 70 years (Pilgrim Holiness Church in Kitty, the Dawsons' Music Lovers Club, and Trinity College Choir, England), and now is a solo tenor in New Jersey. He is sought out for important Guyanese functions such as flag raising ceremonies to celebrate Guyana's independence and republican status. Among his recent performances was his rendition of the national anthem at the memorial service for the late Hugh Desmond Hoyte in New York.

Charles Knights has not forgotten his Guyanese roots and the people he met as he developed his musical career. He is currently launching a fund-raising project aimed at procuring instruments for the Guyana Police Force Band. He plans to visit Guyana in November. If you see him, express a word of thanks for his contributions to music in Guyana during the 20th century. He has been nominated for a 2004 Wordsworth McAndrew Award.

Sources: Interviews with Charles Knights, April 2, 2002, April 26, 2002, August 4, and September 21, 2003.

First published by Stabroek News, September 28, 2003

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