

## **19TH Annual Caribbean Sunshine Awards**

### ***An Event of Two Sentiments***

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The 2007 Sunshine Awards show is truly an event that will be burnt in my memory forever. The 19th annual Sunshine Awards was held on Sunday, October

28 at the Sheraton New York Hotel. This year the event celebrated the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the British trans-Atlantic slave trade, which was officially celebrated on March 24, 2007.

As a result the show fuelled two primary sentiments; the jubilation of the awards presentation and the poignancy of the interspersed slave trade remembrance. Gil Figaro, founder and host, emphatically states "It is appropriate that the Sunshine Awards dedicate this year's program to this event. The Sunshine Awards was created to pay tribute to the creators, performers and promoters of Caribbean music, dance, art and poetry. All of these art forms, which we hold so dear to our hearts spring from the bosom of the motherland, Africa."

The latest slave trade studies (by David Eltis et al) say that 12 million Africans were herded into ships bound for the Americas. Of that number 10.5 million, or 87 percent, arrived alive. The slaves were drawn from two major areas: West Africa-modern-day Ghana, Senegal, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, etc- and West-Central Africa, modern day Angola and the Congo. The Africans brought with them a tradition of songs of praise and of recrimination, which in the conditions of the New World evolved into what we call calypso.

The 19th annual Sunshine Awards program featured a myriad of talents, including the undisputed calypso king of the world, The Mighty Sparrow, the incomparable Mighty Chalkdust (co-founder of The Sunshine Awards Hall of Fame), the unforgettable Mighty Composer, and the Young Designer, who in 1983 gave us the hit calypso "Ah Feeling Nice Now".

This year's awardees include Monty Alexander (Jamaica), Hugh Sam (Guyana), Rex Nettleford (Jamaica), Emeline Michel (Haiti), Shirley Robinson (Grenada), Lord Panama (Panama), and Don Bob (St. Vincent and The Grenadines)

Hall of Fame inductees were Black Stalin, Mighty Composer, Francis Wickam and Earl Rodney, all from Trinidad and Tobago.

The opening blessings were showered on the audience with a splendid performance of stilt-dancing by The Kotchegna Dance Company. The act consisted of a drummer and an acrobatic, almost magical, masked stilt-dancer, who, while standing ten feet tall, did splits and pirouettes with unbelievable grace and fluidity. The masked "moko-jumbie" was uttering unrecognizable chatter in a high-pitched tone that was similar to that of the Ray-Ray power of the Orisha or Shango experience. The audience was then

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encouraged by the drummer to join in a call and response of "Amina", which means Amen; blessings to everyone. So the stilt-dancer would speak rapidly in a high-pitched tone and the drummer and audience would respond with "Amina". The Kotchenga Dance company is the brainchild of Vado Diomande, who

"was born into the sacred stilt-dancing tradition of the Mahou people in northwest Ivory Coast."

The theme was now set, as it were in the nineteenth century; from the land Africa unto the slave ship. The co-hosts, Nikki Crosby and Errol Fabien, came on-stage and put the capacity crowd at ease with their well-timed comedy routine, at the end of which everyone was upbeat, as a definite buzz of excitement filled the room.

The first award recipient was "Grenada's Vocal Coach", Shirley Robinson., who received an award for music. Shirley won her first singing competition at The Grenada Arts Festival in 1947. She is remembered for preparing one hundred and fifty school children to perform for Princess Margaret in Grenada in 1956. Shirley has worked extensively with the Grenada National Folk Group, which has performed worldwide, from the Sidmoth Festival in England in 1989, to the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto in 1995. In her acceptance speech, Shirley thanked God and the Sunshine Awards. She reassures us that she is not retired but re-tyred. She vowed that she will continue working for the people of Grenada and The Caribbean.

The audience lights were dimmed, the 21 ft by 14 ft big-screen on stage lit up, there was a hushed anticipation, as all eyes were focused on the documentary that was unfolding on the screen. The title flashed "The Middle Passage", and the audience was taken into a different realm, one of history and awareness. The Sunshine Awards show was now not just a provider entertainment, but was also a bearer of the torch of Enlightenment. The film took us through some of the cruel realities of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The audience was captivated., silence filled the room, and not a pin was dropped.

The Signal Hill Alumni Choir of Tobago brought us back in entertainment mode with their animated renditions of Songs like Bring Down The Power of Love (Ella Andell), I Fell Good (James Brown), and a medley of calypsoes of the Mighty Shadow, who also hails from the island of Tobago. Choir director, Mr John Arnold on keyboard, and The Signal Hill Choir, continue to amaze us with their world-class performance

The second award recipient of the evening was Hugh Sam of Guyana. Pianist Hugh Sam, also dubbed "Guyana's Best Kept Secret", is a highly accomplished musician and composer, and truly deserves this award for music.

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Hugh wrote the music for Guyanese musicals such as "Starbroek Fantasy" and "Amalivaca". In the early sixties, he was the musical director for the Broadway musical "The Fantasticks". He also did arrangements for steel bands and was musical director of the Guyanese band that performed At Expo '67 in Montreal, Canada in 1967. In 1999 Hugh Sam's "Impromptu For The Left Hand" was premiered at Carnegie Hall by Margaret Mills. He told the gathered crowd that he was grateful to be a Caribbean Person, and he was especially thankful for the award.

Don Bob, of St Vincent and the Grenadines, received a special recognition award for journalism. Don is a career journalist with over 30 years experience as a disc jockey, presenter and producer, and as a stringer for the Associated Press. Mr Bob has worked in The United States and in The Caribbean, where he has touched many listeners in St Vincent, Montserrat, Antigua, Grenada and Anguilla. This year, Don Bob was the proud recipient of The Silver Award at the New York Festival Radio Broadcasting competition for the United Nations program on Commemoration Of The Bill Abolishing the Tans-Atlantic Slave Trade"

The Sunshine Awards paid tribute to some of those who left this earth in the past year. Included were Saluche (Lucien Small - Vincentian Comedian), Mighty Terror (Fitzgerald Henry - Calypsonian), Lloyd Best (Economist and Politician), Boscoe Holder (Painter and Entertainer), James Brown (Godfather Of Soul), Gerald Ford (Past President of The United States) ,Aubrey Adams (Playwright), among others.

Monty Alexander, was given an award for special recognition for music. The Jamaican born pianist is so unique in his approach to music, that he has

Superbly merged American Jazz with the music of his Jamaican and Caribbean roots, with special emphasis on the musical genres of mento and calypso. It is difficult to believe that this youthful virtuoso has a career that has spans more than Four decades. Monty has performed with other greats such as Frank Sinatra, Ray Brown, Dizzy Gillespie, Sonny Rollins, Quincy Jones, Ernest Rangling, Sly Dunbar, Robby Shakespeare And more. He has performed at

concert halls and Jazz festivals all over the world. This world renowned musician has not forgotten his roots, and he still travels down to Jamaica To play and experiment with the young and upcoming musicians there. After thanking the Sunshine Awards and the people of the Caribbean, Monty said that he would rather express himself via music, so he whipped out a melodica and blew some traditional ditties by Lord Kitchener and The Mighty Sparrow, among other. He concluded by saying "That is how I knew it". The applause was deafening. I was sitting next to Monty and I couldn't help observing how he was shadow-playing Chords and melodies with his fingers when music was

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being played on stage or by the disc-jockey. He approaches his music with childlike enthusiasm. Mr. Monty Alexander is truly a great musician, virtuoso and human being.

The next event on the program was the Hall Of Fame inductions. This year's inductees were indeed all heavyweights in the arena of Calypso and Steel pan. Trinidadian Earl Rodney was inducted for his lifelong contribution and dedication to the development of the steel pan. Earl's name is synonymous with the improvement and refinement of steel pan music, both as a player and an arranger.

Francis Wickham is described as a "pan man extraordinaire" from the band known as The Invaders Steel Orchestra of Trinidad. Mr Wickham is the catalyst that has made the Invaders Steel Band one of the Most prolific bands of Trinidad from the 1940s to the present time.

The Mighty Composer was inducted for his tremendous contribution to the calypso art form. Composer (Fred Mitchell) made his calypso singing debut in south Trinidad, then took his craft to Port Of Spain in the 1960s. He comes from a singing family known as The Singing Mitchell's, and is the brother of famous musical band leader and arranger, Boyie Mitchell. Compo, as he is amicably known, has given us numerous great calypsos over the years , including memorable hits like "Child Training" "Supposin", "Cacadah", "The Vikings", "Leave Meh Man Alone", "The Third Eye", and "Black Fallacy", which he splendidly performed, dressed in his flowing African robe, in keeping with the theme of the evening.

The final inductee into the Hall of Fame was none other than the ever-popular Black Stalin (Leroy Calliste) of Coffee Street, San Fernando, Trinidad. Black Stalin's older brother Dennis was a panman, so the young Leroy grew up in Free French panyard. His family later moved to Lord Street, where he resided while attending San Fernando Boys RC school, or as they call it in San Fernando, Boys School. After establishing himself as a stalwart in the southland, Black Stalin moved to Port of Spain and joined Kitchener's Revue Calypso Tent, where he instantly became a huge hit. Mr Calliste has won the Trinidad Monarch competition on six occasions .He has given us such hits as "Burn Dem", "Caribbean Man", The Immortal Message of Dr. Martin Luther King", "Wait Dorothy Wait", "Mr Pan Maker", and "Peace In The World"

The inductees were introduced by another six time calypso monarch, Dr Hollis Liverpool (The Mighty Chalkdust) and the honourable Dr. Harold Robertson, the Council General of Trinidad and Tobago in New York.

Without delay, we were being entertained by Guyanese born Moses Josiah, who

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played This Little Light Of Mine on his very unusual instrument, the bow and carpenter saw. The soothing sounds made by the saw were ascending through octaves in undulating echoes. Mr Josiah is a regular performer at this annual event.

The entertainment continued with a lively number from another regular treasure at the annual Sunshine Awards, the incredible pannist, Dave Gulston. His crisp and melodious notes skipped across the room in perfect harmony with his onstage presentation of dance and showmanship. The audience expressed its appreciation with thunderous applause.

The final award for the evening was presented to calypsonians, Lord Panama (George Allen). Lord Panama was born in Panama in 1928 and began singing calypso at the age of 10.

He learned the calypso art form from listening to his Grenadian born mother sing while she worked around the house. His father was born in Barbados . Mr Allen reminded us that West Indians went to Panama not only to work on the construction of the Panama Canal, but also to help build the Railroad. Lord Panama has performed with many calypso greats including the Mighty Sparrow, Lord Melody, and the Mighty Spoiler. He has performed throughout Central America and The Bahamas, and has received numerous awards including The Costa Rica International Fiesta Of Youth Award in 1985, The University of Panama Distinguished Service Award in 1997, The Panama National Institute Of Music Award in 1998, The Fiesta De La Musica Award in 2002, The Panama Festival Of International Book Writers Award in 2007, and of course, The Caribbean Sunshine Award also in 2007. There was a large contingent of Panamanians in the audience to witness their hero receive yet another prestigious award for his contribution to calypso music.

Trinidadian singer Lorenzo Gonzales entertained us with his blend of Latin and Groovy-Soca fusion. Lorenzo is a young artiste with a unique approach to the music. He sings in Spanish and English with a salsa, soca, hip-hop mix.

The Mighty Sparrow, Dr Slinger Fransisco, then took the stage. Sparrow, the undisputed calypso king of the world, has been the nucleus of the art form since his crowning as Trinidad Calypso King in 1956, when he rendered the classic social commentary, "Jean and Dinah (Yankees Gone)". In an interview at the CBC studio in Montreal, Sparrow explained the origins of this song to be his attempt at creating a commercial jingle for the Salvatore store in Port of Spain. The jingle went as follows:

Jean and Dinah Rosita and Clementina  
Came to me one morning,  
After they completed their shopping

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Well they told me honey  
We never seen more luxury  
More than when we stopped  
And went in to Salvatore to shop.

For his effort, Salvatore gave him two dollars and dismissed him. Sparrow went on to combine this ditty with the idea of an already popular calypso song by his hero, the Lord Invader. The subject song, Rum And Coca Cola, which was further popularized by the Andrews Sisters, was a social commentary on the debauching of Trinidadian women by American soldiers during the 1940s, when "both mother and daughter" were "working for the Yankee dollar". Sparrow combined this idea of with his commercial jingle, and his career lifted off.

In sticking with the theme of this year's awards program, on the abolition of the British trans-Atlantic slave trade, the honourable one took command of the stage and captured the complete attention of the audience as he masterfully rendered to us his forever moving, forever significant song of 1963, "The Slave", a lament that allows the listener to imagine what it must have been like to be a slave, from the moment of being captured to the announcement of emancipation. The lyrics remind us of the trans-Atlantic journey as the song begins with the words "I'm a slave from a land so far, I was caught and I was brought here from Africa". The theme of the show was now amplified by Sparrow's performance. The lyrics were metaphoric, the melody was spiritual, the rendition superb, and the presentation was impeccable. Together with clips from the movie *The Middle Passage*, this performance completely and explicitly developed the theme.

Next on stage was the founder of the Sunshine Awards himself, Gil Figaro Sr. to announce that there will be two new awards added to next year's program, namely The Mighty Sparrow Sunshine Award and The Irving Burgie Sunshine Award. Mr. Figaro then went on to thank the sponsors, the award recipients, the performers, the attendees and the staff for helping to make the nineteenth Sunshine Awards Show such a great success. The audience showed their satisfaction for Gil's efforts with tremendous applause.

Trinidad born Gil Figaro founded the Caribbean Sunshine Awards in order to honour those great innovators and contributors to Caribbean art forms. Mr Figaro developed his love for music from listening to his uncle, calypsonian Young Killer, and also from his days as a trombonist in the orchestra of his high school, St Benedict's College in La Romaine, Trinidad. As a token of his appreciation and recognition of the importance of his high school experience, Gil reserved the entire third row of the auditorium for past students of St Benedict's College. Gil has set a high standard for the Sunshine Awards, and every year he raises the bar of excellence. A job well

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done, Mr Figaro.

The closing number of the evening was the song "Ah Feeling Nice Now", done by The Young Designer. This is his milestone song which catapulted Designer in to the calypso limelight in 1983. All awards recipients, performers, and sponsors were invited on stage for the grand finale.

The audience was satisfied, the award recipients were grateful, the hosts were fulfilled and the sponsors were proud.

The nineteenth annual Sunshine Awards was sponsored in part by Caribbean Airlines (the official airline of The Sunshine Awards), The Tobago House of Assembly, Moet Hennessy, USA, The New York Carib News, and The Trini Breakfast Shed.

Congratulations to the efficient and congenial staff of Joey Romeo, Kanchan Paser, Anthony County, Donna Daniels, Curtis St Louis, George Arakalian, Alicia Hall, Janice Forde and Adrian Nicholas. Thanks for making it a comfortable experience.

The purpose of this year's show is totally in line with the mission of The Sunshine Awards, and this was captured by the words of the co-host Errol Fabien as he reiterated, "we must not forget the history".

The nineteenth annual Sunshine Awards program cleverly and effectively combined entertainment s with a serious historical event. It caused us to simultaneously experience ebullience and melancholy, truly an event of two sentiments running parallel to each other, but in a spirit of enlightenment.

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