

***Caribbean Sunshine Awards Heats Up New York.
A Huge Success. Sponsors Should Be Proud***

By: Clevil James



New York City, the most vibrant Caribbean metropolis, was smothered in radiant Caribbean sunshine to mark the occasion of the 17th Annual Caribbean Sunshine Awards, held last Saturday, October 29th at the New York Sheraton Hotel.

The event, which some have dubbed "The Caribbean Music Grammy's", is the brainchild of Trinidadian-born Gilman "Gil" Figaro Sr., and is dedicated to paying tribute to the great innovators and contributors to Caribbean art forms. This year's edition of the Sunshine Awards brought together a galaxy of Caribbean stars, including the youthful Kevin Little of "Turn me on" fame, and the grey-bearded "Chalkdust" (Hollis Liverpool), the reigning Calypso Monarch of Trinidad and Tobago; a diverse and appreciative audience showed up to pay tribute to the creators of Caribbean music.

This year's awardees included Cyril Shaw (Guyana), Earnest Ranglin (Jamaica), Bernadette Scott (Trinidad & Tobago), Oliver Bromes (Lord Radio, Barbados), Leo McDonald (The Mighty Gryner, Barbados), Habeeb Khan (Guyana), Kevin Little (St. Vincent and the Grenadines), Rupert Clarke (Rupees, Barbados), Earnest Galloway (St. Croix), Carl "Jazzy" Pantin (Trinidad and Tobago), Nathaniel Crichlow (Trinidad & Tobago) and Kelvin "Zuzie" St. Rose (Trinidad & Tobago).

The first Sunshine Awards program was staged at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in Brooklyn, New York on June 24, 1989. The theme of the first awards program was “A Reflection on the History of Calypso and Steel band Music. Gil wrote the script for the program and the world renowned Roberta Flack was co-host for the evening. On that historic night, twenty (20) awards were presented.

Some past awardees include the Mighty Sparrow, Rita Marley, Calypso Rose, the Mighty Duke, Tabou Combo, Machel Montano, Andy Narrell, Lord Kitchener, Nydia Caro, Lord Ziegfield, David Rudder, Winston Spree, Roaring Lion, Walter Chieftain Douglas, Frankie McIntosh, Desperados Steel Orchestra and numerous others who have contributed to Caribbean art forms. The Sunshine Awards is an extremely important cultural event that encourages Caribbean integration. Musicians and artistes play a vital role in bringing Caribbean people together.

New York has always been an important centre for the growth, development, and dispersal of Caribbean music, including rumba, calypso, cha-cha-cha, salsa and kompa. Manuelita, a 1912 recording by George Baillie's band, Lovey's String Band, has been included in the US Government's inaugural 'Top-50' list of recordings. The city has also hosted icons like Wilmoth Houdini, Perl Primus, Connie Williams, Lord Invader, and The Mighty Sparrow. Hence New York is an appropriate location for The Sunshine Awards.

The 17th annual Sunshine Awards ceremony, held last Saturday, October 29, 2005 duly recognized some of the great contributors to Caribbean music. The honorees were as varied as their countries of origin and musical genre. Among them were pianist, calypsonians, a guitarist, a choir director, and more, hailing from Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Barbados, Jamaica, St Vincent, and more... The four hour, black-tie event was professionally scripted and executed, with appropriate punctuations of musical interludes and comedy.

Before the awards ceremony began, we were ushered into a spacious, dimly-lit room to start the evening activities with cocktails and finger foods. Guests and hosts were all very polite, with everyone smiling and quietly greeting each other. However, out of the corner of my right ear, I heard a woman whispered to her friend about a gentleman she recognized "But eh eh, look at Johnny nah, who ever tort he could ah dress up so". Her friend promptly replied "Girl hush yuh mouth nah, yuh like commess eh? Dis is not de time and place". Meanwhile I'm shaking in my chair, trying to hold in a laugh while pretending that I wasn't overhearing the reassuring conversation. Reassuring because I knew then that I was among the innovative, creative, satirical, imaginative and witty Calypso people. Chalkdust (Dr Hollis Liverpool) was the only person not dressed in formal attire. He was clad in casual slacks and jean jacket, sporting his trademark bushy white beard. All due respect to Chalkie, one of the few remaining masters of the calypso art-form today, a story-teller who excels in using metaphors, imagery and double entendre in his lyrics. The cocktail hour was extremely enjoyable. I had wonderful conversations with many people. Permit me to add that there was no wining during cocktails.

After cocktails we were again politely ushered, this time to the Metropolitan Ballroom, where the stage was set for the evening's main event, The Caribbean Sunshine Awards ceremony. Do you know that some West Indians brought some of the rum and wine from the cocktail area into the ballroom? We were seated in very tightly fitted, impermanent, cushioned chairs, about 15 double rows of 10 chairs each, with an aisle down the middle.

The house lights were dimmed the stage was spot-lighted, the huge TV screen located on our the right side of the stage started displaying pertinent information of the proceedings., and the show began with the melodious performance of the five member steel band, NFM Pantasy Orchestra of Trinidad and Tobago. The calypso music was very innovative and jazzy, with lots of creative improvisation. They played about three numbers, all of which were well received by the audience.

Next on stage were the co-hosts for the evening, Nikki Crosby and Errol Fabien. They went through their vintage comedy routine to put the audience at ease. Errol said that he was overjoyed when he saw quiche on the menu, because all day long he was feeling for quiche. You have to say it out loud to get the effect.

The Sunshine Awards then paid tribute to prominent people who died since the last awards. The voice-over together with the screen reminded us of Rosa Parks, Lord Blakie, Frankie Francis, Ibrahim Ferrar, Compay Segundo, Lord Melody of Grenada, Johnny Carson, and many more. This was a very moving segment indeed.

The first award was for Friend of The Arts, went to Cyril Shaw of Guyana. Mr. Shaw “used his talent to promote performers from across the globe. “ The program stated that he worked with the Mighty Sparrow, Louis Armstrong, Johnny Mathis, Sammy Davis Jr., Byron Lee, Jimmy Cliff, Percy Sledge, Sam Cooke, Lord Kitchener, Calypso Rose, Denyse Plummer, Miriam Makeba, Mahalia Jackson, Latonia, to name a few. Accepting for Cyril Shaw was his grandson, Terry Mohamed.

Receiving the Special Recognition Award for Music was Lord Radio (Oliver Bromes) of Barbados. Lord Radio, known in Barbados as the “King of the hotel Circuit” has been performing calypso for the past 55 years. He performed with greats like Spoiler, Roaring Lion, Viking, and Director.

The next award was presented to The Mighty Gryner (Leo McDonald Blenman) of Barbados. A Special Recognition and Award for Music. He spent over 40 years performing calypso music. He has toured Canada, Europe and The United States. I found it amazing how Gryner was so shy when he gave thanks for the award, but was so extroverted and energetic when he later performed a lively and gyrating calypso. A well deserving recipient indeed.

At this moment there was a fascinating performance by Guyanese Moses Josiah who played some soothing ballads on very unique instrument, the carpenter’s handsaw, a bow, and a hammer. It was announced that he was so good last year; hence they brought him back for yet another year.

The Mighty Chalkdust, reigning Calypso Monarch for 2005, then came on stage to announce the Hall Of Fame Inductees for this year. He sat in a low chair with a higher chair in front of him on which lay a sheet of paper containing his script, and with guitar in hand, but not playing it, he inducted the following:

Prince Galloway (Earnest Galloway) of Archie Buck Them Up fame. The Prince has been performing since the early 1950s with well-known bards such as Melody, Destroyer, Invader and Cristo. The Prince later performed some examples of smutty calypsos, accompanied by Chalkdust on the guitar.

Carl “Jazzy” Pantin, for his involvement with the calypso art form as singer, musician, promoter, calypso tent manager, calypso judge, and above all, father figure to many calypsonians. Jazzy managed Lord Kitchener’s Calypso Revue Tent from 1963 to 2004, the year of his death.

Nathanial “Natty” Crichlow, a member of Casablanca and City Syncopators Steelband Orchestras in the 1940s and 1950s. He was the Vice President of the T&T National Association of Steel Bandmen, now Pan Trinbago. Natty was also a respected Trade Unionist and the leader of the National Union of Government and Federated Workers.

Kelvin “Zuzie” St. Rose, a professional pan tuner who started his career with the Crossfire Steel Orchestra in the 1950s. He was highly respected not only in Trinidad and Tobago, but also in Grenada, Barbados and St. Vincent.

The Founder of the Caribbean Sunshine Awards, Gil Figaro then took the stage for a special presentation and to recognize the work being done by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent, with special emphasis on the help they provide to hurricane victims in the Caribbean.

Jamaican Earnest Ranglin was then given a Special Recognition and Award for Music. Earnest is he arranger of Millie Small world wide hit, “My Boy Lollipop“. He also contributed to hits like “It Hurts to Be Alone” for the Wailers, and Rivers of Babylon for the Melodians. Earnest Ranglin is rated as Jamaica’s greatest jazz guitarist, and he was instrumental in the development of ska music. Earnest performed about four songs for us, one of them being the memorable Toots and The Maytals hit, 64-46 that’s My Number. I traveled back to the hotel in the same taxi as Earnest and his wife Joan. They are just simply wonderful people. A musical interlude followed here as a dramatic performance by pianist Dane Gulston. Both Ranglin and Gulston were musically supported by Charles Dougherty and His Circle of Friends. The crowd soaked it up.

Special Award for Music and Dance was given to Bernadette Scott, the founder of The Love Movement group of Trinidad and Tobago. Bernadette founded the group in 1972, and they did their first full performance at the Holy Name Convent Hall in 1973. On Saturday night the group put on a costumed and animated song and “dance” performance to the total delight of the audience. They sung hymns, calypsos, and original “nation building” songs written by Bernadette. They were the highlight of the show.

I was fortunate enough to be present at the earlier group rehearsal at which time I spoke to Bernadette, who was open and polite enough to tell me the history and philosophy of the Love Movement. She said it’s not just a choir; it’s a ministry of love. She started the “ministry of love” in order to help children who resided in institutions. In Trinidad and Tobago. She said that the most important element of any member is attitude and spirituality, and if they happen to have a good singing voice, then so much the merrier. There is no doubt that Bernadette Scott is totally fulfilled with her contribution to the betterment of people all over the world.

Special Awards were also given to Kevin Little of St. Vincent and Rupert “Rupeee” Clarke of Barbados. The 17th Annual Caribbean Sunshine Awards was a huge cultural success. Everyone present had high commendations for the organizers, especially for the industrious, humble, insightful and congenial Gil Figaro, Founder and Chairman of this important organization.

The 17th Annual Caribbean Sunshine Awards was sponsored in part by New York Carib News, Moet Hennessy USA, Continental Airlines, BWIA, Travel Span Vacations and RumJungle.

A job well done. I’m looking forward to next year.