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## Dr. Eric Williams' Vision for the Development of Carnival

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**Dr. Eric Williams' Vision for the Development of Carnival**  
**by Hollis Liverpool (Chalkdust)<sup>1</sup>**

A few years ago, I wrote an article for a newspaper, the *Bomb* actually was the name of it, and the editor of the newspaper called me in and told me I couldn't write that article.<sup>2</sup> So, I asked him why, and he told me that I was a calypsonian and calypsonians can't write.

Of course, he was insinuating that calypsonians were simple singers and not academics. So, let me begin by saying that Eric Williams saw the calypsonian in a different light. Williams saw the calypsonian as an academic and indeed more than an academic. For Williams, the calypsonian was a political scientist in his own right. And I want to begin by singing the calypso, "Let the Jackass Sing."

It is a very true calypso because Williams used to talk to me about calypso and what calypsonians do and I learned a lot from him. And I also learned from his cook, the woman who used to look after him. And when I asked her how he liked the calypso and what Williams said, she told me, "Let the Jackass sing!" So I got that actually from the woman in the house, who told me: "Let the Jackass sing!" And I want to begin my talk by singing the first and third verses of the calypso, to show you how he thought of the calypsonian and, hopefully, at the end of my talk, a short talk this morning, you will have a better idea of Williams in terms of his imagery about the calypso and the calypsonian. And if you follow me ...

Let the Jackass Sing

*1st verse*

PNM women against me  
They report me to Deafy  
Last year after Dimanche Gras  
Deafy Chalkie gone too far  
How come someone in Trinidad  
Tell this young man  
That someone in White Hall mad  
It's an insult to your office  
Let us take him to court for this.

*Chorus*

Leave him alone women  
Eric Williams tell them  
Is caiso men like he  
Contribute to me  
When dem caisonians sing  
Is de tourists dey bring  
And it is cash come in  
For de treasury

and de party  
and some for me  
He goin to tie a noose  
Around his own throat  
Give him plenty rope  
Is I go win  
All yuh let the jackass sing

*3rd Verse*

Eric, Chalkie is a damn scamp  
It is time we out his lamp  
Tings we don't want people know  
He does tell dem in calypso  
Although the man criticizin we  
You still send him university  
Let's dismiss him for some stupid breach  
Or send him in Toco to teach

*Chorus*

Leave him alone women  
Eric Williams tell dem  
Is time you ladies know  
More bout calypso  
Without calypso lavwe  
Who go jump and sway  
What will steelbands play  
The calypsonian makes me understand public opinion  
Though he neigh and bray  
Though his tongue does wag  
Let him fly his flag  
Eric is still de king  
Phyllis Mitchell let de jackass sing<sup>3</sup>

I think that the calypso captures the man, but my talk this morning is not on calypso. I am talking generally on Carnival, Eric Williams, and his vision for Carnival. Let me begin by saying that, in 1957, when the Carnival Bands Union demanded that their prizes be raised from \$8,000.00 to \$16,000.00, and the calypsonians decided to boycott the national Carnival competition, the newly formed Government of Eric Williams had already instituted the Carnival Development Committee (CDC), concertedly, to develop the Carnival.<sup>4</sup> His Carnival Committee at the time promised to provide better prizes, etc.

Contrary to what many people believe, Williams did not dismiss the *Guardian* Committee. The *Guardian* Committee, as if by consent and attrition, dismissed themselves.

Since then, until now, the CDC has run every Carnival celebration in Trinidad and Tobago, and right through all the Caribbean Islands they have appointed Carnival development committees.”<sup>5</sup> And they have all utilized the Trinidad and Tobago model, but they have not however instituted the full Eric Williams model.

In 1968, and I was at a calypso audition for selecting persons for the Calypso Theater then managed by the CDC. Note that Williams found the audition important enough to go and I was there. In an aside and private conversation with me, he told me, “I have instituted the Carnival Development Committee to bring all the calypsonians into the fold. The word is development now, don’t forget, development.”

I will never forget that. This is 1968. Dr. Williams way back in 1956 had this profound vision. He was only one year in office at the time but already he had seen the need for development of the art form. Hence, he did not dismiss the *Guardian* Committee, and when George Goddard of the Steelband Association (George Goddard introduced me to the prime minister), when George asked him, “Well, what about the *Guardian* Committee?” He told George that the *Guardian* Committee was to see about the operational aspects of the Carnival in terms of competition and prizes and the CDC was to see about development.

There was a time ten years ago when development was only seen as economic growth. In terms of Carnival, it meant chairs and prizes, etc., etc., in other words, the awarding of prizes and large sums of money, etc. Williams knew all of that but what then is development. What was Eric Williams’ vision for development? As early as 1965, and I was there at [Government] Training College in 1965, when Williams gave the address to students graduating in 1965 at Teachers’ College [Government Training College], and they played pan for him, and they sang calypsos. I sang. And he informed us of the need not only to take part in cultural events but also to make culture become part of educational practices. In other words, if any human development was to take place, Williams was saying that there could be no development without an appropriation of one’s culture. When he instituted the CDC, and he stressed the word development at the 1968 audition, I was reminded of his consistency. You see people look at the words Carnival Development and they do not know what it means.

The World Commission on Culture and Development put it very nicely.<sup>6</sup> A fellow called Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the old Secretary General of the United Nations, said: “Development divorced from its human or cultural contexts is growth without a soul.” In other words, the Commission was saying two things. They were saying that first of all, development must be seen as a full, satisfying, valuable way of life. It is the flourishing of human existence in all its unified forms. And secondly, the Commission was saying that a human being could not be developed if one was divorced from one’s culture.

If this point of reference is generally acceptable, and Carnival and its concomitant behaviors link the West Indian to his culture, then in the Caribbean especially, where historically

Carnival means so much to so many as a genre of art, of movement in song, and song in play, and transposes itself into functional art, then it must be welded into the elements that are basic to our development. May I remind you that for us in the Caribbean, Carnival is a concatenation of things—it is movement, it is color, it is food, it is drink, it is fete, it is feast, it is ritual, it is celebration, it is what keeps BWIA flying, it is foreign exchange, it is a harbinger of blessings and woes. So, for us in the Caribbean, there can only be an arid education, no center of development, no holistic schooling or training without directional focus on the annual Carnival Bands. A few years ago, I attended a conference (when I was Director of Culture) in Nicaragua, and they came to the conclusion, the cogent conclusion that Carnival must be seen as the rhythm of our development.

Ladies and gentlemen, yesterday there was talk of sustainable development. Today, in keeping with that Williams vision, sustainable development must embrace more than just the physical environment, and it must bring in maintenance and placement and capital assets, etc. It means therefore, first of all, that if we are to develop Carnival in the Caribbean there must be a great deal of concentration placed on the education of our people with a view to alerting talent, developing skills, training administrators, practitioners, maintaining the human resource, documenting our past, ensuring the retention of our traditions, and recognizing the artistic creations and cultural expressions of our population. And secondly, it means that governments and state agencies that are entrusted with the development of Carnival must also develop cultural policies that are profoundly sensitive to and inspired by Carnival itself. And such policies must not be seen as a handout but be seen as a correction of a market failure.

All of you will agree, I am sure, that to produce a Carnival Band, or to play a pan, to sing a calypso, or to manage a calypso site, be it a pan yard or a tent, calls for skills. You know, Kitchener [Aldwyn Roberts] was telling me that when he came back, one of the reasons he started to sing with the pan was because he saw the skill in the pan yard. When the guy hit that palang, palang, palang, everybody kept quiet.<sup>7</sup> Kitchener said that was what made him start singing on pan.

It is said by social scientists that in the field of management, human beings are the most difficult of the elements to manage. Well, if they had studied Carnival, they would have found out that panmen and calypsonians are among the hardest people to manage. Carlyle “Jazzy” Pantin told me, the Carlyle “Jazzy” Pantin who managed Kitchener’s Revue [Kaiso tent] from 1965 to his death in 2004. When I asked him the reason for his success, he told me you have to be a friend, a referee, an adviser, a marriage counselor and a father, a tactician and above all a moneylender who must forget who he owes. And these characteristics surprisingly, ladies and gentlemen, these characteristics developed in the Calypso tent by the manager, represent fundamentals of modern management.

Hugh Borde, the longest reigning Captain of a steelband, had been a captain since 1948. He told me that he learned to steal his father’s money (his father used to have a pharmacy) and

his mother's too, to give to panmen, or else pan [the steelband] would have mashed up in the first year. He learned too to avoid steelband clashes with other steelbands, he said, by not taking any sides whatsoever when disputes arose. Clearly the management requirements, empathy, and objectivity had developed naturally in Hugh Borde without the university lessons of the practicing psychologist. And last, in 2003, there was a satirical calypso song on Mr. Afong who was the chairman of the NCBA, the National Carnival Bands Association, and the guy sang a calypso called, "Ah-fong [I found] the thief."

Besides skills of administration and management, producing the Carnival band calls for skills in painting, in welding, in wire bending, designing, decorating, sewing, and above all the use of metals and other materials for the construction of mas'. Today, the correct materials must be used to provide that masquerade with balance, and resilience, and movement, etc.

In the area of pan playing and tuning, everyone knows that it takes a special skill to play the pan, and more skill to tune it. And would you believe, ladies and gentlemen, that Trinidad only has six pan tuners. When I talk about pan tuners, I am talking about tuning pan to a professional level.<sup>8</sup> In the discipline of the calypso, the art of composing, singing, playing a musical instrument, reading music and discerning different rhythms and tunes are skills that all calypsonians need to have.

A few years ago I met a guy in London. He came off the stage and he asked me, "Chalkie, what you think about the calypso?" And I said, "You need training." He watched me in my face with pain, "I need training." He watched me with a startled look on his face. For calypso, you need training. He couldn't understand that calypsonians need to be trained in the use of meter and rhyme and sequence of melody and even in the proper use of the microphone. Over the years, ladies and gentlemen, we have been trained by apprenticeship training. In the recording industry everyone knows that to compete in the international market, calypso CDs must be at a high standard in terms of sound and musical arrangement and musical chords and musicianship. One simply has to go to a recording studio today to see the very changes in recording. You can put on your voice in Miami, put on the synthesizer in Toronto, etc.

In the area of education, in keeping with Dr. Williams' vision that a person cannot be termed as educated if he or she is not grounded in their culture, let me give you an example of what I mean. I went to a secondary school once in Couva, and I heard, Rudy Piggott, the history teacher teaching the history of the Amerindians, and what was he using? He was using Carnival, "Tears of the Indies," George Bailey's [masquerade] band. I went once to listen to a teacher teaching a lesson in a primary school. She was talking about slavery and she was using [Sparrow's calypso], "The Slave." I went to the University of Lund in Sweden, and the guy was teaching physics using the steelband—steelband is physics.

And today, ladies and gentlemen, what happens? Today, we see, in the streets today [during the Carnival parade of bands], we see thousands of Romans and Vikings and Egyptians

and marines and sailors and tribal warriors and Chinese philosophers and Apache Indians, to name a few. They are all roaming the streets in all their glory—giving us lessons in history and sociology and anthropology and math and music and science, and very little of this rich and informative data reaches the classroom. It has not reached the halls of our universities, far less the primary and secondary schools of the Caribbean. We cannot call ourselves developed and have no understanding of the psychical elements driving the Carnival on the streets. We cannot be developed and still not be moved by the masses of human beings drawn into cohesion through natural bonding.

And our governments and universities in the Caribbean, ladies and gentlemen, they know that Carnival [is] culture, they know the part that it plays in the life, etc. The mere fact that the University of the West Indies bestows honorary degrees on our carnival practitioners is an apology and proof that they recognize their own failure to regard culture as a necessary ingredient for development. Sparrow was just granted an honorary degree, but it came years after C.L.R. James compared Sparrow's calypso on Federation ... as being the best paper on the Federation. If I had the time, I would sing you a verse ...

People want to know  
Why Jamaica run from de Federation  
If you want to know  
Why Jamaica run from de Federation  
Jamaica have a right to speak she mind  
That is my opinion  
And if you believe in democracy  
You agree with me  
If they know they didn't want Federation  
And they know they don't want to unite as one  
Tell de doctor you not in favor  
Don't behave like a blasted traitor  
Dis ain't no time to say  
You ain't federating no more

(The Might Sparrow, "Federation")<sup>9</sup>

CLR James said it was the best paper on Federation. I like the word paper because as I told a university professor, when I applied for a job and he told me that I did not produce, I said, "Which university professor has produced more than I?" I said, "I produced 300 papers!"

Ladies and gentlemen, talking about training, I went to the University of Portland and I saw this guy putting up all these beautiful things at an exhibition of African masks in the museum in Portland, and I asked him:

“Where you learned that?”

And he said, “Carnival.” And he said, “But Chalkie you can’t get a certificate for me?”

I said, “A certificate for what?”

“A certificate to show I am a carnivalist or something,” he said. “If I had a paper I’d a get so much money, eh. But I eh have no paper.”

In other words, thousands of our Carnival artists make their living out of Carnival, but they have no paper or certificate to show that they are committed people, or they are educated people, so they roam our shores only recognized by other practitioners like themselves. That is one of the faults we have and Eric Williams’ vision now becomes perceptible in manifold applications. The wide world recognized the wizardry of Boogie Sharp, but our universities do not. The Carnival world, the world of Miss Universe, and the world of the Olympics, hired the skills of Peter Minshall. The English-derived education system does not. The Japanese ambassador in Trinidad praised bandleader Jason Griffith who has been playing fancy sailor for over fifty years ... And I remember in 1984, J.O’Neill Lewis telling Penguin (Seadley Joseph) and me that we had turned out more people over all the years in Washington even though he was ambassador.

It was in keeping therefore with Williams’ vision of the art form that I sang the calypso, “Let the Jackass Sing.” And I am saying, let me finally say this, that most people only see Eric Williams calling me a jackass, but they neglect to see in the song the role of the calypsonian and on that role he had lectured to me many times. As prime minister, he visited the tents, and I was secretary of the Calypso Association and talking to him all the time, and he pointed out to me, as the song showed, that calypsonians by their creative abilities not only increase the general revenues of the Treasury, but the political party. He pointed out to the women who had complained about me that businessmen too are exploiting the calypso, mercilessly. They make calypso paint, calypso dish, and calypso sandwich. Above all, in 1965, with his vision for development, he had told the graduates [of Teachers Training College] that as educated sons and daughters they should be involved in calypso. He told them that even though I was criticizing him, he still sent me to university. Thus I was a bona fide part of his vision for a developed populace, for Williams saw the need to develop the artistes by giving them the educational tools to reach their highest potential. And when I was at university and the university people turned down—we were part time people—our getting in full time. We went to Williams and Williams okayed it. And when, in 1968, and let me say this for the first time, I was charged by the Teaching Service Commission for receiving “emoluments while in the employ of the Crown,” it was Williams who came to my assistance with the famous words, “I don’t know why they humbugging the young man for.” Those words caused the Commission to drop the charges and reinstate me into the teaching profession from which I’d been temporarily shelved. So, I want to close by singing the last two verses of that calypso, the second and the fourth.

Let the Jackass Sing

*2nd verse*

PNM women don’t like me

They tell Deafy that Chalkie  
Castigatin him daily  
An bad talking de Party  
Doc if you could say that Shorty was rude  
Well then we believe Chalkie rude  
Though there's some truth in the things he tell  
Doc we could charge him for libel

*Chorus*

Leave him alone women  
Eric Williams tell dem  
Is caiso men like he  
Help build dis Party  
Many men before he  
Took a pride you see in attackin me  
Melo and Christo bad talk me for so  
They dead out you know  
They a pounce on him  
Causing him such strife  
Crapaud smoke his pipe  
No don't stop him  
Ruby Felix let the jackass sing.

*4th verse*

You ladies Eric said  
Caiso brings us plenty bread  
Singers get wages from it  
Records bring others profit  
[Is] so Calypso means to Carnival day  
And from Carnival many get their pay  
People sell from pudding to water  
Alcohol sales make the firms richer

*Chorus*

Leave him alone women  
Eric Williams tell dem  
People learn of our country from records by he  
Business men take slangs from he  
Put dem on jersey and make big money  
Dey make calypso paint calypso dish  
And calypso sandwich  
His song call "Ah 'Fraid Karl"<sup>10</sup>  
Almost make Karl king

So let Chalkie flap his wing  
Is fame I getting  
[Rita Guy] let the jackass sing.

Years after, I met Karl and he had a nice button on his shoulder here, and it mark: "Karl ain't 'fraid." God bless.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>On Friday, March 18, 2005, Dr. Liverpool presented a paper entitled “Dr. Eric Williams’ Vision for the Development of Carnival,” at the conference on Calypso and the Caribbean Literary Imagination, March 17-19, 2005. His presentation was part of a panel of three on Policy, Politics, and Promise in Calypso: The Eric Williams Era, that was chaired by Dr. William Aho, Professor Emeritus, Department of Sociology, Rhode Island College. In his presentation, Dr. Liverpool focused on Carnival development in at least two ways: the value of Carnival to personal and national development, and the need to further develop Carnival arts through (formal and informal) education and through stronger government support. His presentation slipped in and out of the vernacular and included the singing of his calypso “Let the Jackass Sing” and a few lines from The Mighty Sparrow’s “Federation.” This script was transcribed and edited for publication by Sandra Pouchet Paquet from an original video recording of Dr. Liverpool’s presentation, and is reproduced here in its present form with Dr. Liverpool’s permission.

<sup>2</sup>*The Bomb* is a long-running political weekly in Trinidad & Tobago.

<sup>3</sup>Chalkdust (Hollis Liverpool), “Let the Jackass Sing,” *Stay Up* LP Strakers GS 7789, 1974.

<sup>4</sup>An article in the *Trinidad Guardian* (23 February 1957, pp.1-2) suggests that the government of Trinidad and Tobago organized the Carnival development committee in late 1956. Originally, the committee did not intend to implement its plans in time for the 1957 Carnival, but a crisis occurred that forced it into action. That crisis, as Dr. Liverpool indicates, was the threatened boycott. See also, Gordon Rohlehr, *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad* (448-456).

<sup>5</sup>In the period following a change of government in 1986, the CDC was renamed the National Carnival Commission (NCC).

<sup>6</sup>The independent World Commission on Culture and Development (WCCD) was established jointly by UNESCO and the United Nations (1992-1995).

<sup>7</sup>The “palang, palang, palang” refers to the knocking on the side of a pan by a steelband arranger, when he wants everyone in a panyard to stop playing during a rehearsal.

<sup>8</sup>There are actually many more than six, but Dr. Liverpool is making the point that he feels only six are of the highest quality.

<sup>9</sup>The Mighty Sparrow (Slinger Francisco), “Federation,” *Sparrow Come Back*, Matrix N804 1114/5, 1962.

<sup>10</sup>Chalkdust (Hollis Liverpool), released a calypso called “Ah ‘Fraid Karl,” on *Ah ‘Fraid Karl / We is We A/B 7*” Strakers S-0052, 1972.