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One Last Lavway for Gordon Rohlehr

ARTICLES

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> Well ah went to a stick fight meetin'
> Grande clash wid Rio Claro
> Then dem drummers start wid a fancy drummin'
> Singin' some lavwé from long ago
> Man it was ponya bois and ponya peltin'
> Goat skin screamin' in de Canboulay
> I see women hold dey belly and bawlin' batoné!
> And cry out Sans humanité
>
> (Anslem Douglas, *When I Dead Bury Me Clothes*)[1]

Our keeper of chantwell traditions has left the tent, and will not return for a curtain call, no matter how long the resounding applause continues. As I sat to craft these few words in memory of Prof. Gordon Rohlehr, this is the song that became the music to accompany me in this task, not because Rohlehr was a warrior in the tradition of stick fighting per se, far from it. What he would have appreciated about this remake of Growling Tiger's "When I Dead Bury Me Clothes" is Douglas' skill in blending "words with extremely complex rhythmic phrases of music and still retain the fluidity and basic rhythms of speech."[2] While Rohlehr is making these comments in response to questions from Kamau Brathwaite about West Indian poetry and calypso, he would later expand his analysis and critique on calypso to include other genres of literature and music. He appreciated a good story, and the ability of the calypsonian to deliver history in context without being pedantic or disrupting the musical elements, what he sometimes referred to as the "sinuousities of rhythm."[3]

Gordon Rohlehr was many things: a father, a husband, a mentor, a tireless music aficionado (not just of calypso, but jazz also), and possessed an unabridged, seemingly inexhaustible knowledge of calypso music and history. Born in Guyana in 1942, Rohlehr was educated at Queens College in Guyana before traveling to the University College of the West Indies (now the University of the West Indies) where he earned a first-class honours degree in English Literature. Rohlehr later went on to complete his dissertation, entitled "Alienation and Commitment in the Works of Joseph

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[1] Around 1996 or 1997, Anslem Douglas remade Growling Tiger's 1979 Calypso, *When I Dead Bury Me Clothes*. The song maintains the lavway (or chorus) but Douglas creates a whole new sociocultural context for the song by creating a rich story about a stick fight between men from Grande and Rio Claro, obeah, and other traditions.

[2] This line is part of Rohlehr' response to a question from Kamau Brathwaite in the interview/ commentary that was later published as "Gordon Rohlehr's 'Sparrow and the Language of the Calypso' –CAM Comment–." *Caribbean Quarterly* 14, no. 1/2 (1968): 91–96. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40653060.

[3] Ibid, 92.

Conrad," at Birmingham University. Much has been written about the fateful conversation at the London flat of Orlando Patterson (in the company of Kamau Brathwaite, George Lamming and his fellow countryman, Guyanese artist, Aubrey Williams) where Rohlehr first intimated to those gathered how he might approach the question of what constitutes a "Caribbean aesthetic."

By the end of the discussion, a seemingly understated invitation, "if that is how you feel, why don't you do it then" soon became Rohlehr's lecture, "Sparrow and the Language of Calypso" which, according to Louis Regis, was "delivered on Friday 7 April 1967 at CAM's second public meeting at the Students Centre in London. In a conversation with Regis, Rohlehr recalls that he was invited by Kamau Brathwaite to deliver a talk on "Selvon, the Calypso and the Creolisation of Experience," a title suggested by Kamau, but he (Rohlehr) opted instead to hold forth on "Sparrow and the Language of Calypso."[4] Brathwaite was clearly taken by Rohlehr's argument, taken sufficiently to respond to the lecture nearly a year later (which he recorded) in a "CAM Comment" (a conversation with Rohlehr about the lecture) published in *Caribbean Quarterly* entitled, "Gordon Rohlehr's 'Sparrow and the Language of Calypso."[5] The discussion that began a year ago (in 1967) both men, now resting with the ancestors, referred to the letters they had exchanged with one another in the interim. We can only imagine the vast archive of these exchanges between Rohlehr and his contemporaries, his students, colleagues, calypsonians, other music officiandos, historians and anyone else who had an interest in music and literature. Of the men gathered that evening, only the host (Orlando Patterson) is still on this side, the others I would like to imagine, are on the other side, continuing the conversations that animated their lives and friendships.

I imagine these exchanges as a version of Douglas' rendering of Growling Tiger's song, precisely in the spirit of the sinuous rhythm that Douglas evokes in his telling of the stick fight meeting where the music, then and now, frames the historical and cultural context of stick fighting, the Canboulay riots, African spiritual practices, and the social geography of Trinidad and Tobago (Sandy Grande, Rio Claro, and Moruga):

> Well ah went to a stick fight meetin'
>   Grande clash wid Rio Claro
>   Then dem drummers start wid a fancy drummin'
>   Singin' some lavwé from long ago
>   Man it was ponya bois and ponya peltin'
>   Goat skin screamin' in de Canboulay
>   I see women hold dey belly and bawlin' batoné
>   And cry out Sans humanité
>
> *When ah dead, bury meh clothes,* (lavway)
> *Ah doh want nobody cry for me*
> *When ah dead, bury meh clothes,* (lavway)
> *Man, put everything in di cemetery*
> *When ah dead, bury meh clothes,* (lavway)
> *Ah doh want dem boy wear mi shirt and tie*
> *When ah dead, bury meh clothes,* (lavway)
> *And doh forget to tell meh muumma doh cry.*

In the parlance of kaisonians, a lavway (or *lavwé*) is the (often sarcastic) chorus sung by the crowd in the street (or backup singers) led by the chantwell. Some would say is when the music just leh goh in di street and people dem tek over the song. But the chantwell is always aware that the song belongs to the people and the music speaks to them, it speaks of them in the cadence and rhythms that are their heart beats. This understanding brought Gordon Rohlehr to the crossroads of calypso and literature in the Caribbean, he understood the intimate relationship between the oral traditions that informed West Indian speech and storytelling and the musical traditions that comingled with one another in the Caribbean region. He recognized that the nature of West Indian speech and the culturally repressive circumstances out of which the creolized French, English and African languages, religions and rituals emerged all sprang out of bodies of resistance, embodied voices and embolden imaginations.

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[4] Louis Regis, "'Ah Never Get Weary Yet': Gordon Rohlehr's Forty Years in Calypso", Tout Moun, From Apocalypse to Awakenings, Vol. 2, No. 1, October 2013, quoting "Gordon Rohlehr, Interview with Funso Aiyejina", in Funso Aiyejina (ed.), Self Portraits. Interview with Ten West Indian Writers and Two Critics, St Augustine: The School of Continuing Studies, 2003 (230–70), p. 247.

[5] Brathwaite, Edward. "Gordon Rohlehr's 'Sparrow and the Language of the Calypso' –CAM Comment–." *Caribbean Quarterly* 14, no. 1/2 (1968): 91–96. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40653060.

Here, at the University of Miami, Gordon Rohlehr was a major part of several pivotal projects and conversations, he was part of the Miami tribe, meaning he was fiercely loyal to the enterprise of developing Caribbean literary and cultural studies, no matter where this work was taking place. As a result, he was at almost every conference we hosted at UM; if Sandra Pouchet Paquet reached out and asked, he made his way to Miami. One such instance was our convening of the Calypso and the Literary Imagination in 2005 in partnership with the Historical Museum of South Florida and Stephen Stuempfle. I had only recently arrived in Miami, but Gordon greeted me in the new context of Miami with the same degree of enthusiasm he had when I landed at his office door at UWI, St. Augustine as a graduate student doing dissertation research in the 1990s. What mattered to him the most, was not where he met you, but that he met you in the context of a shared affinity: Caribbean culture, history and politics, “the unholy trinity” he would jokingly say sometimes before he launched into a conversation about whatever you brought up with him.

He was a visionary, there with what was needed for the situation, sometimes it was questions, other times answers, but always engaged. Sometimes, it was the kind word, an insight into the worst and best among us, whatever the moment required, there was a smile, a story or a song, and when the situation warranted it, a long steups that could resonate across generations. But there was his laugh…a loud booming laugh, rivaled only by his voice, that seemed to emanate from the same base that Shadow sang about in “Bass Man” (1974). It was a sound that resonated because it was full of life and living, from deep within a tradition of sound and song that continues to reverberate, still.

Gordon Rohlehr always loved the story at its source, he loved the telling of the story and the lived experiences calypsonians sought to bring to the big stage of life during the Carnival. He also loved the conversation between the rhythms and the lyrics – the fact that Douglas kept Growling Tiger’s lavway and the rhythm, but changed the tempo, was one of the things Rohlehr would point out to those of us who had cut our teeth on the literary canon (British or Caribbean, it made little difference). We all acknowledged that ours was more than a passing romance with the shared affinities and elements of music and literature. Tempo was still tempo, and we recognized it, reveled in it, all the while tracing out the lyrical beauty in the iron of the rhythm section, or a bottle and spoon, and the cadence of the chantwell.

In the end, we have not, as the lavway implores us, buried his clothes, nor will we wear them. He was a giant of a person, after all, tall in stature and intellect, with a wonderfully deep rich voice, his was a voice of a generation. Instead, in the spirit of the chantwell, he has left us a wonderfully sinuous song (a real big chune, as Jamaicans would say) and invited us to fashion our own garments, our own tempo, and our own lyrics that reflect our moment, our realities. *And doh forget to tell meh muumma doh cry.*

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Patricia J. Saunders is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Miami, Coral Gables where she is the Co-Editor of Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal. She is the author of Alien-Nation and Repatriation: Translating Identity in Anglophone Caribbean Literature (2007) and co-editor of Music. Memory. Resistance: Calypso and the Caribbean Literary Imagination (2007). Her second book, Buyers Beware: Epistemologies of Consumption in Caribbean Popular Culture (2022), examines a range of contemporary Caribbean popular cultural modes of expression to argue that the bonds between consumption and citizenship in the region are stronger now more than ever despite higher rates of unemployment and socioeconomic inequity. Buyers Beware was published in the Critical Caribbean Studies Series with Rutgers University Press. Her work has also appeared in journals such as: Plantation Society in the Americas, Small Axe, Transforming Anthropology, The Journal of West Indian Literature and recently, Feminist Studies.

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