

Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal

Volume 4
Issue 2 *Earl Lovelace: A Special Issue*

Article 4

December 2006

Congratulations, Compère Earl

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Recommended Citation

Hernandez, Edward (2006) "Congratulations, Compère Earl," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol4/iss2/4>

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I am not sure what year it was—1964 or 1965—when I first met Earl. Tobago was still in aftershock following its devastation by hurricane “Flora” in September 1963—a year after our celebrations of Independence, and suddenly appearing before me at my place of work introducing himself, was the man I had read about in the Guardian and heard on Radio Trinidad after he won the British Petroleum Independence Literary Award for his novel *While Gods are Falling*. It was more than a refreshing and pleasant surprise in the chaotic environment created by the hurricane, and we quickly endorsed our acquaintance with a nip at “Koo Corner.” This became a regular pastime.

To this day I cannot recall the name of the person who told him to check me out when he took up his job as an Agricultural Extension Officer in Tobago, but whoever it was must have realized that we shared the same passion for our folk traditions and the Arts, and so a bond of friendship and brotherhood evolved not only between ourselves but also with my young protégé Jim Armstrong. We were all young then, but Jim was younger—a teenager—and he too shared our passion. It is said that Earl’s attempt at painting—using my paints—caused him to take up painting seriously—the proof is there for all to see. Through this bond our families became close, so close that I am the godfather of Earl’s first son Walt, and he is the godfather of one of my sons, Lincoln, both of whom shared the same crib at baby-sitting times.

During his sojourn as an Extension Officer, he drove a “Volks,” a Volkswagen—we called it “The Bug”—and if this “Bug” like “River Stone” could talk, it would have told tales of many things, of places, adventures, experiences, and his interaction with farmers whom he met in the fields at fore-day morning and at night at village rum shops under flambeau light to discuss their problems and give advice. Like a schoolmaster with blackboard and white chalk, he illustrated the ideas he was putting across. His method and approach in dealing with village folks was not learnt at the farm institute, but from his life experiences.

I shared some of these experiences with Earl at nights, tagging along to keep his company and learning from his folkways in dealing with rural village people. Very often he would comment about his job and the lack of understanding about the farmers under the system of his department, which required him to report for duty from eight to four. My workplace was his hideaway during later hours of the day where he would read, write or paint—theme painting, over and over, and bring along draft chapters of *The Schoolmaster* for me to read and comment on. His drafts were handwritten in black ink with an old fashioned pen-nib on plain white paper. Reading his handwriting was akin to a reading doctor’s prescription in the days when they studied Latin and wrote with a scrawl. During the quiet hours of evening I also read some of his plays and short stories, and one of those stories “The Bus Stop” and its main character are indelibly imprinted on my psyche to this day.

It is the story of an artist who painted on glass on the reverse side, painting fashionable themes of those days such as “Home Sweet Home,” “God Bless Our Home,” “In God We Trust,” or “Sacred Heart of Jesus,” framed with cardboard backing and passe-partout around the edges,

in an era when the homes of folks in Trinidad had one or two of these paintings hung along with a picture of the Crucifixion of Christ. In addition some homes also hung pictures of the King and Queen, Haile Salassie, and Uriah “Buzz” Butler smiling, escorted by a policeman at the High Court to be sent to Nelson Island.¹

Lovelace’s story unfolds at the bus stop with the artist broke and desperate. He waits for the bus to travel and peddle his paintings with his last sixpence piece, when he finds a five-dollar note. He is an honest, religious and virtuous man and his mind is now in turmoil. He debates with himself whether he should keep it or try to find who lost it, because he never touched so much money at any one-time in his life, and he prays to be relieved of this temptation and torture. Recently, I asked Earl about the story which he vaguely remembers, and he explained that it was probably hidden among the volume of his papers in storage.

Earl was a national celebrity among the rich and famous transient personalities that frequented Tobago in the 1960’s, yet he kept a low-key profile, and when people discovered who he was they would say, “is he,” “he so simple,” “he not fussy,” “he have ah sweet smile” women said. When his book *While Gods Are Falling* was launched in Trinidad in 1965, the well-to-do and not so well to-do invited him to dinner and cocktails. He gracefully refused most of them. But he was concerned about the circulation of his book in Tobago. The bookseller had only sold four, while dozens remained on the shelf, and he said to me, “we have to organize a book launch in Tobago.” We sat down to talk, smoke, sip, and think.

He agreed with me that a book launch was a mundane exercise attended by some who will not buy a book and want talk about their ambitions to write. We also agreed the Library was not the place that would highlight the author and his book, so we decided on a program that was exciting and entertaining and supported with live entertainment. Crown Point Hotel decided to sponsor the event at the Hotel with cocktails and dinner. At this event we mounted an Art Exhibition, with performances by the Crusoe Kid—now Tobago Crusoe, Barbara Choy and Tuxedo Orchestra. Every book was sold and signed, every drink was drunk and everybody danced. All the women wanted to dance with the author, and I looked at Earl’s smiling face, which told me it was the beginning of greater things to come.

My most enlightened experience with Earl as a writer was co-producing his Independence play *The New Boss*, which was directed by Jim Bryan, who acted one of the roles when we were members of the drama group Tobago Players. The selection of the actors to portray the characters had to measure up to Earl’s insight, which he described with infinite detail. After this came the readings, which appeared to appease his creative mind. He was always taking notes and we discussed the players’ interpretations after each session until we were ready to rehearse and act. Of course he was always taking notes and by the next rehearsal we would have changes in the script, and by the next rehearsal we again had changes in the script, and so at every rehearsal changes were made until tempers flared. He decided then to absent himself but he was always close by and would appear towards the end.

In the last days before the performance we reviewed costumes, props and lighting. Our dress rehearsal was two days before the show and he demanded changes in the backdrop, which was painted ply board to simulate the old galvanize of estate barracks. So we had to get authentic old galvanize and rehearse with that all over again. Our voices reverberated on the galvanize creating a cacophonous sound, so it was back to the original set. I drank some rum afterwards and decided to quit, but by early next morning I was back with the crew preparing the original backdrop and props with Earl overseeing and smiling from ear to ear. We even had real banana trees, and bunches of coconuts and bananas, a real “poniar” and “poniar-case.” We looked like real laborers. After all, we had inherited the estate and were the New Boss! After this close encounter with a playwright, I vowed “never me again to produce a play with its author present.”

Jim went abroad, then another close friend Selvon Nanaan who never returned, Earl followed, and suddenly I was alone without friends to share a deep interest in our cultural heritage. Making new friends who share the same passions is not easy and it was not the same without them. However I am always elated when someone from the country hails me and asks, “how you’ pardner?” And I ask, “which one?” And they reply, “the one with the Volks—the writer” and “the other tall red-man?” “Oh! Earl and Jim—yeah—them fellas was real regular.”

This is a testament of respect and admiration for the man with the Volks. If it could talk it would say much more. CONGRATULATIONS COMPÈRE EARL

Notes

¹Uriah Butler was a labor leader and national hero who fought for the rights of the working poor in Trinidad. He was found guilty of inciting the Oilfield Riots of 1937, also known as the Butler Riots. He was sentenced to two years hard labor at Nelson Island, one of the five islands west of Port of Spain that was used as a detention center in the 1930's.