

ON THE HON. LOUISE BENNETT -
A TRIBUTE BY THE PUBLIC RELATIONS
SOCIETY OF JAMAICA

B/N - Bennett, Louise

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FROM TIME TO TIME IN THE HISTORY OF A NATION, THERE EMERGES SOMEONE ON THE NATIONAL SCENE WHO SEEMS TO EMBODY THE VERY PSYCHE OF ITS PEOPLE; CAPABLE OF DISTILLING, INTERPRETING AND EXPRESSING ITS COLLECTIVE WISDOM, ITS HOPES AND ITS ASPIRATIONS, ITS STRENGTHS AS WELL AS ITS WEAKNESSES.

IN JAMAICA, LOUISE BENNETT IS SUCH A PERSON.

FOR OVER FIFTY YEARS, THIS SUPERB ARTIST HAS SPOKEN OF AND FOR THE JAMAICAN PEOPLE WITH SUCH UNDERSTANDING, WITH SUCH LOVE, WITH SUCH ACUTE APPRECIATION OF HER PEOPLE THAT FEW WOULD CONSIDER IT AN OVERSTATEMENT TO SAY THAT LOUISE IS JAMAICA AND JAMAICA IS LOUISE'S.

THE PUBLIC ROMANCE BETWEEN LOUISE AND JAMAICA BEGAN OVER 50 YEARS AGO WHEN, AS A YOUNG GIRL, SHE FIRST BEGAN PERFORMING HER DIALECT VERSE AT THE THEN POPULAR CHRISTMAS MORNING CONCERTS AT COKE HALL IN KINGSTON.

WITH HER DEBUT ON THE JAMAICAN STAGE, LOUISE SIGNALLED THE START OF A MINOR REVOLUTION AS, PRIOR TO THIS, POEMS IN DIALECT WERE CONSIDERED A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS.

DIALECT WAS THE LANGUAGE OF THE ORDINARY JAMAICAN AND THE LANGUAGE THAT THE NOT-SO-ORDINARY JAMAICAN FELT MOST COMFORTABLE WITH, IF ONE IS TO JUDGE BY THE EASE AND RAPIDITY WITH WHICH SUCH PERSONS LAPSED INTO IT AT EVERY UNGUARDED MOMENT.

BUT POETRY WAS SOMETHING ELSE AGAIN - THAT WAS THE PROVINCE OF ENGLISH POETS AND SUCH OF THE LOCAL FOLK WHO COULD MANAGE A REASONABLE FACIMILE THEREOF.

IT WAS MANY A YEAR BEFORE LOUISE'S ART WAS TO RECEIVE SERIOUS CONSIDERATION AS A LITERARY FORM BUT IT IS CLEAR THAT SHE WAS UNDAUNTED BY THIS. SHE CONTINUED TO HOLD UP A MIRROR TO THE SOCIETY AND RHYME HER WAY INTO THE HEARTS OF HER FELLOW JAMAICANS WITH A UNIQUE BLEND OF KEEN OBSERVATION, IRONIC COMMENT, AND INFECTIOUS GOOD HUMOUR SET TO A RHYTHMIC, UNMISTAKABLY JAMAICAN BEAT. A LATER GENERATION OF JAMAICANS WHO WERE TO BEGIN EXPERIMENTING WITH POETRY AND REGGAE IN A FORM WHICH HAS BECOME KNOWN AS DUB HAVE SALUTED LOUISE AS THE FIRST "DUBBER" - CERTAINLY A TRIBUTE TO THE TIMELESS QUALITY OF HER WORK, IN AN AGE WHERE YESTERDAY'S MASSIVE HIT IS RELEGATED TO THE SCRAPHEAP OF HISTORY, AS QUICKLY AS IT TAKES TO GET TO THE TOP OF THE CHARTS.

FROM HER EARLY SUCCESSES ON THE JAMAICAN STAGE LOUISE WENT ON TO FORMAL STUDY IN DRAMA AT THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF DRAMATIC ARTS, IN THE U.K.

WHILE STILL A STUDENT IN LONDON SHE BEGAN BROADCASTING - HER FIRST ENTRY INTO THIS MEDIUM BEING A BBC LIVE RADIO SHOW WHICH DEALT WITH WEST INDIANS IN LONDON AND WAS STYLED "CARIBBEAN CARNIVAL".

THIS WAS THE START OF AN ACTIVE CAREER IN BROADCASTING FIRST IN THE U.K. AND LATER IN JAMAICA WHERE PROGRAMMES LIKE "LAUGH WITH LOUISE", "CALLING MISS LOU", "LOU AND RANNY" AND "MISS LOU'S VIEWS" BECAME STAPLE BROADCASTING FARE FOR JAMAICANS OF ALL AGES AND ALL WALKS OF LIFE.

WITH THE ADVENT OF TELEVISION, LOUISE WAS TO MAKE HER MARK IN THIS MEDIUM APPEARING IN A NUMBER OF LOCALLY PRODUCED SHOWS AND COMPERING FOR MANY YEARS A POPULAR CHILDREN'S PROGRAMME, KNOWN AS RING DING.

BUT RADIO AND T.V. WERE ONLY TWO ASPECTS OF WHAT WAS TO BECOME A REMARKABLE CAREER WHICH LOUISE RESUMED WHEN SHE RETURNED TO JAMAICA IN 19..

IT WAS A CAREER THAT WAS TO MAKE HER KNOWN AND LOVED THROUGHOUT JAMAICA, WHERE EVERY MAN, WOMAN AND CHILD WOULD HAIL HER AFFECTIONATELY AS MISS LOU WHENEVER AND WHEREVER SHE APPEARED.

SHE WAS AT ONE TIME A DRAMA TUTOR AT EXCELSIOR HIGH SCHOOL, HER ALMA MATER, THEN WENT ON TO PERFORM A SOMEWHAT UNIQUE TEACHING ROLE FOR JAMAICA WELFARE, TRAVERSING THE LENGTH AND BREADTH OF THE ISLAND, AS SHE HELPED JAMAICANS TO LEARN TO EXPRESS THEIR IDENTITY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE THROUGH DRAMA.

THE OTHER ROLE WITH WHICH MISS LOU WILL ALWAYS BE ASSOCIATED IS THE MINDS OF HER FELLOW JAMAICANS IS THE ROLE OF COMEDIENNE WHICH SHE FILLED IN THE JAMAICAN PANTOMIME FOR 28 UNBROKEN YEARS - BEGINNING WITH THE FIRST PANTOMIME TO BE STAGED BY THE LTM IN 1943 AND ENDING WITH HER RETIREMENT IN 1971.

IN THE COURSE OF HER JOURNEY THROUGH LIFE, THE LITTLE GIRL WHO LOVED TO "VERSIFY" HAS TRAVELLED A LONG ROAD WHICH SAW HER, NOT ONLY WIN THE LOVE OF HER FELLOW JAMAICANS BUT ATTRACT INTERNATIONAL ACCLAIM, AND WHERE HER POETRY WHICH AT FIRST WAS SEEN AS PLEASANT AND DIVERSIONARY EVENTUALLY CAME TO RECEIVE SERIOUS LITERARY ATTENTION.

REX NETTLEFORD, WRITING AN INTRODUCTION TO JAMAICA LABRISH - A COLLECTION OF MISS LOU'S POEMS PUBLISHED IN 1966 - SAID, "IN A QUARTER OF A CENTURY SHE HAS CARVED DESIGNS OUT OF THE SHAPELESS AND UNRULY SUBSTANCE THAT IS THE JAMAICAN DIALECT, THE LANGUAGE WHICH MOST OF THE JAMAICAN PEOPLE SPEAK MOST OF THE TIME - AND HAS RAISED THE SING-SONG PATTERN OF THE HILLS AND OF THE TOWNS TO AN ART LEVEL ACCEPTABLE TO AND APPRECIATED FROM ALL CLASSES IN HER COUNTRY".

MISS LOU CONTINUES TO CARVE HER DESIGNS, ENRICHING US ALL. A GRATEFUL JAMAICA HAS BESTOWED ON HER A NUMBER OF AWARDS INCLUDING THE ORDER OF JAMAICA, THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES HAS CONFERRED AN HONORARY DOCTORATE ON HER; AND SHE HAS BEEN THE RECIPIENT OF THE PRESTIGIOUS NORMAN MANLEY AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE.

WE SUSPECT HOWEVER THAT NONE OF THESE MEAN AS MUCH TO MISS LOU AS THE FACT THAT HER BELOVED JAMAICANS PAY HER THE SUPREME COMPLIMENT OF NOT ONLY LOVING HER, BUT IMITATING HER.

THIS EVENING THE PUBLIC RELATIONS SOCIETY OF JAMAICA IS PROUD TO PAY ITS TRIBUTE TO DR. THE HON. LOUISE BENNETT, POET, ACTRESS, COMEDIENNE AND CHRONICLER OF THE JAMAICAN SCENE. *AFFECTIONATELY CALLED - THE Hon Miss. Lou.*

TO QUOTE PROF. NETTLEFORD AGAIN - "HER INSPIRATION CAME AND STILL COMES FROM THE EVERYDAY HAPPENINGS AROUND HER. SHE IS ACUTELY SENSITIVE TO THESE OCCURRENCES AND FINDS IN THEM A THOUSAND WONDERS - WONDERS EASILY CONCEALED FROM THOSE OF US TOO LONG CONDITIONED TO SEEING THE WORTH OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE ONLY IN THE DEEDS OF KINGS AND CONQUERORS. SHE MAY NOT HAVE BOTHERED TO ASK IN EXPLICIT TERMS ABOUT THE ENDS OF EXISTENCE. NOR DID SHE

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LABOUR ON THE FEARS THAT MEN HAVE ABOUT THEIR INEVITABLE MORTALITY. INSTEAD SHE CONCENTRATED ON THE IMMEDIACY OF THE TASK OF HAVING TO SURVIVE. AN UPROOTED, POOR BUT PROUD PEOPLE ARE PRIMARILY CONCERNED ABOUT SURVIVING, HAVING FOUND THEMSELVES ALIVE. THEY MAKE THE BEST OF IT WITH AN INTELLIGENT OPTIMISM WHICH IS THE OCCASION OF MISS BENNETT'S BRIGHT-SIDE-OF-LIFE HUMOUR. HUMOUR BECOMES, AS IT WERE, THE EXPRESSION OF A PEOPLE'S WILL TO LIVE AND MISS BENNETT RECAPTURES THIS WILL WITH UNDERSTANDING, COMPASSION AND TRUTH. WHAT MORE SHOULD ONE ASK OF HER"?

MARCH 30, 1987.