

Bennett, Louise

Louise Bennett: Pioneer

B/W Literature - Sta. Arthur

By Donna Ortega

As most schools islandwide prepare this month to enter the various speech, drama, dance, music and other cultural competitions in the build-up towards our annual Festival celebrations, it is fitting that we pay tribute to someone who has been a pioneer in preserving Jamaica's heritage. This has been the aim of the Jamaica



'Miss Lou' in an informal mood at her Gordon Town residence.

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Cultural Development Commission's promotion of involvement in all areas of the arts — to inspire pride and a sense of identity so important to nation building — which is culminated in Festival. This too has been the thrust of Louise Bennett's dedication of her life to the people of Jamaica.

Louise Bennett-Coverley, fondly known to all Jamaicans as "Miss Lou", this year marks 46 years as a professional writer and theatre personality. Although she no longer takes part in the Little Theatre Movement's annual Pantomime, her rendition of her poems are always in demand and Miss Lou is always ready to satisfy her audience.

Born in Kingston on September 7, 1919, Miss Lou was educated at St. Simon's College and Excelsior College before going on to England to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

Miss Lou began writing dialect when she was a teenager. At that time, the society felt that dialect was not an approved form of expression. Today, she has raised the appreciation of dialect to an art level.

The research and folklore creations for the Jamaica stage, she has done, have helped to save a great deal of Jamaican folk material from becoming extinct. Miss Lou has also helped to promote Jamaican culture abroad and lectured in the U.S.A. and the U.K. on Jamaican folklore.

In recognition of Miss Lou's work as author, dramatist and comedienne, she was awarded the MBE for work in Jamaica Literature and Theatre; the Norman Manley Award for Excellence; the Order of Jamaica for work in the field of Native Culture, and the Gold Musgrave Medal for 1978 in recognition of her contribution to the development of the arts in Jamaica and the Caribbean. In addition in 1983, she was recognised for her contribution to the development of Jamaican dialect, the Arts, as well as for her theatrical performances which have been acclaimed and internationally she was awarded the Degree of Honorary Doctor of Letters (D. Litt.) by the University of the West Indies.

Miss Lou says that some time this month she should be starting "full-scale" writing of her "Memoirs" which she has already started, as well as the compilation of her lectures and demonstrations on folklore. Already her day begins at 4: a.m. "or earlier" a very busy lady indeed but this does not stop the flow of poetry from her pen. How does she do it

"I find it very stressful to sit and write poems in a regulated way. I don't like writing under those conditions. I like to feel it and den tek me time and do it. It's not the same thing when somebody sets you something to write. You have to feel that you want to write on this."

In June last year, Miss Lou was invited by the Centre of Afro-American Studies of Atlanta, Georgia to tour Senegal and Zambia. Before going to Africa, she spent weeks in the U.K. performance before West Indian audiences. She was sponsored by the Commonwealth Institute at concerts in Birmingham and in London. One concert at the Lyric Theatre in London was recorded and an album called "Miss Lou, 'Yes M'Dear" released in September 1983.

According to Miss Lou, her overseas performances went "very well". She has very fond memories of her reception in the Gambia where the simplicity of the people struck a responsive chord in her own heart. "They're very warm and very nice, and they're not oversophisticated", she says.

Of her audiences both locally and overseas, Miss Lou says: "It's nice to have such a good rapport with your people. The young poets here and abroad, them come and eulogise and them carry on so mek you feel good". As she speaks, she laughs, warm and hearty in characteristic fashion.

That's our own Miss Lou: — working hard to preserve our cultural heritage and spreading joy while doing so.

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