

'Di Dragon Doan Walk Di Trail No Mo'

'David Rudder's famous calypso 'Di Hammer' says it all - 'Di Dragon Doan Walk Di Trail No Mo'. Soca legend and band leader extraordinaire Byron Lee 'Dragon', will be buried today in Kingston. There will be two services. The first will be held at the Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Hall, 2b Lemon Lane, off Mannings Hill Road, from 11:00 am - 12:00 noon, while the second service will be a Tribute to Byron Lee and A Roman Catholic Service of Thanksgiving at the Abe Issa Auditorium, St George's College, his alma mater. Lee, who had been ailing for sometime, died at the University Hospital in Kingston on Tuesday, the day after another music industry pioneer, Alton 'Mr. Rocksteady' Ellis, was laid to rest. A few days before his death, he was conferred with the Order of Jamaica during a special ceremony at the University Hospital. The tributes continue to pour in, with the music fraternity honouring and recognizing his contribution to their lives and careers.

Speaking shortly after his death, chairman of the Jamaica Association of Vintage Artistes and Affiliate, and manager / bass player for Fab Five, Frankie Campbell described Byron Lee's 52 year career as 'incredible'. He said Lee was a pioneer and was instrumental in revolutionizing aspects of Jamaican music, and taking ska across the globe. Mr. Campbell expressed his condolences to Lee's family and friends and said the music industry has indeed lost a true stalwart.

Soca Diva, Allison Hinds (Roll It Gal) says "He's made such a huge contribution to the Caribbean musical landscape that it cannot be overlooked. He was very hands on and people respected that. There were times I remember going into a new country (when I was with Square One) and finding that Byron Lee and the Dragonaires was already firmly entrenched, so we then had to work to establish ourselves as a band that was just as good as his. That's what healthy competition does and it made us a better band in the long run." She said the fact that told her several times that she was his favourite soca artiste, meant a lot to her.

Soca artiste Destra Garcia said Lee gave her a lot of good advice and describes the experience of performing with Byron Lee and the Dragonaires as "fantastic."

"Former Prime Minister and Music producer Edward Seaga described Lee as a social engineer who used music as a tool to transform and close the social gaps. He noted that by 1963, Jamaicans were composing their own music and the first Jamaican rhythm, the ska, was very popular, but downtown only.

At the time Seaga was Minister of Development and Welfare and wanted to see the ska become nationally accepted in keeping with the objective of Independence. "I took Byron downtown to Chocomo Lawn in Denham Town where he heard a small band, rehearsing. Byron listened intently to the beat of the music, enthralled by the unique arrangement with the off-beat. That was sufficient. Soon ska was being played uptown, making it a national form of music."

He also talked about Lee's influence on calypso in Jamaica saying that at first it was uptown music, "but when he later promoted the Trinidad Carnival in Jamaica, he drew the downtown music lovers into his entrancing carnival parades. Once again, he helped to create a national music.

One of the faces of Byron Lee and The Dragonaires, is lead singer, Tobago-born, Oscar B. He describes the Dragon as a perfectionist "whatever it may be, he knew what he wanted and how to get it out of you." Oscar B recounts the first day he walked into Lee's office at Dynamic Sounds "There was a replica of a stone on his desk with a stream of blood running down and the bottom read: "The Dragon will make blood out of stone."

Courtney Robb, former lead guitarist and band leader for Byron Lee and The Dragonaires emphasizes that "Byron's contribution to Caribbean music cannot be overstated. His shows were always on time, his production flawless and his presentation first class. The two-and-a-half years I spent as a guitarist with the legendary Byron Lee and his Dragonaires could fill a book. My first tour ever was with them, under his leadership, and I will never forget his passion for perfection. His clashes with his musicians over a sloppy solo or botched chords are unforgettable and something I took with me in my future endeavours as a bandleader and producer. Byron might not have been a virtuoso, but to keep a band such as his on top for 50 years speaks volumes about the man." Calypsonian and personal friend, David Rudder describes Lee as "a true visionary", noting that he was a friend, elder, father figure and mentor to him and the many musicians he took under his wing. He said Lee, breathed life into everything he believed in, remembering when he told him "David, I am going to bring Trinidad Carnival to Jamaica." He believed introducing some of the joys of carnival to Jamaica would help lift the spirit of the people. At the time, Rudder said he thought it was no more than a dream. Father Francis Ryan, former sportsmaster at St George's College remembers Byron Lee as a student, describing him as "a natural leader", noting that the other children looked up to him and he was good at so many sports. He noted that the band actually started through sports. "After a win at Sabina Park, the football team was in the clubhouse beating pots and pans celebrating and that's where Byron Lee and the Dragonaires started. My memories of Byron are very strong. I had him on all of my teams and he was always very reliable. He had a good character and he put everything into what he did."

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