

Miss Lou, More Than Comedy

To call her a comedienne is to limit her stellar contribution. Story teller, writer, social commentator, cultural icon, historian, 'Miss Lou' is larger than life.

Louise Bennett was born on September 7, 1919. She was a Jamaican poet and activist. From Kingston, Jamaica Louise Bennett remains a household name in Jamaica, a "Living Legend" and a cultural icon. She received her education from Ebenezer and Calabar Elementary Schools, St. Simon's College, Excelsior College, Friends College (Highgate).

Miss Lou's work forms part of the corpus of material studied by students of Caribbean Literature and Folktales at the University of the West Indies and graces the library shelves of many universities and institutions of learning outside of the region. Dr. The Honourable Louise Bennett Coverley is no ordinary Jamaican. In the introduction to the book *Jamaica Labrish* Miss Lou's most well known publication, Professor Rex Nettleford wrote: "There are very few Jamaicans whose lives have not been touched and in many cases significantly influenced by this heroine of Jamaican culture." Heroine? you might ask, yes definitely a heroine. One who went to war in her own inimitable gentle way, to gain respectability and acceptance for things Jamaican, most of all our language. Me Too Of course the debate about whether Jamaican Patois can/should be considered a bona fide language, continues. Those who seek to denigrate its legitimacy have not yet begun to understand that it conforms to many of the rules of what constitutes a language : it communicates, it has phonological morphological and syntactical rules, it has a system for marking tense, plurality etc. But that is for another discussion because perhaps too many do not want to understand. Suffice it to say that is the medium and in which several writers and creators of artistic works have documented much about the life and social situations of Jamaican people and the world around us. Trinidadian storyteller Paul Keens Douglas 'Tim Tim' speaks with reverence about the positive influence Miss Lou has had on his life. So too does Jamaican comedic giant Oliver Samuels who lists her as one of his earliest sources of cultural inspiration. Trinidadian Extempo Calypso Monarch 'Gypsy' said as a child growing up he looked forward to hearing about Miss Lou and reading, her poems. Miss Lou, her influence and her poems continue to dominate the Jamaican Language categories of the annual speech competition run by the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission. Most performers cut their teeth on Miss Lou's dialect poems and they continue to be a reference point for many writers and performers. So strong is the influence that years after Miss Lou has stopped performing in Jamaica, many young performers still try to imitate her performing style and frequently end renditions of her pieces with her trademark "Aye yie yie." Others try to legitimize their writings and performances by claiming that pieces were written by Miss Lou. According to Nettleford "Miss Bennett is a performer accomplished and unrivalled. If on the printed pages her poems appear to be dated or frozen jingles, in the renditions she gives of them, they take on vitality and meaning, capturing all the spontaneity of the ordinary Jamaica's joys and even sorrows his ready poignant and even wicked wit, his religion and no philosophy of life As a social commentator, a recorder of the events of her time, Miss Lou was nothing short of brilliant, chronicling for her people in a language which represents their daily utterances.

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An examination of her series of war time poems, for example, is a good gauge of the social aspects of a society affected by war. Much of the terminology used in that period, has been kept alive through her poems, buoyed on the vehicles of wit and humour. A prime example is when the street vendor (higgler) in the poem *South Parade Peddler* asks the toothless man if 'dem torpedo yuh teet?', and tells the bald headed man to whom she was trying to sell a comb "Yuh look like yuh a suffer from hair raid." Her social commentary provided a good socio-cultural reference point for anyone interested in the social fabric at certain points in our history. Miss Lou is a gentle preacher choosing the route of the prescriptive rather than the descriptive writer. When she chooses to criticize and individual a group of people or society at large, it does not read as offensive as her caution and criticism is often interspersed with humour and so operate as the proverbial spoonful of sugar which makes the medicine go down. One of the things for which Miss Lou is most remembered is the television show *Ring Ding*, which was aired every Saturday morning for over ten years. *Ring Ding*, conceptualized and presented by Miss Lou, provided a forum for teaching and learning folk songs, folk dances, folk stories and all the wonderful aspect of our culture, some of which unfortunately were then and are still shrouded in shame and embarrassment. *Ring Ding* gave many an artiste a start to a performing career and ensured the preservation of the many aspects of the culture. I had the distinct pleasure of visiting with Miss Lou and her husband Eric 'Chalk Talk' Coverley several times in Canada, and always left feeling youthful and refreshed. Both exuded a youthful almost childlike charm which belied their ages. Miss Lou's laughter was ever infectious, her mind agile, exciting, witty, and she remembered most, if not all her poems. She would laugh heartily as she talked about the big 'grey back man an ooman dem' who would approach her all over the world with that excited but shy look which precedes " Miss Lou, I did sing a song / do a dance/ say a poem one time on *Ring Ding* yu know" And no matter 'which part of worl dem deh' Jamaicans still get that twinkle in the eye when Miss Lou's name is mentioned, the same once beloved twinkle in the eye of Louise Bennett, one of Jamaica's most beloved cultural icons, to whom we owe boundless gratitude. Yuh waan fi hear some

more tings from Miss Lou?

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