



IRVING BURGIE

THE FATHER OF MODERN CALYPSO

By Justine Ketola

How many of you, nationals or foreign-born, have reached Sangster Airport in Montego Bay, Jamaica to be serenaded by folk singers with songs like “Island in the Sun” and “Kingston Market”? Many of these classics were written by Irving Burgie, long considered one of the greatest composers of Caribbean music, whose songs have sold over 100 million records by artists throughout the world. He is the creator of such world standards as “Day-O” and “Jamaica Farewell” and the author of the national anthem of Barbados.

Although he was born in New York, Burgie, who celebrated his 79th birthday on July 28, was raised by his mother Viola Burgie, originally from Barbados. They lived in the Brooklyn borough’s West Indian community where he was exposed to the vibrant culture of the Caribbean. He attended the University of Arizona, studied music for five years at the Julliard School in New York and graduated from the University of Southern California in 1949.

In 1954 he made his New York City debut at the Village Vanguard under the name of “Lord Burgess.” As a young musician just out of college he began breaking himself in as a performer and writing material for his act, much of which was slanted toward the Caribbean. It was around this time that Harry Belafonte’s agent obtained some of Burgie’s material and he got “the call” and was told that his music would be used for the

“Colgate John Henry Comedy Show” radio program. Based on the quality of this material, the focus of the show changed to a Caribbean theme. As Mr. Burgie recalls, “It was a big smash, and right after the show we got together and did the recording, and it was the biggest hit that they’d ever had at that time. It was the first album to sell a million copies.”

This recording was Harry Belafonte’s debut album, *Calypso*, which was released by RCA in 1956. The album was number one on the *Billboard* charts for 32 consecutive weeks. Mr. Burgie had written eight of the 11 songs featured on this album.

What followed was an illustrious career as a songwriter. “I followed that up with two more albums; Belafonte actually recorded 34 of my songs in all,” notes Burgie. Two additional records came out within a five-year period: *Belafonte Sings of the Caribbean* and *Jump Up Calypso*. These albums reached the top of the charts all over the world.

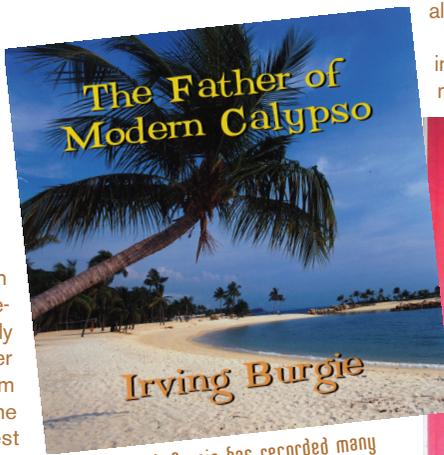
As a Cherry Lane (ASCAP) songwriter, Burgie has not been inclined to be a performer in the live setting, which is why he can now at this stage in his career take the time to release a solo project, *The Father of Modern Calypso*.

In the 1950s, Burgie recalls, “At that time me being a performer didn’t make too much sense. I had the hottest performer in the world at the time singing exclusively my songs. I became known as a writer. And the songs are still popular—I have been living off of them for 45 years. My copyrights are still bringing me in royalties from all over the world.”

When reflecting on the genesis of his songwriting

career, Burgie puts a realistic spin on his craft: “I started out studying the theory of music and then I became interested in singing. I went to Julliard, I studied there for two years. I was a voice major at that time. I don’t think a person can start out in life saying ‘I am going to be a songwriter’—if you are into something, you just go ahead and see where your talents take you. I was a young man of 31 years old when I did my first songs. And the music is a sort of a thing that you never know what is going to be your forte when you start out. In writing, I didn’t use an instrument, I could read and write music. I was taught to write and I took musical dic-

Continued on page 55



On his new cd, Burgie has recorded many of his songs that have become Caribbean classics.



Burgie’s songs were a big part of Belafonte’s breakout album in 1956.



OLIVER MTUKUDZI

Continued from page 30

stories of various stars of Afropop knows about the difficulties of obtaining the necessary instruments and equipment back in the golden era of African pop. Says Tuku: "It was difficult. Up to now it is difficult to get instruments as well, because we don't really manufacture; everything is imported. In our time it was even worse. There were very few groups, and all bands used to share equipment."

We discussed that most elusive of ideas: What makes a person—in this case Oliver Mtukudzi—an accomplished and successful songwriter? It's interesting to note that Tuku doesn't recall a conscious learning effort or period of training. "I guess I was just a born musician, because I didn't decide to be a musician, I just had this love of music, love of creating my own songs. I just got interested, like at home, I would stand up and perform something the whole family didn't know. And I enjoyed that, creating my own thing and giving it to them and seeing how they felt. And from there I started writing songs for church choirs. When I left school I spent three years without any job or anything, I guess because I hadn't done any particular career course, I had just done my academics to all five levels. My parents couldn't afford to let me carry on.

"Through the regime that was there I couldn't get a job. I started writing about how I felt about my life, because all my friends were working I was the only one who had no job and that frustrated me, spending the whole week having nothing to do and no friends, 'cause all friends were at work. I remember going door to door to find work and I couldn't find any. I started resorting to writing and the first song was hit, because a lot of people could relate to it. It wasn't a marvelous recording, I have a copy today, I go back and listen to it and think 'this was the best I could do then.'" Tuku did offer one point of his craft, though: "My system of writing songs, I prefer to have my lyrics first."

Oliver Mtukudzi and the Black Spirits are continuing to tour heavily. This year there's a major tour of festivals in Southern Africa: South Africa, Mozambique, Swazi, Lesotho, Namibia and Botswana, as well as returns to Europe and another U.S. tour taking shape for April 2004.

Mtukudzi has been a late bloomer in terms of breaking big time in the international music market, and that's probably a good thing. His base in Zimbabwean life and culture is so strong that it seems capable of filling a very deep well of creativity. That much of the inspiration for his music comes from factors that are tragic only serves to deepen the power and importance of his songs and his sound which, in the end, convey a sense of optimism and an appreciation of life's beauty even in the midst of seemingly insurmountable trials. Don't think of the Moses evocation at the start of this piece as hyperbole or overstatement. For while it's true that those figures in human history who brought their people to a promised land mostly seem larger than life (Beowulf, Moses, Jesus, Gandhi, M.L. King, Marley, Mandela), that's only because they're the ones whose stories had such an impact that they can't be forgotten. A man like Mtukudzi—as reluctant to take credit or status from

his work as any of the above figures, to the point of actually denying his role—is really fulfilling the same mission in his society as they did in theirs, regardless of any differences in scale, and it's for that reason he is so popular and his music so vital and compelling.

The crucial question really, is not whether or not Tuku is comparable to any of the above figures, but rather whether the people of Zimbabwe are capable of turning his messages into concrete, positive action the way the citizens/followers of those other figures were. Because that's why we even know who those people were and what they did. Is Tuku an ordinary man, a great man, or an ordinary man doing great things? The answer is irrelevant and the question pointless. The point of the Moses comparison is not to say that Tuku is like Moses, but that the people of Zimbabwe can be like the Israelites if they so choose. Tuku's just doing the best he can to help them. Given the depth of Zimbabwe's problems, he may not still be on this earth when his life's work comes to fruition, but as far as that goes, he'll be in good company in that other promised land. In the meantime, international fans of African music are just as fortunate to be able to partake of tuku music as Tuku professes to be in having the opportunity to play it for us. ★

IRVING BURGIE

Continued from page 31

tation, sight-singing. If I thought of a melody I could write it down. That has been my approach."

As far as lyrics were concerned, Mr. Burgie wrote most of the lines himself, but he also enlisted the help of screenwriter and Barbados native William Attaway, who was Harry Belafonte's best friend and played a crucial role in the young songwriter's career. Attaway's sister told him about Burgie. "He was the one who told Harry Belafonte about me and changed the 'John Henry' show to the 'Caribbean Show' and that is how we got tied in together. He helped me with the lyrics on four of my songs which I gave him credit for," explains Burgie.

An avid traveler, Irving Burgie returns to the Caribbean from his Queens, NY residence an average of four times a year. He has a favorite place in Barbados he frequents: "I am very well known down there so it is like going home."

Burgie's nephew Kim plays trumpet on *The Father of Modern Calypso*. As far as his own children are concerned, he says proudly, "I have two sons who are both Yalies [Yale graduates]. One is a schoolteacher and the other works in environmental health."

The energy and time that Mr. Burgie has put into his own compositions has been applied to instill the value of music in education with those of the next generation. In 1973, he devised the Caribbean Day Assembly Program for New York-area public schools. It was built around his publication *The West Indian Song Book* and this took him into the school system teaching Caribbean music in the curriculum for seven years. Additionally, a lesson/activity music book, *Share the Caribbean Music: The Songs of Irving Burgie*, is now available as part of the McGraw-Hill Education Share the Music series of

music education products with Hal Leonard.

In 1980, he established the Irving Burgie Award for Excellence in Literary and Creative Arts in Barbados and Jamaica, a \$500 U.S. literary prize that is given to seven high school and college students who exhibit excellence in writing.

Additional achievements and accolades have included a collaboration with the Jamaica National Dance Theatre in 1984. The JNDT choreographed an album performed by the Royal Philharmonic of London consisting of Irving Burgie's songs. In 1987, Burgie received the Silver Crown of Merit from the Government of Barbados, and in 1989, Burgie received an Honorary Doctor of Letters degree from the University of the West Indies.

Newly recorded and remastered, *The Father of Modern Calypso* is Burgie's first full record which includes beloved classics and the recent compositions "I'm A Candy," and "Love Will Come By," written for an upcoming theatrical production the artist is working on entitled "Day-O," which takes place in a Jamaican village. He is also working on an autobiography.

As for the high-profile attention he is receiving, including a write-up in Billboard and an interview with NPR's Tavis Smiley, Burgie responds, "I am glad that at my age people are still interested in my music and that I am in good health and can participate and enjoy it."

The 16 compositions are vibrant with lush vocal and orchestral arrangements, which are handled by longtime Burgie collaborator and Jamaican native Eugene Gray, who acts as musical director. Expert guitar solos (performed by Burgie) and sentimental vocal delivery invite the listener to "join one of the greatest composers of Caribbean music as he takes you on a festive, musical journey to the islands!"

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RASTLIN' JACOB

Continued from page 51

The Spiritual Baptists of Trinidad, like their Spiritual Baptist counterparts in other parts of the Caribbean and North America, practice a singing style in which exaggerated overbreathing (hyperventilation) along with a variety of other sounds (grunts, yells, murmurs) create a stirring form of vocal percussion. The technique is known as "trumpeting," and *Rastlin' Jacob* offers numerous examples of the astonishing soundscape their voices create.

A perfect example is "Onward Christian Soldiers," for many an all-too-familiar hymn identified with Salvation Army bands. In the hands of Spiritual Baptists, it begins as a familiar hymn, then gradually, thrillingly, out of the form of the Christian hymn spring voices creating a syncopated line of drum sounds. My first association was that corny Christmas carol "Little Drummer Boy" "I come to praise him/a rump-pa-ta-tum"—except the "rump-pa-ta-tums" keep exploding with emotional intensity and rhythmic complexity. It is unlike any music from anywhere on earth I've ever heard, maybe a form of neo-African spiritual doo-wop.

Continued on page 56