

THE UNIVERSITY OF
THE WEST INDIES



Earl Lovelace

Chancellor,

*Earl Lovelace has a rare gift for conveying paradox at the heart of Caribbean communities. He draws comedy alongside pathos, and interweaves frustration with carnivalesque exuberance celebrated in *The Dragon Can't Dance*:*

Dance to the hurt! Dance! If you catching hell, dance, and if the government don't care, dance!

Beginning as a Trinidad Guardian proof reader (1953-54), he then worked for ten years as Forest Ranger and Agricultural Field Assistant for the Government, establishing among the denizens of Rio Claro fond recollections of himself as a fast bowler but, also, completing his Diploma in Forestry at the Eastern Caribbean Institute of Agriculture and Forestry. There he learnt Trinidad from the roots up, its physical vitality permeating his writing and prompting one of his characters to assert that this landscape "coulda never

hold people here surrendered to unfreedom” (Salt). Quickly, he refound the literary path as a journalist with the Express Newspapers.

Born in Toco, Trinidad, in 1935, he received his Master of Arts from Johns Hopkins University, 1974, after attending Ideal High School, Port-of-Spain. He began a series of university appointments as Lecturer at the University of the District of Columbia, Visiting Novelist at Johns Hopkins University, NEH Visiting Professor at Hartwick College in New York, and Lecturer at the University of the West Indies in the 1980s. More recently, he has been Writer-in-Residence at the London Arts Board (1995-96) and Visiting Professor in the Africana Studies Dept of Wellesley College in Massachusetts (1996-97). Earl Lovelace is currently Distinguished Novelist in the Department of English at Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, Washington.

In 1962 he directed his first play, The New Boss, in Rio Claro for the Independence Celebrations, and others followed, of which My Name is Village attracted the Best Play Award in Best Village (1976) and The New Hardware Store was named Best Play by the Trinidad and Tobago Drama Association (1981). Lovelace has also published twelve short stories, collected in A Brief Conversion and Other Stories (1988), scattered through anthologies, and even read on BBC Radio - as in the case of “The Gambler’s Funeral”. In addition, Lovelace’s poems have appeared in The Trinidad and Tobago Review.

However, Earl Lovelace is most widely recognised for his novels. The earliest, While Gods are Falling (1965), won the British Petroleum Independence Literary Award. The Schoolmaster appeared shortly afterwards in 1968. The Wine of Astonishment (1982) was also produced by Malick Folk Performers and won best play and a number of awards from the Drama Association of Trinidad and Tobago. Then, widely acclaimed as both novel and play, The Dragon Can’t Dance played in

Trinidad (1986), at Stratford East Theatre in London (1990), in Jamaica and Toronto, and at the Carnival Conference in Hartford, Connecticut (1998). Dragon has also been read over the BBC in its Books at Bedtime series and recently appeared as a three-part drama in the Classic Literature Series on BBC 4 (1999). Fifth, and most recently, Salt (1997) won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize and the Best Book Award for the Canada-Caribbean Region.

Lovelace's part in defining a Caribbean way of thought commands attention. In collecting essays by Lovelace, Funso Aiyejina notes a general "ignorance of the extent of Lovelace's involvement in the debates about life, politics, culture, and the arts of the region." Yet, apart from the creative work for which he is best known, he has produced a number of articles, speaking (in Aiyejina's words) "of, to and for those who are not usually the subjects of their own history." In contemplating engagement with a New World as cross roads and crucible and the forging of an alternative vision, Lovelace follows the experience of those of African descent but he emphasises the interest of the nation over the interest of the group. Within this group, though, he notes the particular urgency of becoming Caribbean by contending with the criminalisation of folk culture and the demonisation of African tradition. As he notes in Salt,

When people begin to curse their elders, the next step they take is to curse their gods.

His artistic achievement is to re-humanise, by re-mapping the fractured psyches of the region. What he terms a new "bacchanal aesthetics" is nothing less than a definition of our proper location in the world. This definition is enabled through an artistic voice that transcends limits of race, class and gender.

Lovelace expresses this unifying vision of Caribbean creativity in practical ways. He is Honorary Artistic

Director of Malick Folk Performers and Patron of the Foundation for the Academic Advancement of Spiritual Baptist Youth. He has served on village councils and worked with Best Village groups, particularly the Matura Best Village group, within the framework of the programme, Arts and Indigenous Traditions, which he developed at UWI, St Augustine. His rural grounding, apart from his connection with landscape, is even more strongly founded in the community, from which education has not alienated him. In Lovelace, "something there is that does not love a wall," and education has provided a tool for understanding and conveying a people's deepest concerns. Thus the personal life and creative work of the Dragon (as he is affectionately known) remain seamlessly intertwined, and rooted in the community. The artistic talent has found its way into the genes and flourishes in his children.

He has read from his works, presented papers and delivered addresses at Book Festivals in Trinidad and Tobago and other Caribbean countries, in the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, Venezuela, Germany, the Netherlands and Japan. He has attracted honours which include The Cacique Lifetime Award from the Drama Association of Trinidad and Tobago; The Pegasus Award (1966); The Guggenheim Fellowship (1980); The Chaconia Medal, Gold (1989); Malick Folk Performers, Carifesta V (1995); the National Congress of Incorporated Baptist Organisations of Trinidad and Tobago (1999). His international standing is indicated by translations of his work into German, Dutch, French, Hungarian and Japanese.

Earl Lovelace enjoys not only an international reputation but enthusiastic local recognition of an expanse and variety of talent. This variety includes substantial culinary skills (for he is reputed to make a "wicked roast bake and tomato choka"), but he has also an extraordinary capacity to evoke hilarity by exposing the mundane as outrageous and laying bare the bizarre in common life. We celebrate the Dragon's merciless

humour alongside his intense social and cultural activism, his abiding practical engagement with the concerns of ordinary people and his creative achievement in representing the language continuum so as to forge a literary medium for Caribbean oral traditions. While Gods are Falling offers a glimpse of the frustration and dilemma of the voiceless:

“Words. Words. He has no words to paint the picture that his heart can comprehend.

As our rich oral tradition reaches for scribal expression, Earl Lovelace has contributed to the unsilencing of the Caribbean voice in a global context and to the shifting of Caribbean discourse from periphery to centre in our developing canon.

Chancellor,

I invite you by the authority vested in you by The Council and Senate of the University of the West Indies to confer on Mr Earl Lovelace the Degree of Doctor of Letters, Honoris Causa.

November 1, 2002

St. Augustine Campus