



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES

Christopher Laird

Chancellor,

Christopher Laird has pioneered Caribbean ownership of visual media, use of television in community building, and establishment of an indigenous film industry.

Son of a celebrated architect, Christopher Laird recognized his own visual sense early, declaring his interest in film-making at nineteen. A graduate of London University, he built on postgraduate training in Education, experience in theatre management, and ability in creative writing. He had much to bring to the 1974 UNESCO/UWI summer course that laid the foundation for Banyan. Steering this first independent television production house in the Southern Caribbean over the past three decades, he constructed the Caribbean Film and Video Archive - the world's largest video collection of Caribbean culture, including unique material like interviews with C. L. R. James, V. S. Naipaul and Derek Walcott - some 3000 tapes.

Co-founding Gayelle, he transformed an operation originally assessed as unfeasible to a viable and unique radio station, free and exclusively Caribbean in content, producing seven television channels besides helping to establish Radio Toco, the first community radio station. Neither supported nor bound by major corporate funding, Gayelle can shift focus and outlook swiftly. Not only flexible but stubbornly inclusive, Gayelle was first to show Ramléla on television and first to integrate African and Indian culture in one programme. Other firsts include Laird's *Who the C.A.P. fits* (1978), the first TV drama series in the Anglophone Caribbean, one of a prolific oeuvre that has attracted Caribbean and International awards.

Sought after for his expertise from Belize to St Kitts/Nevis, lecturing in St Augustine's Film Studies programme, Christopher Laird performs on the cutting edge of his discipline and in areas of national and regional need, attracting awards for video use in community development, for best documentary on AIDS, for best children's programme, for best environmental film. At the Caribbean Tales Festival in Toronto earlier this year he received a Lifetime Achievement award.

Christopher Laird forthrightly criticises lack of government investment in media but his is constructive commentary rather than unproductive plaintive lamentation over evils like colonialism. His paper on community media compelled policy change – the deregulation of electronic media in 1989. A fearless film-maker, Laird filmed the controversial events of Drummit 2 Summit, even as police in battle gear shut down proceedings and arrested participants, an action justified on the basis of an ancient law against drumming.

Documenting genuine Caribbean culture has demanded courage, for, as George Bernard Shaw quips, "all great truths begin as blasphemies". Critiquing foreign programming as designed to capitalise on the insecurities of a postcolonial people, rather than form Caribbean cultural identity or self-worth, Laird has fought in the vanguard for Caribbean ownership and authority over our own programming, and for projecting local images rather than foreign packaging that alienates us from ourselves. Championing expression in the local voice, he has complemented formal training with popular education.

His strength, however, lies in versatility. Multitalented, he flips between roles: producer, camera man, editor, script writer, devoting his fine critical eye to portraying his subject without announcing himself – always the unintrusive artist, in jeans, in a corner, self-effacing, mingling. "I have always been a backstage person," he admits, shrugging off enquiries about his unassuming nature: "I know I'm no genius." But his interpersonal skills are brilliant and founded in character. A staunch friend and co-worker, he treasures long term connections, is swift to offer his skills and eager to share praise, but resolute in principle.

Upholding traditional values but interrogating political positions, this radical conservative enables and nurtures as he unflinchingly preserves the region's priceless audiovisual history in championing Caribbean identity.

Chancellor, I present Christopher Laird, and ask that by the authority vested in you by the Council and Senate of The University of the West Indies, you confer on him the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

St. Augustine Campus
Friday 30th October, 2009