

A tribute to Rex

The sensation that predominated as I saw Rex before and after he drew his last breaths was predominantly one of there being unfinished business, as I felt that what was the essential Rex would be there for a very very long time. I could only surmise what that unfinished business would be by thinking about what I knew of him since we first met some 57 years ago. But I had to share this immediately. So as I came home that night and literally came in from the cold, Sylvan and I thought and spoke about how we know him and why we like so many other love and respect him for what he is and for what he stands for.

Sylvan would speak of knowing him when they both attended high school in Montego Bay, and some of her more acute memories were those of him taking stellar roles in August morning concerts at the Strand, and she would say that his stardom as a dancer and a producer were no surprise to her. We agreed that no one could have imagined then that that part of his persona and that innate talent would bring fame and acclaim not only to himself, but to generations of young Jamaicans whom he inspired by his dedication to the premise that excellence is earned and is the result of patient persistence. I would evoke memories of him, red gown slung across his slim shoulders wending his way across one or other of the lawns at Mona.

We remarked on the ease with which he bore the numerous accolades that came his way-tributes to his cultural genius, encomiums to his academic achievements and awards for his contribution to so many different facets of Jamaican and Caribbean life. The details of those contributions have been chronicled in numerous places recently, but let me focus internally and sum it up by contending that he is an essential and indelible part of the DNA of our University of the West Indies. He labored in it and loved it almost all his adult life; from the days when we were hundreds to these days now that we are thousands and I have said to him that his concept of inward reach and outward stretch was one that he sought not only in the dance, but for the University as well, as he helped to insert it into every one of the Caribbean lands. He served at every academic level up to being Vice-Chancellor and discharged the responsibilities of the office with devotion and dignity. The lovingly crafted account of our early history by Philip Sherlock and himself has to be the definitive story of our beginnings. He was passionate about the University's place in the region and he would interpret the Grand Anse declaration that UWI should remain a regional institution indefinitely to read slightly differently. His version was that it should remain so in perpetuity.

I would be personal and recall the exquisite pleasure it gave me to bestow on him the Chancellor's medal; which is given rarely and then only to individuals or institutions for exceptional contribution to the University and the Caribbean and I could be absolutely sure that there would be no one who could deny that he was deserving of it. We reflected that perhaps his most defining character was one of generosity. He was genuinely generous of spirit, generous with advice that came from his accumulated wisdom and many do not know how generous he was to others with his personal goods.

His life among us can perhaps be described with a favorite phrase of his own. It was a life that was richly textured, but the most brilliant of the strands was that of dedication to service: service to country, to region; to his University and in his quiet way, to his God.

In recent years when I would enquire how he was he would respond thus: “you are seeing the glow of the setting sun”. But I can be as sure as it is humanly possible to be, that neither time nor circumstance will erase that glow if indeed the sun of one of our most illustrious sons will ever set and we should ensure that much of the business that he was about when he was physically among us is carried on.

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Chancellor