



Charles Emile Straker, BCh

Chancellor,

I turn now to a legend from the world of Barbadian music, a man whose unforgettable songs have formed a soundtrack to our lives for nearly fifty years, a man who has done more than anyone else to bring the very best of Caribbean folk arts and culture to a global audience.

I present Mr. Emile Straker, lead singer and co-founder of The Merrymen, easily the most successful band in Barbadian history. The Merrymen have sold millions of albums worldwide, appeared with some of the biggest names in the business and performed to massive crowds at some of the world's major venues – for example, Madison Square Gardens, the Carnegie Hall, the Royal Albert Hall, and at perhaps the greatest show on earth, the Super Bowl half-time show.

It is no disrespect to his richly talented fellow band members (and good friends) to say that Emile is the inspirational genius and creative powerhouse of The Merrymen. From their very first (unpaid) gig at St. Winifred's School back in 1962 right up to the present, Emile's warm, melodious voice and signature whistle have defined the band's uniquely appealing sound. But just as important as the vocals are his lyrics and musical arrangements; and here Emile demonstrates true mastery.

He is a brilliantly skilful songwriter, with (in Willie Kerr's words) "an innate gift for crafting beautiful melodies and witty, catchy lyrics". One of these songs, *Big Bamboo* (1963), was such a huge international hit that it stayed at Number 1 in the charts across Europe for 18 consecutive weeks.

Over the years, compositions have poured from Emile's fertile pen (400 and counting,

according to his son Dean), many of them - *You Sweeten Me, Garry Sobers, Sam Lord, Rachel Pringle, Beautiful Barbados* – classics that will last until ‘the Rock’ crumbles into the sea. Or as one bizarrely-worded website puts it (and I think Emile will get a kick out of this), “*the Merry Men of Barbados are truly one of their country’s prides. They may not live long, but surely their music will.*”

Amen to that (or as Emile might say: *Yee-Haw!*).

Emile’s profound love of Barbados, its people, its culture and its heritage shines through everything he writes, but it’s obvious in other ways too. He has served on many boards and councils (the National Trust, the Tourist Board, the Hospitality Institute of BCC), has been a JP since 1972 and was the first-ever Crop Over Committee chairman. He also works tirelessly for charitable causes, donating to the sick and the indigent enormous amounts of his time and money, always remembering his own humble beginnings.

Affable, modest and tender-hearted (except to lizards), devoted to his family, as comfortable today liming with a St. David’s Church parishioner as he was with a superstar like Frank Sinatra (yes, Chancellor: the Leader of the Band met the Chairman of the Board!), a superlative BS artist (that’s what Peter Roett calls him - BS standing of course for ‘Best Storytelling’), possessor of a fantastic sense of humour (except when confronted by litterbugs), Emile genuinely epitomizes Kipling’s ideal of what it takes to be a man: the ability to walk with kings without losing the common touch.

This philanthropic entrepreneur has received many accolades throughout his career, some of which include the Barbados Service Star (1981), the Rotary Club Outstanding Club Service (1997), the Invaluable Service to Tourism and Entertainment Award (1998), the Pride of Barbados Award (1998) presented by Prime Minister Owen Arthur, the COSCAP Award of Excellence (2010) presented by Prime Minister David Thompson, and in 2000, the Barbados Centennial Honour, an award given only to one hundred Barbadians.

Yet, despite being deeply moved by these public tributes to his remarkable achievements, I suspect, Chancellor, that Emile will cherish above all the very private tribute his children have shared with me, and that I share with him now: that he is quite simply the best father anyone could ever wish for.

I know that Emile loves to serenade his grandchildren on special days, and I was planning to do the same for him now: it’s too bad I forgot my guitar. But of course a far better way to celebrate his stellar accomplishments in songwriting, singing and performance, his unique contribution to the promotion of Barbadian popular culture, and – last but not least - his outstanding, world-famous Big Bamboo, is to invite you, Chancellor, by the authority vested in you by the Senate and Council of this University, to confer on Mr. Charles Emile Straker, BCH, this gem of Barbados, this national treasure, this incomparable Leader of the Band, the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.