



Olive Lewin

Chancellor: I present Dr Olive Wilhelmina Mahoney Lewin, Commander of the Order of Distinction, Fellow of Trinity College London, Associate of the Royal College of Music, Honorary Associate of the Royal Academy of Music, founder and Director of the Jamaican Folk Singers and of the Jamaica Orchestra for Youth, Arts and Culture Consultant for Grace, Kennedy and Co., Ltd. She holds, among other honours, the Jamaica Music Industry Honour Award, an Award for Long and Meritorious Service to the Mico Teachers College, the Award for Excellence of the Munro and Dickenson Trust, and a Gold Musgrave Medal of the Institute of Jamaica.

At school, her nickname was 'jigga flea,' because she was just about as large as a flea, and just as lively. Besides, she could deliver a mordantly verbal nip, if you treated her with disrespect. She says that her birth was an accident, that she 'just fell out' and nearly bled to death, and that from that time she has been impatient – impatient of humbug and nonsense, impatient of delay. However, wonderfully unlike any 'jigga flea,' she could make mellifluous music.

Music was in her bones and in her environment. Both her parents played the piano, and her father, the redoubtable Richard James Mahoney Lewin, 'Teacher Lewin,' was choirmaster of his church. Her dear mother, affectionately and respectfully called 'Governess,' taught her to tune her ears to the sounds of rural Jamaica, the sounds of Nature and of the people. The workers passing on their way home from the estate in the evening would stop by the Lewin house to ask her to play one or other of their favourite pieces from her repertoire.

When she entered Hampton Girls School at the age of ten, her sister and herself were the only black girls in the school, and she suffered the barbs of colour prejudice from some of her schoolmates, and withstood them. Her parents had given her a sense of self worth and dignity. She had scored the highest marks in the scholarship examination that would get her a place in the school; but when the school authorities tried to keep her out, on some trumped-up excuse, her father was adamant. He took the matter 'to the top,' as Olive Lewin puts it. He referred to the *Handbook of Jamaica*: 'It says that the school was established for the poor of the parish. My children qualify. It says nothing about colour.'

She won a scholarship to the Royal Schools of Music, London, and entered at the end of the Second World War, in 1945. She excelled, getting two extensions of the scholarship and studying everything that she could, including piano performing, solo singing, piano and violin teaching. For her thesis for the course in harmony, counterpoint and composition, she chose the music of Russia. As she worked at it, she came to realise that 'Tchaikovsky and people like that had really given the world a special type of music because they were immersed in their own music, their own folkways; and it suddenly dawned on me that Jamaica was going to become a nation of imitators unless we learned our own folklore.'

Thus, in faraway London, did her mission to teach, perform and preserve Jamaican folk music first declare itself. On her return home, she taught music at her alma mater, and eventually, in 1959, took a position at Mico Teachers College, whose Principal was supportive of her project, although there was much head-shaking among others at the top of the educational hierarchy. Soon she was taking the music to parts of the city that discretion would have prevented less committed teachers of her station from entering. And if she found that some of the people there did not know 'Linstead Market,' she for her part began to learn the folkways of the urban yards, and the music of revivalism. Through her mission as a teacher, she began to learn more and more about her people and their music. Over the next many years, she was also to take the healing and person-building word of music into the Bellevue Hospital for the mentally disturbed, and into the city's correctional institutions.

In 1966, the same year in which she became Folk Music Research Officer at the Jamaica School of Music, Olive Lewin made what some will consider her greatest contribution to Jamaican cultural heritage: she founded The Jamaican Folk Singers. For over thirty years now, the group has been delighting and educating audiences at home and abroad. They have earned high acclaim and many awards, from the O.A.S.

plaque for first place in a Festival of Folk Music in Argentina in 1972, to four Gold Medals in the South African Eisteddfod in 1997. To quote the liner notes of their third L.P. album, *Encore*: 'They have sung ... at the U.N. and the U.S. State Department ...; in the square of Cologne's famous cathedral, Germany; in Chicago and St Martin's-in-the-Fields, London; in hotels and shopping plazas for the Jamaica Tourist Board; at a presidential palace and in prisons.'

1983 saw the realisation of another of Olive Lewin's nation-building ideas, when she founded the Jamaica Orchestra for Youth. Through this project, she has not only continued to spread joy, but she has brought purpose and hope to the otherwise blighted lives of many of her young performers. The Orchestra, like the Folk Singers, has evinced her skill as administrator. She has coordinated and directed cultural programmes for the Social Development Commission of Jamaica. She was Director of Arts and Culture in the Office of the Prime Minister between 1980 and 1988. She initiated the Memory Bank project, a national programme to collect and preserve Jamaica's oral history and cultural heritage. She became Executive Director of the Jamaica Institute of Folk Culture in 1989, but retired at the end of 1990.

Dr Lewin is a scholar. In the mid-1970s, her colleagues on the Board of the International Council for Traditional Music, impressed by the knowledge that she had to offer the world, insisted that she read for a doctorate. One of them was John Blacking, Professor of Social Anthropology at the Queen's University, Belfast. In 1987 she obtained the Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology from that institution, her thesis topic being 'Folk Music of Jamaica, with Special Reference to Kumina ...'. That seminal work is in process of being published by The Press, University of the West Indies.

Chancellor, as the saying goes, 'the lady likkle, but she tallawah!' Our musical 'jigga flea' has enjoyed a career of remarkable and inspired jumping. Out of the gravity of admiration and thanksgiving, I invite you, by the authority vested in you by the Senate and Council of the University of the West Indies, to confer on Olive Lewin, musician, musicologist, folklorist, cultural conservator, teacher, administrator, giver of joy and hope, the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

Mona
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