

Tribute to Charles Hyatt

COMEDIAN EXTRAORDINAIRE

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Contributor

"Your Crown has been paid for – all you have to do is wear it."

– James Baldwin

THIS IS one of my favourite quotations. I have used it several times over the past five years, both in this column and at speaking engagements. Why? Because we have all come through an incredible journey.

Our history, our legacy, tell us we are a people of greatness. So we must continue to follow the path that has already been paved for us. We must celebrate each day with pride. I'm not sure why February, the shortest month in the year, was chosen for Black History Month, but I celebrate it with great joy and pride.

Last February in this column, I honoured four remarkable individuals: Madam C.J. Walker, Paul Robeson, our own Marcus Garvey and Mary Seacole. They all had amazing careers.

Last year, we seemed to have lost so many great people both at home and abroad.

I once had a fear of dying because I still had so much to do on earth before I am called upstairs. But recently, that fear has dissolved and I am comforted with the notion of the company I would be in when I am there. I could have deep dialogue with Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King, Marcus Garvey, Steve Biko and Huey P. Newton. I could rock with Bob Marley and Peter Tosh, attempt to sing ballads with Luther Vandross and Curtis Mayfield, share stories with Zora Neal Hurston, Bebe Moore Campbell and Octavia Butler. Have a joke or two with

Charles Hyatt and Miss Lou. And scream loud at the top of my lungs. "I'm black and I'm proud," – with the godfather of soul – James Brown, who passed away on Christmas Day.

Many of us (especially our young ones) take for granted the path we tread every day. We jump in our air-conditioned cars, complain about the traffic on the way to work, complain about the jobs we have, we don't get enough pay, we don't like our bosses, how we are not appreciated for the work we do.

COMPLAINTS

The litany of complaints is endless. Don't block your blessings. There was a time in our history when we didn't get paid and worked harder. Our ancestors worked long, arduous hours in unsanitary conditions with no air conditioning, no cars, no cellphones, no one to pump their gas, not a chance to voice their opinions or their worth.

These days we can whine about everything without ever giving thanks to those who came before us, making our journey much easier. When you don't do well in school or on your job you are dishonouring those who came before you, those who sacrificed their lives for us to have a better one. So think twice the next time you want to shirk off work and not show up in class.

Our island is full of all kinds of magnificent treasures. Charles Hyatt was one of Jamaica's finest treasures. I first met Mr. Hyatt when I had the distinct pleasure and honour to interview him on my radio show, *Living True*. I was beside myself with excitement. He told me during this interview that he made a point to learn one thing new every day, before lunchtime. Many of us have been fortunate enough to be raised on the incredible wit of



FILE

Charles Hyatt tells the audience about his father's ram, during 'Tellabration 2005', at the Montego Bay Community College, St. James.

Charles Hyatt. Especially at his annual pantomimes at the Ward Theatre.

I believe even when he was trying to be serious he was side-stitching funny – but with a humility that some of our young people could learn from. Charles Hyatt, in my humble opinion, was and will always be the king of comedy who wore many crowns.

A renaissance man with many talents, he was an actor, author, broadcaster, theatrical director and comedian extraordinaire. He had an amazing career and became a cultural ambassador for Jamaica.

He first became a well-known personality on RJR in *Poppy Show*, and later became the early morning man when JBC first went on the air. It was at JBC that he created and performed the historic comedy radio show *Here Comes Charley*.

In 1959 he was awarded 'Actor of the Year' for the first of many in his portrayal in Barry Reckord's *Miss Unusual*, and was awarded a scholarship to further his studies in drama after doing yeoman work in 14 pantomimes – nine consecutive years as the 'Dame'. Mr. Hyatt left for England with a British Council bursary to study at the Theatre Royal in Windsor in 1960.

His sojourn in England lasted 14 years, during which time he excelled in radio, television films and stage, including the West End. While in England he performed in several plays written by blacks, such as *The Wind of Change Crown Court* and *In the Beautiful Caribbean*.

Mr. Hyatt made his film debut in *A High Wind in Jamaica* (1965) starring Anthony Quinn and James Coburn. He appeared in *Club Paradise* (1986) starring Robin Williams. *The Mighty Quinn* (1989) with Denzel Washington, and my personal favourite was the 1993 blockbuster *Cool Runnings*, which I have seen more times than I care to mention. Other movies were *Milk & Honey*, 1995, *Club Paradise*, 1986, *Bush Baby*, 1970. In the U.K., *Cross Plot* and *Love Thy Neighbour*.

In 1989 he published *When Me was a Boy*, a compilation of short stories on his life as a child growing up in Kingston. This column cannot do Mr. Hyatt's career the true justice it deserves.

While living in England, Mr. Hyatt kept in close touch with his roots and was a popular cabaret act among the West Indians and Africans. He made two comedy LPs, *Kiss mi Neck* and *Kiss Mi Neck, Again*.

On his return to Jamaica in 1974 at the request of the JBC and his quest for the sun, Mr. Hyatt returned to his first love – broadcasting. He hosted the Sunday afternoon

music radio programme *Sunday Souvenirs* and became head of the Department of Drama, which was the first to put the Schools Drama Festival on TV.

He wrote, produced and directed three full-length plays for JBC Radio, *Jesus Christ them kill Son Son*, *Santa Fari* and *Curly Locks and the Seven DJs*. He also conceived, produced and directed the record-breaking radio serial *The Fortunes of Floralee*, shortly followed by *Sister Angella*.

His first stage appearance back in Jamaica was *Two's A Crowd*, at the Pegasus' 'Way Out' Theatre. He later went on to direct a number of plays and adult reviews.

He was invited to Toronto as a guest director of the performer in the production of Trevor Rhone's *Smile Orange*, at the La Plaza theatre.

The 'Way Out' Theatre was to see Charles at his acting best when he returned in Trevor Rhone's classic *Old Story Time*, and later as 'Jim' in *Two Can Play* by the same author, which was filmed by Kentucky TV and viewed in the United States.

Outstanding playwrights such as Basil Dawkins and Louis Marriott's have written plays for Mr. Hyatt *Bedward* and *Champagne and Sky Juice*, for which he won awards as Actor of the Year.

Among his many accolades, Mr. Hyatt received the Silver Musgrave Medal, a Centenary Medal from the Institute of Jamaica, and has had the National Order of Distinction awarded to him for his contribution to theatre and music in Jamaica. Of his many children his daughter, who goes by the name Michael Hyatt, was the only one to follow him in his footsteps.

Hail to the 'king of comedy'. He will be greatly missed.

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