

Here comes Charlie, again!

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In a scene from Eripides' Alceih's.

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FOR CHARLES HYATT, being in England was not synonymous with problems, but he had his fair share to start with. As the story goes Charlie left Jamaica in 1961, to take up his British Council drama scholarship at the Theatre Royal in Windsor. He went by way of New York and thereby hangs another....

Knowing that money would be waiting for him in England, once he had landed, Charlie decided to splurge in New York with the few dollars he had. His jaunts in the Big Apple included going to the 'birthplace of black stars', Apollo Theatre, in Harlem, to see Count Basie. Billed as singer with the band was a "shy young lady, bordering on plump, in a green satin dress. It was her first really big appearance on the pop scene and she was very nervous, but as the Apollo crowd warmed to her stylings she began to glow. She was brilliant."

After the show, in a bar near to the theatre, Charlie was introduced to the young singer's father, "a man dripping in diamonds, or rhinestones, me noh know which, on rings and tie pin and cuff links."

"She's gonna go far," Charlie said to the father.

"Think so?"

"Yeah."

"Would you like a piece of her?"

"How much?"

"A hundred dollars or more."

The father was asking Charlie to put his money where his mouth was. Charlie was convinced the singer would make it, but a hundred dollars in those days was big bread. So while he kept his faith Charlie, like a good talker eased himself out of the monetary commitment. The man who'd offered him a piece of his daughter had been introduced as "Rev. Franklyn"

Three years later when Aretha Franklyn hit the charts, Charlie says, "A tink a woulda mad. To think that I might have owned even a quarter of one per cent of Aretha Franklyn providing her father wasn't jive talking me, you know what I mean?"

Other good things happened. There was meeting Redd Foxx, seeing Nipsey Russell and, going to Birdland the then promised land of all jazz lovers outside of New York. (They tore the place down some two years later). There he heard Quincy Jones' orchestra featuring "a slip of a girl playing a bellows trombone Melba Liston. And she blew my mind."

It was to have been Melba's last public appearance for many

years to come. The next time Charlie heard her was at a School of Music concert last year when Melba took up her trombone again, on the brink of a new performing career.

Charlie landed at Heathrow Airport, England with lasting memories of New York and ninety cents in his hand. The B.C. (British Council) courier he expected was not waiting at Heathrow, but at Victoria Station, twenty miles and five shillings away, by coach. Nevertheless he boarded the coach. When the conductor came to collect, Charlie, the only Black on the coach, held up his ninety cents, U.S. The conductor went through a routine about not being able to take coins, but that if Charlie had a dollar note he'd give him two shillings change.

Still holding up his hand and in his finest primitive utterance, Charlie said, "Noh." The conductor repeated himself and Charlie countered with his "innocent" monosyllable. A couple more repeats and then finding no voluntary interpreter among the passengers, the conductor gave Charlie a ticket and got off the bus. As he enjoyed the ride to Victoria he noted lesson number one: Sometimes you might have to con your way out of situations in the new land.

At Victoria station the British Council courier was waiting. "That's one thing I like about them. The precision. I was told here by the Council that the man would be waiting. Me set right web de bus stop, at de door web me fi come off, on the spot was de man with the B.C. badge pon him arm. And the money." I said, 'Boy, am I glad to see you.' Is a good thing the conductor don't travel on the bus or he would hear that I spoke English."

His first meal in England was a disaster. Veal Ham Pie Salad. He'd ordered it because the title made it plain enough. "But a never taste miffin so bad from a born. The salad was fine. Fresh vegetables. But the ham pie part. Spiceless. Wun than hospital food. Lesson number two: Veal Ham Pie was not my pallet."

Charlie put up at a place called Inverness Terrace where an old leftover sign from the war days on the bathroom door read "No more than five inches of water in the bath". It didn't bother him. That first day he found England too cold for bathing. On instructions from his friend Robin Midgley, Charlie set off for Windsor next day. On arriving there, "me jump inna taxi with me facetiness. Cost me five shillings only to find that the lady I was to board with was only quarter mile away. Lesson number three: If you don't know where you going you will pay dear to learn, by taxi."

His future landlady, Mrs. Tansley, a 70-year-old travelling physiotherapist, was not at home. And he, too, inexplicably,



Charles Hyatt . . . Young Charlie.

uncomfortable, cold nights Charlie "put up" in the attic of The Round Tower opposite Windsor Castle. And he wrote home and cried.

Mrs. Tansley arrived and his "bed and breakfast" arrangement with her was fine. "The breakfast you get a mornin', dawg eat me, coulda feed a army. But at first me an' it couldn't tek tea. Little by little the old lady fin' out what me eat. If me seh me like fish, she kill me with fish fi the whole week". But Charlie didn't complain. According to the little bursary he got it suited him to have a big breakfast, to make sure he was present for the tea breaks (at 10 a.m. and at 4 p.m.) at the theatre.

"Well for lunch me walk round and tek in the sights, and eat peanuts and fruits. Windsor was everything like the England I envisaged as a child and where I'd always yearned to visit. And I got very slim and healthy living on peanuts and fruits for lunch for six months. But I was happy. I was immediately accepted at the theatre. That's one thing I've liked with theatre. The security it always provides."

(That made life in England much less traumatic than it would have been for the ordinary migrant.)

While Charlie was at Windsor they did a musical version of Jane Eyre. The Queen would be coming to see it and all of Windsor was refurbished for the occasion. Then came the night. Charlie wasn't in the production but, "Yours truly mek sure seh him very visible in him invisibility. A stand up right where the Royal entourage had to pass. Then after the performance, which I wasn't into, the entire theatre personnel lined up to meet the Queen in the wings.

"Tony Armstrong Jones and Princess Margaret were among them group. The thing that struck me about Armstrong-Jones was how he seemed to be imitating Prince Phillip's attitude with the hands behind the back. I don't know why, but the man made a bee line for me. Maybe because I was the only Black and him wanted to put me at ease. Now, before he and Margaret were married there was a famous story about a romance between him and a Trinidadian named Jackie Chang. So when he came up to me and said, 'And where are you from?' Yours truly trying to show that I was at ease said, 'Not Trinidad.' His reaction was dead silence and immediately to move 'way from me. I was so embarrassed."

After an enjoyable and profitable training at Windsor, Charlie decided, at the end of his course, to stay in England and accept the challenges of the new society. He went to London where the action was and where, at one time, he lived with Karl Binger, Dr. Spence in Floralee and Len in Old Story Time; Vernon Estick, a degree lecturer in Canada; George Townsend, manager of the Montego Bay Club. "The whole a wi, big man, pile up inna one bed inna one basement in London. Lawd have mercy". But the rough spots weren't too many for Charlie whose talent kept him in work in his chosen field. When that wasn't available he did other jobs. "The only thing I swore I wouldn't do was wash dishes. And I didn't".

London brought him close up to the culture shock suffered by blacks and whites alike as he saw it. The formerly tolerated immigrants of the great Fifties Trek began to settle and carve out their own life styles in Britain. Formerly the colonials stayed in back or conformed as best they could. Once when Charlie had to meet a boat train from the West Indies he realised what it must mean for rural people, laden with their cooking pots and fowl coops and tropical dress, to be suddenly thrust upon a cold, highly civilized metropolis like London, which accommodated some twelve million people each day.

By 1962, however they had begun to organize themselves into groups and colonies. They organised pools among themselves for workers living near to each other going to the same in-

dustrial complexes to work. They set up their partner system, "throwing two and three hands. And when a man get him draw him go with a grip full of money to buy a house for cash. The British couldn't understand it. They figured it would have been better to bank and borrow with a bank where the transaction was much more secure. But we understood that when you go to a basement party and paid five shillings for a plate of rice and peas and stew, or for a drink of whisky, that often it went to pay someone's mortgage or some such.

"The two Jews, the Dane Brothers, combed the Caribbean and other sources of Black immigration to England to learn their eating habits. Soon the spices and the soul food came in. People knew they could get ackee in tin, callaloo, breadfruit, mango and susumba in tin. Cho, when them own food was available, them jus' settle in. Of course the Danes became millionaires in three years by providing anything the Blacks wanted to eat.

"With added confidence the people became more visible. The Post Office, transportation, medical services were black. The black vote was now valuable. A Black man Dr. Pitt, ran in a safe Socialist seat and won it for the Conservatives. That sort of thing was happening. But while on the one hand the people seemed to be accepted the British on the other hand practised the subtleties of racism. You knew it was there because of the strain the British went to to accommodate the people and to prove that they weren't racist. Sometimes you found that you had to be rude not to make them embarrass themselves trying to prove their point.

"Of course there were countless ways in which the immigrants capitalised on the situation. Like the time the West Indian told the traffic cop that he'd run through the red light because he'd seen the white driver go through the green and he thought red was for blacks".

Then there's the joke Charlie used when he did occasional cabaret for his people. "Whenever I cross the peder walk on the pedestrian crossing I always walk between two whites. The immigrants had a lot of culture conflicts among themselves. One of Charlie's personal experiences was the time a Nigerian woman brought a child to give him and his wife. They were shocked, frightened and refused to take the child. They hadn't known then that for whatever reason giving a child away was acceptable to Africans.

Outside of the culture scene too wide to explore, Charlie enjoyed the Good Life within the safety of the performing arts society.

His friend Robin Midgley got him a nine-month stint, a starring role with one of BBC radio's longest running serials Dr. Dale's Diary. In it Charlie acted as Dr. Smithson, Dr. Dale's assistant. He was flooded with fan mail from admiring listeners. But there was other mail from people who were against a black man getting into a romance with a white girl, Sue, who was boarding at the Dales. Soon Dr. Smithson was made to recapitulate to an old love back in the West Indies and to go back home and marry her.

However the stint pushed up his popularity. He did a lot of work for the BBC Overseas Service, he worked in Repertory theatre playing anything and everything, because flexibility was his aim, because he believes an actor should keep in shape and that no part is too small.

His first TV stint was the narrator in *A Book With Chapters*. He didn't actually appear but he got a kick out of seeing his name in the credits on BBC TV. Another big event was appearing with Sammy Davis in Jan Carew's play *The Day Of The Fox*. It meant a friendship with one of his favourite Black stars who was then at his zenith. Charlie was then very popular in British radio and theatre, tasting honey and wanting more. And

he feels he more than got his share.

In 1962 Charlie was invited home to do *Here Comes Charlie* live, in a Special Independence Nuggets For The Needy Show. He was overwhelmed and humbled, he says, by the V.I.P. treatment he got from co-sponsors — JBC, BOAC and John Crook Limited.

"The appearance was a total trust thing, with Adrian Robinson who'd invited me back. I was unrehearsed and I had exactly five minutes. I asked not to be announced. I wanted to see if people remembered me. I did my thing and when I delivered the punch line at five minutes on the dot, State Theatre erupted. I was home."

Charlie was personally asked by Sammy Davis who'd also been invited to appear for Independence, to MC his show. The LTM asked him to appear in a special presentation of the Pantomime, *Carib Gold*, and a two-week visit stretched to three months. It wasn't any hassle then, as Charlie was by now a star in British theatre complete with an agent, who saw to it he was employed, and eligible for releases from productions without any strain. His first TV play was *Return To Look Behind* in Evon Jones' series *Jezebel XUK* — a kind of *Love Boat* series.

His first colour TV appearance was as a flamboyant councillor in Obi Egbuna's *The Wind Of Change*. He did some 100 TV plays, the greatest of which, for him, was playing opposite Athol Fugard in Fugard's *Bloodkgg* — a ninety minute two hander, which was so popular, it was networked in the U.S. on NET.

The first of his five films was *High Wind In Jamaica*, starring Anthony Quinn and James Coburn — an epic that didn't make anything but an award for photography in an Italian festival. However seeing "Introducing Charles Hyatt" on a Twentieth Century Fox credit run was enough of a kick for Charlie.

Charlie's work over the fourteen years or so in England took him all over Europe and England, exercised his talents to the fullest and most enjoyable extent and as far as his great love, radio, was concerned and TV, he was at the zenith in Category "A", commanding starring fees for all appearances.

However his best act to date, he says, of all the things he's done, classics and contemporary works alike, is the role of Pa Ben in Trevor Rhone's *Old Story Time*.

"There's nothing like *Old Story Time*. It will go down in the annals of theatre as one of the best. I have great plans for that play".

Another thing he's extremely proud of is the now very popular *Fortunes of Floralee* which he produces and directs for JBC Radio One.

Charlie came home from England in 1973. "I realised my children were growing up as aliens to their own country. That wasn't right. Then there was the conflict with the IRA. I could not justify dying in a pub, say, blown up by the Irish who were fighting the British. I didn't fit into the picture."

On coming home he expected and met changes in post-Independence Jamaica and he gave himself ample time to become acclimatised to "the runnings" especially in the media he likes best.

Today "Sweet Plates" Charlie (the originator of *Kool Kat* and the voice behind it and many other popular commercials) is one of the best and busiest in the business. He feels that at this stage of his life he is in a position to pass on valuable knowledge to those coming up even while he continues to work and hopefully, continues to live in the manner he thinks befitting to him. "I'm willing to teach, whenever asked". Here comes Charlie. Catch him while you can.