

Seaga notes rich legacy

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FORMER PRIME Minister Edward Seaga has lamented the passing of “the icon of Jamaican folk music”, Dr Olive Lewin, hailing the founder of the Jamaican Folk Singers as a woman who has left a rich legacy and impact on Jamaican culture.

It was Seaga who got Lewin to work in the public sector in 1962 when he was then Minister of Development and Welfare, with responsibility for social development and culture.

“When I came into office in 1962, I realised that folk culture was being neglected and that folk music was dying and disappearing. So I set out to have a collection done of all the folk songs that existed in Jamaica, about Jamaica and some of that collection had already been done by one or two people – not a good deal but some of it had been done,” he said.

“So I got Olive Lewin, who was a very accomplished musician but was not involved in public service, and I got her to agree to go out into the field and go out and collect all the music that had not yet been collected or recorded,” said Seaga.

There was a deliberate attempt on Seaga’s part to ensure that the folk music project remained free of political colouring.

“There were never any political sides to this. It was national; that’s the way I set it up and that’s the way it was,” he said.



SEAGA

According to Seaga, he was also deeply involved in the development and preservation of Jamaican music. It was when Lewin was in the field that she became even more interested in the rich tapestry of Jamaican folk culture.

“After doing that, I guess she came across a lot of interesting episodes and tales that would be considered folk history and she decided to record those as well. All of this went on during the ’60s and ’70s, and of course during this time came the Jamaican Folk Singers which became the most popular singing group in the country,” he recalled.

LASTING IMPACT

Unable to carry through with the rigours of the Jamaican Folk Singers, Lewin was not singing with the group at the time of her

death. However, there is little doubt that Lewin’s life work will see her legacy impacting the development of Jamaican folk culture.

In a release, Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller said the passing of Olive Lewin, a pioneer musicologist, leaves a great void in the pursuit and preservation of Jamaica’s traditional music and cultural art form. Jamaica has lost an invaluable cultural icon. For more than six decades, Olive Lewin remained at the forefront of the process of researching, performing and teaching traditional Jamaican folk music and theatre.

“Dr Lewin led a truly exemplary life and we honour and salute the outstanding contribution of this most beloved Jamaican patriot and sister, who not only distinguished herself locally but across the region and internationally,” Simpson Miller said.

The prime minister described Dr Lewin as a fine Jamaican lady in every sense of the word, who exhibited consummate humility and gentility with a great heart for service. It was those very qualities which saw her bringing into schools, correctional and mental institutions, the power of music and Jamaica’s rich cultural tradition in soothing the soul and lifting the spirits of the Jamaican people.

Simpson Miller expressed condolences to Dr Lewin’s daughter, Major Johanna Lewin, and the family on behalf of the Government and people of Jamaica.