

The Importance of Preserving Guyana's Literary Heritage and Contemporary Literary Scene: An Interview with Yaphet Jackman

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There are many stories in life that need to be told, and with this gift of writing that I've been given, I've vowed to play my part in writing my part of history so that it's added to the bigger picture of life.
—Yaphet Jackman

I began this interview with Yaphet Jackman when I was living in Georgetown, Guyana on sabbatical, between January and June 2014. I was impressed by the hand Jackman played as an artist and young producer helping to keep the poetry and spoken-word scene alive in Georgetown. Having travelled extensively throughout the Caribbean and having lived in Jamaica for different periods of time—and having been part of scholarly, as well as other, circles in the Caribbean over the years—I also noticed that, in relation to the rest of the Caribbean, Guyana is significantly under-funded and under-represented in the arts. There is an extraordinary pool of artistic talent in Guyana; however, archives and libraries need attention, and the literary heritage and contemporary literary scene of Guyana must be honoured and preserved. Hopefully this interview will help to draw attention to the richness of talent that exists in Guyana and the need for scholars and funding bodies to focus carefully on Guyana's literary records.

This interview reflects the time during which I met Jackman—when Upscale readings were still booming—and when these readings/performances rapidly disappeared. Jackman and I began discussing the arts in Guyana and Upscale in January 2014. I sent him the following questions in May. He moved to Ohio in early June, and I left Guyana in July. I received full replies to the questions in October, and it was at this point that I learned the Upscale readings had folded the month Jackman left Georgetown; the final show at Upscale was a tribute to Jackman and a precursor to renovation. After these readings ended, the event and restaurant were permanently closed, and poetry night in Georgetown no longer exists. My interview, then, is a potent reminder of the need to foster and preserve the arts in Guyana.
(Stephanie McKenzie)

Yaphet Jackman is an MFA film student and graduate assistant at Ohio University, College of Fine Arts. He is a young professional independent filmmaker, poet and event coordinator who has worked mostly in the Caribbean region. He is also a Global Shaper of the Georgetown Hub in Guyana, where he served as the first vice curator of the Hub. The Global Shapers Community is a youth affiliate of the

World Economic Forum, based in Geneva and run by youth between the ages of 20-30 from around the world. He has sixteen years of media industry experience and worked his way up from camera operator to studio manager at the corporate level. His work and expertise have gained him senior positions in the Caribbean Broadcasting market, more particularly in St. Vincent and Antigua and Bermuda. He holds a Bachelor's Degree in Communication Studies from the University of Guyana and has served as the Special Projects Coordinator for the W&T George and Company Ltd. where he curated, planned and hosted several "open mic" night events. These events were based mostly on the visual and performing arts that later became a staple in the Guyanese arts industry. Spoken-word and poetry recitals had been at the Upscale Restaurant and Sports bar—an entity under the W&T George umbrella—for twelve years. Jackman coordinated and hosted six of those twelve years. He worked as the lead coordinator for these events with the help of the directorship, management and staff of W&T George, along with artists, performers and enthusiasts of the arts. The show's popularity led him to merge his love for television and film and to create a television series of the live show. The show, *Verses & Flow*, quickly became a hit that set the precedent for local entertainment television. This genre, of course, branched into a social media program, establishing its own Facebook & YouTube pages. Jackman is also a spoken-word performer and writer, currently working on a collection of work through music and new media.

Introduction to the Background of Upscale and Production in Guyana

The Upscale Restaurant and Sports Bar—one of six entities under the W&T George and Company Ltd. Umbrella—was a restaurant that provided both local and international cuisine, along with a sports bar, in a comfortable and relaxing environment. It also provided some of Guyana's leading poets and comedians with a stage to perform for the Guyanese people. Apart from being a restaurant and sports bar, the Upscale Restaurant had served as a generous social contributor to arts and culture in Guyana by creating a forum for expression through the visual and performing arts. The Upscale Restaurant started its poetry and comedy events in 2002. The directorship of the company, more particularly, Mr. Asafa George, recognized the apparent opportunity for more cultural entertainment shows that were lacking in the creative industry. At that time, the Upscale Restaurant was the only business that consistently hosted such cultural events and soon became the home of spoken word and comedy. It was one of the few private businesses that hosted wholesome family entertainment attracting diverse people. The events grew from humble beginnings to overflowing audience attendance at each monthly show in 2014. The "open mic"—held the first Tuesday of every month—and the comedy shows—held the last Thursday of every month—evolved from basic

solo artist performances to more intricate shows involving multiple local and international performers.

The Upscale Restaurant had been directly responsible for the growth and development of the performing arts through poetry and comedy in Guyana. Because of its consistency and contribution to the arts, Upscale had birthed some of the most famed poets, artists and comedians who are recognized in and around Guyana, the Caribbean and further afield.

Unfortunately, the cost of sustaining such shows inevitably added up, which caused the organization to make a harsh financial decision to liquidate the entity and its associated events just recently—in August 2014.” (Yaphet Jackman)

What is critical to recognize is that a number of these shows—boasting a wide selection of Guyanese poets, writers and spoken word artists over the years—have been filmed by Jackman and others. Thus, recordings exist of a Guyanese literary heritage that is vibrant and vital but on hold in a way as of now—because of the cancelling of the Upscale poetry night. It is imperative that these records be preserved somehow.

SM: Yaphet, I’m very interested in and impressed by the work you do as an organizer and producer of the poetry readings at Upscale here in Georgetown. I’m wondering if you could tell me about the history of the Upscale events and describe your role in them.

YJ: Thank you much! The history of Upscale poetry has still not been fully captured in my mind due to the numerous people who have all contributed to this legacy before my time. Poetry night began as a one-of-a-kind event in 2002. Since its beginnings, it has attracted like-minded lovers of poetry, writers, musicians and performers from all walks of life. I began attending these shows in late 2003 and was an ardent attendee until I left Guyana in 2007. Upon my return to Guyana in late 2008, I inquired about poetry night, only to be told that it had lost its momentum. It was in September 2008 that I took over the Upscale poetry night event and rebranded it as “Xpress Yoself GY” under the Blue Bucket Entertainment *brand—with my business partner JP Schwmon*, which was based in St. Vincent while I lived there.

Xpress Yoself GY ran successfully for one year—this was the duration of the contract that I made with the Upscale Restaurant. The show evolved from a recital/performance format to a musical, visual art and spoken word format. The thinking behind expanding the format was based on the notion that the Guyanese public deemed poetry as “bland and boring.” The inclusion of music, song and dance attracted people who would not have normally attended a poetry show. These pull factors worked well. Attendance grew rapidly for the shows as the months rolled on. The Upscale restaurant quickly became too small for the numbers of people who religiously came to poetry nights on a monthly basis.

After the year of Xpress Yoself, I handed the show back to Upscale’s administration. It was at this time (2009/10) that the poetry committee was created. My role from then to now is coordinator and host of the show. The committee is now responsible for the planning

and execution of shows and workshops for both the poetry and comedy events of the Upscale Restaurant. Though there is no formal chair of the committee, they have often looked to me for leadership on *logistical* issues and decisions that needed to be made in the best interest of the events.

The coordinator/host role basically organizes the show, its cast and the flow of it all. Coupled with planning for the shows, I was afforded several opportunities to network with regional and international organizations and groups that would've benefited the entire fraternity. I've served as an ambassador for the Upscale family, representing and propagating sound relationships with other organizers and promoters of the arts to ensure that our performers, writers and musicians all get continued opportunities to perform on several stages in and out of Guyana.

SM: Could you tell me about the history of the Camp Refugee poets, which came into existence after the Upscale crowd and events, and the relation between Camp Refugee and the Upscale crowd? I realize that there is not much information about the group but information on Facebook indicates that "Camp Refugee is a Movement that seeks to [u]nearth and nurture young talent with an aim of producing, promoting and performing quality spoken word poetry."

YJ: The Camp Refugee poets are all self-starters. The idea of the group birthed from popular spoken word performer, actor and writer, Randolph Critchlow—Randy, as he is affectionately known, was just carving out his own identity by giving himself a "stage name." This then grew into an organic and independent movement beside the Upscale poetry effort. The movement quickly grew into a group of twelve poets/writers and performers, who were all passionate about moving the poetry agenda along in Guyana (for more information about them you can check their Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/174267829410884/>). They performed at the Upscale restaurant and several other venues around Georgetown and in the other counties of the land.

The Upscale masses took to them instantaneously because what they were doing was fresh and dynamic. They brought to the stage more collaborative performances and fusions of music and poetry. Because all of these poets were already Upscale stars—through their content and dynamism—the collective movement sparked a lot of excitement and inspiration for "hiding" poets.

SM: You have mentioned (and I have seen) people recording the poetry sessions at Upscale. Could you tell me how long these events have been recorded? As well, I believe you said they have not been shared with a library archive? Is that true? You did mention that some performances are on YouTube? How many recordings are available on YouTube? Do you have plans for the professional archiving of this material?

YJ: All our sessions from 2008 have been recorded on digital video to date. The plan behind our recordings first started out as a personal archiving medium. That idea later grew into making short videos for our poets and for uploading to social media to act as an attractor for new talent to join the fraternity. The idea expanded once more with the creation of *Verses & Flow*—a television version of the Upscale poetry nights, aired on TVG28. *Verses & Flow* quickly became a television favorite. Viewers praised us for creating and producing a quality local television show that not only exposed them to excellent entertainment but also enlightened them to the ground swell of Guyanese performers, writers, poets and spoken-word artists who were right here in Guyana.

Professional archiving is currently in the works. We have the gargantuan task of giving each one of the poets their performances since 2008. With limited resources to get this done, this has become a long, tedious, time-consuming and expensive task. However, we're working towards providing digital copies to each of our regular and visiting poets so that they can add their performances to their portfolios. Apart from our YouTube page (<https://www.youtube.com/upscalepoetry>), no other digital archive exists.

SM: Could you tell me a bit about your own creative work and its history?

YJ: My work straddles the creative arts spectrum. My work includes cinematography, graphic artistry, writing and performance poetry. Most, if not all, of my work in the literary arts is based upon actual direct and indirect life experiences. I often think that the most popular poets all started writing as an emotional release. I used to be a very cerebral person with very little words to offer to anyone, including my closest family. Coupled with being introverted, I often thought that my way of thinking was a little too farfetched and most people wouldn't understand my point of view. I wrote for comfort and my own peace of mind since 1999. The growth of my pen can be seen on my blog (<http://www.thoughtsoftheunheardman.blogspot.com/>). I started blogging in 2008 and use the blog site as an archive for all of my work. My work consists of short stories, poems and free-verse pieces. I often tell people if they want to get to know me more, they should read my blog. I see my poetry as pieces of me—tidbits and fragments of stories that all are a part of my being.

SM: I'm wondering if you could tell me a bit about the literary scene, as you perceive it, in Georgetown and in Guyana. Upscale, of course, is the home of the spoken word. What is the relationship between the Upscale movement (can you call it that?) and other poets, perhaps of the older generation, who deal more with the printed medium?

YJ: From the Upscale perspective, we've seen poetry grow from an elitist stigma to a more accepted form of art by all walks of life. As it relates to the craft of poetry, that, too, has grown over the years. More

and more writers with raw talent join the movement and are quickly funneled and linked with established writers, workshops and other groups that would exponentially hone their craft.

We've heard it said on our behalf that Upscale is the home of poetry. Poets, writers, actors, comedians, musicians and other creatives all have a special respect for the Upscale Restaurant. Our years of maintaining such a forum and the results of rookies turning into sought-after stars and performers are testimony to the contributions that we've made to the Guyana's entertainment industry and literary history.

We've tried to manage our relationships with other individuals and establishments that are all a part of the literary scene. We've always reached out and worked with, and will continue to work with, all parties that are working towards the development of the arts.

SM: You've mentioned that Linden¹ has its own spoken word shows, and you've mentioned Devin Sears, whom you describe as your counterpart, somewhat, in Linden. Is there movement between the Linden and Georgetown crowds/poets? I remember attending a poetry night at Upscale and a crowd had come in from Linden. Is this common? Are there often literary exchanges like this between regions?

YJ: We've had regional importation, more than exchange, over the years. Our Guyanese poets—from the Upscale fraternity—have not been sent to any other country due to the inability to secure real funding for our performers. In addition, Upscale was not as formalized as it should've been to assist the poets to make these exchanges. More exchanges have been made within the country with our own poets, mostly with those from Linden.

Unfortunately or fortunately, we've had more international and regional poets and performers come to Upscale. We've been creating shows for these visiting performers along with workshops and sessions to help our poets sharpen their craft and become more salable and professional performers.

Devin Sears has been an unofficial partner of the Upscale Restaurant for some years. After the revamp of the poetry nights in Georgetown, he's been actively working towards developing and bringing quality performers from Linden to our shows in Georgetown. We also informally created an exchange of Georgetown poets heading to Linden to participate in their regular shows.

SM: What are the options for publishing and disseminating literary material in Guyana? Are there many writers who are keen to be published? Are there opportunities for publication? Or would you say spoken word poets are already "publishing" in a different manner and/or that conventional publishing might not be their aim?

YJ: Self-publication in Guyana has always been a norm, although very non-conventional. Writers and poets would literally go to copy shops

and printeries to “publish” their work by making scores of copies for resale to random readers, book stores, gas stations and libraries.

There are few publishing houses in Guyana. The technical skill, networking and common “knowing a good book for sale” is not popular in Guyanese literature society. Of course, this is from my limited and dated knowledge of the industry. It was only recently that the Caribbean Press was established in Guyana. This press, in a short space of time, embarked on a project of reprinting out-of-print Guyanese classics. This press, though noteworthy, has also brought itself some negative attention by not being able to transparently and accountably reveal how it operates and how it lends real support to budding writers in Guyana.

As traditional Guyanese, writers found crafty ways to disseminate their work. Writers and performers took to the streets, schools, theatres, bars and any other forum that would allow them “sharetime” for their work. Spoken-word performers, in particular, opted to record their work, to make CDs and albums to have their work heard. This then created opportunities for them to perform at different concerts, functions and cultural events that aided in them gaining from their craft financially.

SM: You seem to receive some funding for Upscale events. Who is your main sponsor? Does this existing sponsorship cover all the bills? Is there something else you would like to see funded in terms of Upscale events? What are your main challenges in terms of these events, and what are your strengths?

YJ: Funding and sponsorship have always been a sore issue for the Upscale family. In the beginning of it all, Scotiabank was the main sponsor of poetry night. Scotiabank later left the sponsorship role because they didn’t see the returns on their investment. After Scotia, it was a hard task to secure another full sponsor.

Partial sponsors such as Digicel, Ansa McAl, Banks DIH, DDL Republic Bank and many others came on board at intervals to lend support but did not want to be long-term partners of the event. Needless to say, the Upscale Restaurant and all other entities under the W&T George umbrella—particularly Quality restaurant—bore the brunt of overhead costs when all else failed financially.

What I’d like to see more than anything else is a sustained and consistent, mutually beneficial partnership between corporate Guyana and the private sector. Such a partnership would enable cultural events and initiatives such as ours to become more marketable, financially viable and independent.

SM: Who do you think some of the most important or exciting poets are today in Guyana?

YJ: This is one of the easiest questions I’ve been asked in this interview! Those poets are as follows: Kamadyah Yisrael, Rochelle Christie, Randolph Critchlow, Latoni Beaton, Andrew Timram (the

Apologist), Salimah Hussian, Yerrodin Bowen, Melissa King, Nickose Layne, Ruel Johnson, Sara Bharrat Kojo McPherson, Elsie Ross, Jermaine Joseph, Antonio Devonish, Lady Hilda, Jerome Hope, the late Gordon Baird and the list goes on. Of course, this list is biased and not exhaustive because all of them are regular Upscale performers.

SM: I know (and a big congratulations again) that you are destined shortly to begin film studies in Ohio. Can you say how your background and experience in Guyana has led you to this study? Why film?

YJ: Film has always been an interest of mine from a very young age. It all began with me being curious about the inner workings behind television. That technical desire then grew into a curiosity for the art of videography and filmmaking. I always thought of life as a movie, so it was an easy way to paint the thoughts I had about different issues. That curiosity continued to evolve over the years as I got involved in documentaries and research projects that had a video/film component.

Visuals were always a large part of my life. That's how I learned everything I currently know—sheer observation. I have a visual memory, and I do better with trying to express myself visually than through words. Guyana and the Caribbean region have given me ample opportunities to grow my craft. I've created several documentaries, PSA's, commercials and film work that have all helped to build a firm launching pad for me to delve into concentrated work and study in being a movie director.

SM: I recently attended BOCAS lit fest in Trinidad, and you were there, along with others from Guyana. What do you think is the relation between Guyanese writers and poets and the rest of the Caribbean?

YJ: Generally, Guyanese writers and poets have cordial relationships. I know of only a few writers that have personal relationships with other Caribbean writers, a handful actually. That doesn't augur well for the development of Caribbean writing.

I believe the fundamental problem resides in the lack of awareness of Caribbean opportunities for writers in Guyana. Guyanese writers are always seemingly "the last to know" when there's a festival, workshop or competition that might help improve their craft.

Young Guyanese writers have not allowed themselves to be immersed in the works of other writers. As I always say: "Good writers are good readers!" Until this phenomenon is confronted—the false confidence and certainty in their writing, when it has never even left the shores of Guyana to stand the test of time—our writers will continue to suffer from inexperience and relevance to mass audiences.

On the other hand, Guyanese writers who do not live in Guyana often champion Caribbean festivals. While this is welcomed, these writers are not always authentically Guyanese. They probably have Guyanese lineage, but they have not truly shared in being Guyanese by

living within its borders and sharing the experiences of the country to really represent it at these forums.

SM: I met you by fortuitous circumstances. In conversation, shortly after my arrival in Georgetown, I mentioned to someone I was interested in contemporary poetry in Guyana, and your name was mentioned immediately. What resources are available to those coming to Guyana who are not “in the know” and who are interested in tapping the poetry scene and other arts scenes? Where are events advertised? Do you think enough advertising exists, or would you like to see another source (like the newspapers, for example) begin to list poetry and other arts events?

YJ: That’s just how things are in Guyana! Typically, art lovers have to be very interested in finding other people and places they would enjoy. I’m not sure what resources exist to help the arts and art enthusiasts. The resources that probably exist are not easily accessible by the factions that do constant work—for example: Upscale. Using ourselves as an example, we’ve consistently been looking for opportunities, grants and funding to expand our efforts.

Even with twelve years of executing a one-of-a-kind show, a great percentage of Guyanese were still not in the know of the show. The Guyanese culture is such that a typical person would’ve heard about your show, it might have been well packaged and advertised, but they’re not just going to jump at a cultural show, especially a poetry show. Our people are not at that stage where they can freely do this out of curiosity. There’s more interest in lighter things given our economic background and political high-tension state.

SM: Is there anything else you’d like to add to this interview or anything else you’d like to say?

YJ: Just want to thank you for this opportunity and I’m happy that our paths crossed. You would be sad to know, though, that since my leaving Guyana, the Upscale poetry initiative has been brought to a close. I may have mentioned this to you before, but the business has not been exactly financially benefitting from its efforts. The directorship finally decided to bring this chapter to a close, with a hope that all of the work, time and effort that we’ve invested over the years will spark some other initiative within the fraternity.

Notes

1. Linden is the second largest town in Guyana and the capital of the Upper Demerara-Berbice region.

Works Cited

<<https://www.facebook.com/upscalepoetry>>.
<<https://www.facebook.com/UpscaleComedy>>.