

# Sam Selvon: A Celebration

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AND ISMITH KHAN, WITH FRANK BIRBALSINGH

*What follows is the transcript of a discussion held at York University, Toronto, on 20 October 1995, in celebration of Sam Selvon's life and work. The moderator was Frank Birbalsingh, and the participants were the writers Austin Clarke, Jan Carew, Ramabai Espinet, and Ismith Khan.*

FRANK BIRBALSINGH: Selvon was born in Trinidad in 1923 and went to London in 1950. At that time, one might say that there was no West Indian literature, which doesn't mean that there was no writing from the West Indies in English: it means that the idea of a body of writing called West Indian literature did not really exist. One of Selvon's achievements is that after the writing he did in London in the 1950s, the idea of West Indian literature was born. So one tribute we can pay Sam Selvon is that he played a central role as one of the founders of contemporary West Indian literature. His first book, *A Brighter Sun*, came out in 1952 in London, followed in 1955 by another novel *An Island is a World*. These two books caught the attention of British critics, as did a third novel *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). Whereas the first two books were about the people and places that Selvon knew in his homeland, Trinidad, *The Lonely Londoners* was about West Indian immigrants living in London. Because of their colonial history, West Indians have traditionally regarded emigration as a solution to their social and economic problems, and many West Indians left their homelands to go abroad in the 1950s and 1960s. London was the chief attraction for West Indian immigrants in the 1950s because, as British citizens, West Indians then did not need visas to enter England. It is about these people that Selvon wrote in *The Lonely Londoners*.

*The Lonely Londoners* is important for another reason: the whole narrative was written in what was then called West Indian dialect, that is to say, in the speech idioms of the West Indian people. Today, "dialect" is considered pejorative, and is replaced by "creole," which represents an authentic, West Indian variety of English. In the 1950s, writing in creole was revolutionary, and it helped to draw attention to the new body of writing that came to be West Indian literature. But Selvon was not operating alone; Edgar Mittelholzer, George Lamming, Roger Mais, John Hearne, Jan Carew, and many others were writing at the time. Through the efforts of all these people, West Indian literature experienced a rebirth in London in the 1950s.

As far as Selvon himself is concerned, he published several novels and collections of short stories—*Turn Again Tiger* (1958), a novel; *I Hear Thunder* (1963), another novel; *Ways of Sunlight* (1957), a collection of short stories; and then several more novels, such as *Moses Ascending* (1975) and *Moses Migrating* (1983). Selvon lived in London for 28 years and immigrated in 1978 to Calgary, Canada. In addition to his writing, he gave many readings from his work, and served as Writer in Residence at several universities. He also travelled widely. Early in 1994, he went to Trinidad for a visit and died there. On this occasion we would like to celebrate Selvon's life and work and to recognize his contribution to West Indian literature.

AUSTIN CLARKE: When I was a journalist at the *The Globe and Mail* [1960] and was fired, they gave me two weeks' grace to depart their premises, and I spent the time pretending to be a short story writer. In the two weeks, I wrote ten short stories in dialect, as it was called at the time. I thought this was very original and that nobody had done it before. A few years later, when I came across Sam Selvon's brilliant book *The Lonely Londoners*, I realized that I was imitating him. So I admit the debt that I owe Sam Selvon.

Sam and I were very close, probably because he realized that I was copying his style. Of all the things that may be said about him, I would like to stress two: his graciousness and his loyalty. Sam was not the kind of man to indulge in intellectual

analysis of his own work. On occasions such as these, he would mistakenly give the idea that he did not know how he had arrived at his great strength of portraying West Indian culture, including idiosyncrasies of Trinidad speech and behaviour, by means of a language which not only accurately described personal idiosyncrasies and culture, but also elevated the language to a level envied by most creative writers. Before I give you some examples of the influence he has had, I should say that most West Indians are bilingual in the sense that they speak what may be called "commercial English," that is to say, the language they are taught in schools, together with another language that I would call their "psychological language," in which they express ideas, thoughts, and deeper feelings. This psychological language, in other words, is Barbadian, Trinidadian, Guyanese, etc. In some of its usages it might be a shorthand means of conveying something that would be much more convoluted in standard English. But more often it is more than a shorthand means of expression that hits directly at the heart of the matter.

In trying to decide whether *The Lonely Londoners* should have been written in the same way as his previous novels, Sam came upon the idea that since he was talking about Trinidadians, it might be better to convey their feelings in what I have called their psychological language, Trinidadian creole. To give you an example of the importance of Sam's decision to use a psychological West Indian language, I can refer to my story "The Motor Car" [in *When He Was Free and Young and Used to Wear Silks*], in which, for the first time, I followed Sam's example of having the narration as well as dialogue written in the Barbadian language. I chose it because I felt that the Barbadian language was more versatile, and I was more familiar with it than I could ever be with English. I also felt that the rhythms of the Barbadian language were more suitable.

I have an example of language that includes nationality and culture in trying to express ideas. It comes from Leroi Jones's autobiography *Leroi Jones/Amin Baraka*:

Growing up was a maze of light and darkness. I have never fully understood the purpose of childhood, baby pictures nonplus me, it looks like me a little, I think, but what the hell, I don't know nothin.  
[New York: Freundlich Books, 1984. 1]

I found it interesting that Leroi Jones, professor of English, would begin in traditional language, but when he came to a point which he considered to be serious he automatically goes into black English or jive talk. He did not prepare you for it, so he is not putting a lower premium on jive talk or black English than he is putting on traditional English. Here is another example from the same book:

You see you doesnt understand colored peoples or color peepas either. My mother's folks was in business. Them funeral parlor dudes was and is the actual colored rich guys. [3]

Now, astonishingly, here is an example from Miles Davis, who is the best jazz trumpeter of all time, and who, as you might expect, would use jive talk. This is from his autobiography *Miles*:

The critics were still putting me down and I think some of it had to do with my attitude because I ain't never been no quitter or someone who went out of his way to kiss somebody's ass, especially a critic. So a lot of critics didn't like me back then; still don't today, because they saw me as an arrogant little nigger.

[New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989. 83]

Talking about Sam's work, Jeremy Taylor says, in the *BWIA Magazine*, in Autumn 1994:

In many ways this [Selvon's writing] was ground breaking work. It was partly the sharpness of the humour and the accuracy of the observation which contributed to Selvon's success in forging a lively and distinctive style of his own. Whether funny or poignant or both at once, his style had shape and structure, and an easy-going, anecdotal approach accompanied by brilliant timing. But most of all, this was the first time in West Indian literature that a writer had managed to put Caribbean speech with all its idiosyncrasies and subtle rhythms onto the page not as a curiosity, or something exotic, but as something as natural as sunlight. Caribbean language suddenly found a narrative voice of its own. [34]

You can see this today in the writing of novelists and even in poetry. I suppose one example would be Derek Walcott's *Omeros*. Jeremy Taylor says that Sam's use of language was poignant: it was not merely a curiosity.

To give you an example of what I think he meant, here is an extract from a slave narrative; and the important thing about this is that even though it is the narrative of a slave, it is not written

by the slave. So these cultural idiosyncrasies I'm talking about would not be placed on the page with any amount of decency or respect or seriousness. Here is the example:

They was all scared o' her, she was the cause of my ol' massa trying all the overseers. She'd worked without no watchin' and overseers weren't nothing no how.

You can see how forced that is compared with Sam's language:

Oh what a time it is when summer come to the city and all them girls throw away heavy winter coat and wearing light summer frocks so you could see the legs and shapes that was hiding away from the cold blasts and you could coast a lime in the park and negotiate ten shillings or a pound with the sports as the case may be or else they have a particular bench near the Hyde Park Corner that they call the Play Around Section where you could go and sit with one of them.

[*The Lonely Londoners*. 1956. Toronto: TSAR, 1991. 85-94]

This is part of a sentence that takes up nine pages, and you can see that he is not talking about free association; he is in complete command of the language and is reproducing the way a Trinidadian would speak in these circumstances. I must tell you what Sam said when he was asked about his language, which Edward Brathwaite calls "nation language," but which I simply call the Barbadian or Trinidadian language. When asked, Sam said:

I think it is really important to use this language. It is important for me personally because I think it is the only means of communication whereby one can authentically portray the thoughts and feelings of the people in the very form of the language in which they speak. This is the way they express themselves, and this is the way they think, and as I say, what they call "nation language" in the Caribbean is very much a form of English. [Interview. With Isabella M. Zoppi. *Rivista di Studi Candesì* 5 (1992): 24]

JAN CAREW: For me to separate Sam the man and Sam the writer is impossible because of our shared experiences. He came from a village, and so did I. In my long history of being a professional immigrant, I have found that people from Caribbean villages have more in common with each other than with other Caribbean people, and that this cuts across races and classes. Sam epitomized this for me. He was so totally creolized in Trinidadian experience that I could never think of him in terms

of his being Indian or coloured or whatever labels were popular: Sam was integrated.

The socialization that took place in the village gave him the possibility of looking through a particular spectrum of experience that encompassed the immediate circumstances of his life in Trinidad and then expanded to the world, so that he was able to retain that vision with absolute clarity all of his life. I remember an incident in the corridors of the BBC, where we all used to cluster in those days (the 1950s) when the BBC was our patron. Naipaul and Sam met, and Naipaul said to Sam in his very English voice: "Sam, what are you reading these days?" Sam replied: "Man, me's not a reader, me's a writer." He was sending a clear message to Naipaul to come down from his intellectual plane and deal with realities. It was typical of him that he could do this with graciousness and a certain amount of skill.

What Sam had as an artist was something rare; he could filter the pain of Caribbean experience through laughter and a sort of irony. We all knew what it was to be a writer in London: it forced you to evolve a certain kind of solidarity with your fellow writers and artists, and also to cling passionately to memories of your homeland. Sam could do this as easily as breathing. He never really left Trinidad. This is why he was able to write about Caribbean people with such profound compassion and understanding. To estimate the impact of his writing on the Caribbean community would be practically impossible.

When Shelley said that poets hold up gigantic mirrors in which people can see themselves, this is what Sam was doing for the new West Indian immigrant community in England. For the first time, he was showing us images of ourselves with humour, understanding and compassion. When *The Lonely Londoners* came out, I met Sam near Bayswater; he slinked into a cafe and said: "Come in here, Ian"—he always insisted on calling me "Ian" instead of "Jan."—"Man, I have to go into hiding because the fellows are looking for me." Some people in the community were upset about seeing themselves in *The Lonely Londoners*. It was so real that they readily placed themselves inside the discourse of the work, which is the crowning achievement of an artist. The novel went across the board, taking in an area of London between Bayswater

and Marble Arch. Those of us who went to London in the early days (1950s) knew how significant this area was for the West Indian community, because Nottingham Gate was nearby with a great clustering of new West Indian immigrants. So "The Water" and "The Arch" became terms of familiarity for places in which new immigrants were developing a new sense of belonging. For many immigrants, these terms represented London and security: anything outside of that was the provinces; but if you lived in that small compass of London, you were safe. Sam had an inner ear not only for the speech but for the life of the people he was writing about.

One of the things overlooked by critics is that Sam was in the navy along with Edgar Mittelholzer during World War II. They were in what they called the local forces, that is to say, the colonial as distinct from the metropolitan forces. If you were in the navy or the army or air force in England, you got much better treatment: the discrimination was not as harsh as it was in the colonial world. Sam told me a story about Mittelholzer, who went to the English commanding officer because he was irritated by racism in the local navy. Mittelholzer said: "I want out." The commander said: "You cannot leave the navy as long as you are wearing the King's uniform." So Mittelholzer stripped himself there and then and walked off the ship stark naked in broad daylight. This experience of World War II bridged Sam's transition from Trinidad to London, and opened him not only to a particular experience in Trinidad but to a wider world experience that cataclysmic conflict had thrust upon us all. He was therefore able to cut across the little conflicts of race that still afflict parts of the Caribbean, like Guyana and Trinidad.

Balzac's novel *Lost Illusions* has a character who says that society likes to be entertained for moments in history by artists, writers, poets; but the season of popularity waxes and wanes and society is not as stupid as we think it is. It puts us through monumental tests, and if we survive, society accepts us. There is nothing society can do once a writer reaches a plateau of acceptance. I think this is what happened to Sam. He came through; he reached the plateau, although in Canada, because of a kind of spiritual philistinism, the last novel he wrote was not reviewed in

a single paper. That was the fate of all West Indian writers, including myself. We had our seasons of great popularity when West Indian writing was fashionable in England, and we were the darlings of the salons for a season; but then we had to live through this period of neglect, and only those with creative integrity stayed the course.

The finest tribute that we can pay to Samuel Selvon is to read his books. In an audio/visual age when reading is banished, and eight-minute spans on television, between commercials, are a substitute for reading, it is all the more important that those works should be read. Sam's works came out of a post-war renaissance when Caribbean writers burst upon the scene in London. Caribbean writing should be presented as a body of writing coming out of a particular culture. At the heart of that body of writing are the works of Selvon, who possessed distinct genius that enabled him to listen with an inner ear to the suffering, life, and laughter of the peoples of the Caribbean.

RAMABAI ESPINET: I want to refer first of all to a paper I presented in 1984, called "The Invisible Woman in Caribbean Fiction," in which I looked at the fiction of Selvon and V. S. Naipaul and came to the conclusion that the Indo-Caribbean woman is almost entirely absent from their fiction in terms of fully formed characters. Although I still stand by that, I think it was rather harsh because it did not really consider what Selvon was doing by concentrating so fervently on the character of the male, on, for example, the Indo-Caribbean male protagonist, especially in the Tiger books. I'll focus on two or three examples, particularly from *A Brighter Sun* (1952) and *Turn Again Tiger* (1958). The point of view in these novels is undoubtedly that of the male protagonist. That in itself is of immense value in understanding the social history of the period that we are talking about. It was a period when the society in the Caribbean was in transition from the status of a crown colony to that of a sovereign state. It was a society that was steeped in centuries of domination by unequal gender relations between both slaves or indentured labourers and their European overlords. To such a society, the business of equalizing the score, for example, by acquiring white



girlfriends in London, cannot be ignored as part of what actually happened, and of how it actually thought of gender relations at the time. Sam was writing in the 1950s after all. Yet his approach to this phenomenon is witty, even playful, though not at all trivial, as the boys exchange tall tales of conquests and improbable sexual adventures in London.

In the case of Tiger of *Turn Again Tiger*, I want to focus on the episode with Doreen. Doreen is the white wife of the estate overseer on the Five Rivers Estate, and I think that the relationship there is more complex and interesting than those set in London. Unlike characters such as Urmilla, Doreen is given agency; she is a fully developed sexual agent; and her desire for Tiger is as urgent and as inexplicable as Tiger's desire is for her. But Tiger's internal disturbance is probed after his love-making with Doreen, which occurs quickly on a river bank, with no words exchanged. Because of Tiger's internal disturbance (which he feels for a large part of that novel), he actually takes to drink. This is interesting and provocative; for Tiger feels no sense of conquest or boastful pride in the act of copulating with the overseer's wife. Nor does his urgent desire for her continue. His disturbance is located in his yearning to understand what is involved in "being a man." I use quotation marks because Tiger really doesn't understand how one becomes a man without following the rigidly prescribed roles that he already rejects in this society. In his laboured reasoning about his relationship with his wife, Urmilla, he is really grappling with his own unformed sense of personal identity or personal agency which I would expand to include the Indo-Caribbean person's unformed sense of personal agency and identity at that time.

Tiger is caught between two sets of societal values. There are the values of the Indian family structure on the sugar estate, where the wife is subservient and where she is completely controlled by her husband. Then there are the values of the creole culture embedded in the relationship between Joe and Rita, for example. On the surface, Rita has considerable autonomy and self-possession, and she plays the role of guide, counsellor, and advisor to the more sheltered Urmilla. However, Rita is subject to Joe in a variety of ways; she is also beaten at intervals, and Joe has

relations with many women, relations that Rita can't question. Tiger is troubled by his failure to be sovereign in his episode with Doreen, and he is unable to find peace within himself until he talks this out with Joe and is able to move on. What is interesting is Joe's flippant or casual attitude, which saves Tiger and gives him the impetus to move on. It is clear that Joe's attitude is tempered by concern over the (political and economic) danger that Tiger might have unwittingly put himself in through his relationship with Doreen. Following his conversation with Joe, Tiger becomes aware of the troubling political ramifications of his act, although they are not satisfactorily resolved either for Tiger or for the reader.

I bring this up because I think it is a matter that surfaces again in *The Lonely Londoners* and *Ways of Sunlight*. The liaisons between West Indian men and white women in London are portrayed as casual conquests or trophies—things, related to sports and pastimes. Yet they are important enough to form the subject of every “old talk, lime, or ballad.” The big question at the heart of it concerns the relationship of colonial man to European woman, with all its complex permutations. It is an unsettled question. To quote Derek Walcott: “no language is neutral.” The question that Selvon raises is whether the language of love or sex is neutral.

There are two other brief examples which show Selvon's insight into the way women feel and think. They are at least a beginning in trying to describe women's internal experiences. One is the strike by women in *Turn Again Tiger* when Urmilla and Berta decide to put pressure on Otto and force him to stop giving rum to the men on credit. This is a way of trying to control their households, even though they are stopped in their tracks. Then in *The Lonely Londoners*, there is an interior monologue when Tanty asks for and gets credit from an English shopkeeper in Harrow Road. These are both incidents in which the interior monologue of the woman is given full force. In both of these examples, Selvon is able to suggest processes of reasoning and action which are specific to the experiences of women. This is not to say that he sustains the approach or is even interested in doing so. On the contrary, I would argue that he is not at all interested in doing so. His overwhelming engagement as an

author is with his principal male protagonist. But he does raise that big question, which stays in the mind—the relationship of colonial man to European woman with all its intricate, intertwined historical implications.

ISMITH KHAN: Whether you are a writer or a scholar of Caribbean literature, you are always asked: “What do you write about?” This question has plagued a great many of us, and in thinking about Sam I have to ask myself about some of the things that he writes about. We’ve heard about his use of creole, and his sense of humour; we’ve also heard about his love of the people of the Caribbean. There are so many other things that can be said, not only about Sam, but about other writers from the Caribbean. No nation, society, or culture is without an historical past, and while most nations have had their historians and social scientists to record their past, we in the Caribbean have not been as fortunate. The great gap of our historical past has not yet been filled in by historians or social scientists: it has been filled in by our writers of fiction, poetry, and drama. Sam Selvon was the first writer to fill those empty spaces of history, not as historian or social scientist but as novelist, poet, and dramatist. While his early works give us a picture of the roots and origins of our culture, his later works—the Moses novels—trace with accuracy not only where we come from but where we are headed. From the sugar cane plantations to urban areas, from Caroni to Barataria, in *A Brighter Sun*; from Port of Spain to London, in *The Lonely Londoners*; from England to Trinidad, in the Moses novels. The basic questions—who am I, where did I come from, and where am I headed—are dealt with in Selvon’s use of language, his sense of humour, his understanding of our people. While some of us may well feel that we can see ourselves, it takes the talent of a writer like Sam Selvon to crystallize this complexity for us through his writings and to reach the common man as well as the scholar. Sam created a body of literature that elevates the common man to the level of angels. His characters and their lives are made more real for us so that we can see more clearly what we only glimpsed as though in a dream and are able to say: “Yes, that is the way it is; that is who we are; that is telling it like it is.” We see ourselves more clearly because of

this acute sensitivity and great gift. His characters speak their lines, tell their hopes and dreams, express their innermost feelings in a way that is instantly recognizable so that readers can say: "I know that man, that woman, that child." Others will ask how is it possible that someone else can know and understand me better than I know and understand myself. Sam's passing saddens us all, but the legacy of his works will continue to be a star to which many young writers will hitch their compass.

**BIRBALSINGH:** What would West Indian literature be like today if Selvon had not appeared at all? The claim is that he transformed creole into a literary medium that reflected a folk sensibility, and that he did this by using "the ballad and the episode" which are essentially a form of oral Trinidadian narrative. Without Selvon's contribution, can we imagine what West Indian writing might have been?

**CAREW:** The fact is that Selvon was part of a movement. As Austin Clarke said, in the Caribbean, you had to speak proper English at home, and as soon as you went outside you relaxed into speaking creole which was your natural language of expression. So if you were going to reflect anything of the reality of the consciousness of people in this society you had to convert an oral language into a written form. Mittelholzer began the process before Selvon, as did Eric Walrond and C. L. R. James, whose writing contained echoes of what Sam later did; so that by the time Sam came along, he put these echoes into more creative form. It was a general process and everyone had a role in it: you had to translate creole into a written form. We owe Selvon a great debt for having highlighted and dramatized this process.

**CLARKE:** Mittelholzer's books come straight out of what we call an English tradition of the novel: so do those of John Hearne, Victor Reid and others. Lamming, in *In The Castle of My Skin*, breaks from this tradition to some degree. Parts of *In the Castle of My Skin*, other than the dialogue, are written in creole, but this psychological language helped by Lamming's ability as a poet, absorbs some traditional English. So you don't get a full move-

ment away from the structures of traditional English as you get in a book like *The Lonely Londoners*. The answer to the question of what West Indian writing might have been like without Selvon is that this type of West Indian writing in creole would have come to us more slowly. The brilliance of Sam's achievement is that he was able to give you in the narration not only the eyes of a camera, but the eyes of a Trinidadian looking through the camera; so you didn't get the sudden jump from traditional description of the scene to a Trinidadian description. You certainly would not have someone like Caryl Phillips so soon if there were no Sam Selvon.

The first time I heard Sam was on the BBC radio programme, "Caribbean Voices." I could not really understand what was happening to me. It was a Sunday after we had heard all the top calypso music from Trinidad. In a Barbadian house which was very Christian, this was sacrilegious. Then "Caribbean Voices" came on, and I heard this accent that I could understand, talking about things that I was seeing around me but had never heard about in a programme coming from England. The programme gave these things legitimacy. It was very startling. Before Selvon we had Lord Kitchener; but in Barbados we didn't have any calypso to measure up to that excellence, either in music or lyrics. Calypso came from Trinidad. In Barbados, we did not feel that calypso was anything of importance; it was just something to laugh at and to dance to. Part of the reason, I think, had to do with the structure of our society. It was after all a slave society in a very strong sense. Even though I can't remember having seen slaves in Barbados, the mentality was there. We were not disposed to putting value on anything produced amongst us, except, ironically, cricket; and we were only able to measure our supremacy in cricket after we beat the English at Lord's in 1950; that victory itself was made famous in a calypso by Lord Kitchener.

What I am saying is that when I heard Sam Selvon that Sunday night many years ago coming over the radio, even though we had already given some literary credence or respectability to experiences in our own conditions, it was preposterous to think that a West Indian from Trinidad could be a poet, and that poetry about his own experience could be accepted by the BBC and sent

back to us. That was a shock. I'm not saying whether it was good or bad. I'm just explaining how it struck me. Then, for the first time, I began to understand the beauty that surrounded me in the village—the flowers, trees, etc. I was able, of course, as a well-educated Barbadian, to understand the significance of daffodils from Wordsworth's famous poem; but we did not have daffodils in Barbados. It is not the same now; but when I was growing up, no self-respecting young man would tell anyone he knew the names of flowers; it was considered effeminate for a man or a boy. So when I heard the early poems of Derek Walcott and Martin Carter coming back to us on the BBC, and these poems were couched in language reflecting the rich vegetation and floral beauty of the West Indies, it was these poems and stories of the early writers that made me look around me and begin referring to trees as casuarinas. I started to think that it was poetic to write about such trees.

CAREW: What Sam quite unconsciously did is that he placed himself in London and said: "Look, this is me; this is who I am; this is the way I speak; this the way that I think; this is the cosmos that my imagination embraces; you take it or leave it." This was really a revolutionary act, because in our colonial upbringing, we were trained to deny what we were and shut off the voices that we heard at home. The voices that I heard in the particular village were voices with Hindi inflections or Shiite Muslim inflections. There were also Indian untouchables who lived outside my village. This was the first time that I understood Marxist class differences, when I looked at the way in which these peasant folk separated themselves from people who looked exactly like them. There were also Chinese with their own inflections. So we had a vast array of cultural riches in an environment regulated by English standards and values. When we broadcast from the BBC it was the ambition of many people to speak with a perfect BBC accent, for the accent defined how secure you were in a British colonial environment. The same thing now goes on in different circumstances. In a multicultural Canadian society, we are expected to do a sort of mental mutation and suddenly assume an accent and erase from our brain and consciousness who we really

are. The fact is that we can move around the world and still feed our cultural riches into the experience of the place that we inhabit at any particular moment. This was something that Sam taught us how to do very well, in an easy-going, amusing, and witty fashion.

**CLARKE:** An important aspect of Sam's work is his understanding and love of music; I mean, in particular, music from Trinidad, music that you would find in the calypso and the steel band. In Guyana during the first Carifesta, Sam and I were neighbours. The President of Guyana offered lavish hospitality during Carifesta when Sam was given his own house and I was given my own house. I had seen Sam five years before in London in the winter and this was the first time I was seeing him in hot weather. He was a man transformed. Next door to us was the Trinidad steelband, which was being tuned. It was the first time in my life that I understood what I had missed by having lived abroad so many years; it was the freshness, power, and beauty of this music at close range, and I heard Sam say: "Oh God Copper, pan in your ass, boy." When he said that, it could not have been put into any different terms. He could not say, "Copper, now you're going to hear for the first time the intricacies of contrapuntal music," for it would not convey what "Copper, pan in your ass, boy" conveyed. So we had three more drinks before mid-day. It was that and the music in the movement of women when they walked—Indian women in saris—all that I could see in his work.

**BIRBALSINGH:** I think the point is well taken that Selvon's contribution and his place in West Indian literary history are secure. He was able to interpret accurately the feelings and thoughts of the people among whom he grew up, and he expressed them in a medium that reflected a history of colonial domination and resistance. Attitudes and speech habits which our colonial environment led us to believe were not respectable—he made respectable. That is a lasting achievement.