

Remembering 'Miss Lou'

September 7, 1919 to July 26, 2006

The Most Honourable Louise Bennett-Coverley OM, OJ, MBE, HON. D. LITT (Miss Lou) is possibly Jamaica's most loved personality. Public figures are often controversial, but in the minds of many Jamaicans, she is without flaw. Revered for her effortless use of both the English language and the Jamaican Creole, not only was this woman of substance a world class poet, but scores also remember her for her formidable commentaries.

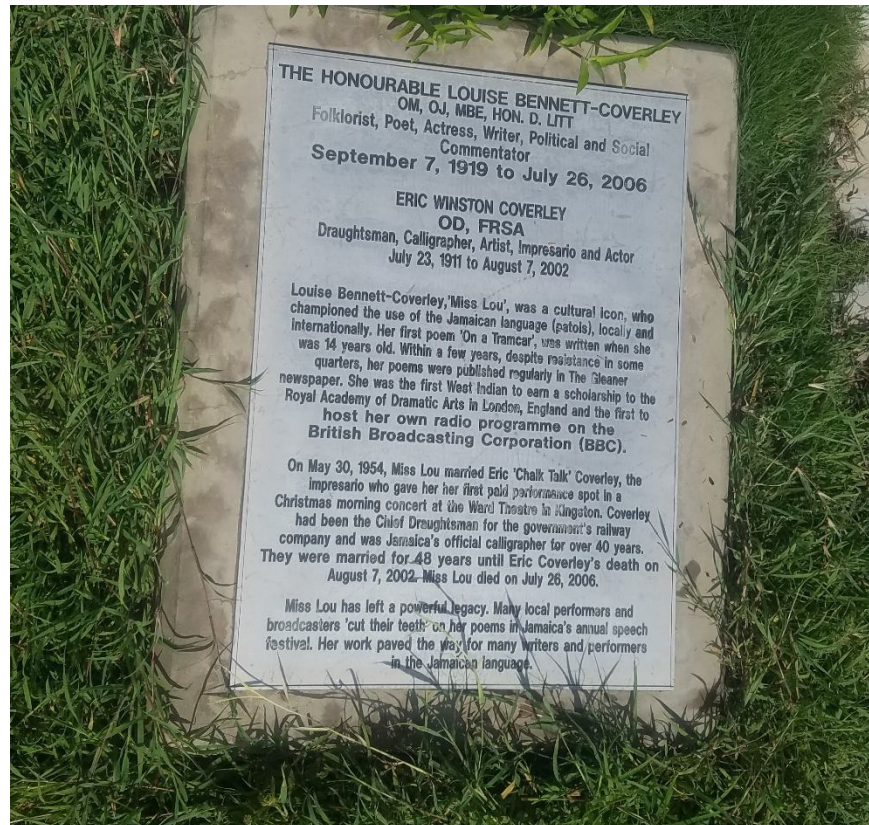


Figure 1: View of the storyboard at the National Heroes Park commemorating the lives of Louise Bennett-Coverley and her husband, Eric Winston Coverley

Louise Bennett was born on Sunday, September 7, 1919, at 40 North Street, Kingston to parents Augustus Cornelius Bennett and Kerene Robinson. As a pupil, she attended Ebenezer and Calabar Elementary Schools, and St. Simon's College, Excelsior College, and Friends College, Highgate. At Friends College in Jamaica, she majored in folklore in 1943. Because of her talent, she was offered roles in productions such as *Trifling Woman* (1943) and *Hot Chocolate*. Being a precocious

personality, young Louise was awarded a British Council scholarship in 1945 to study at the Royal Academy of Drama Art (RADA) in London, England. Upon receiving this accolade, she created history as the first black student to study at RADA. During her sojourn abroad, she hosted two radio programmes for the British Broadcasting Corporation – Caribbean Carnival (1945-1946) and West Indian Night (1950).

While in her home country of Jamaica, she worked at the Jamaica Social Welfare Commission as a drama officer in the latter part of the 1950s and lectured drama and folklore at the University of the West Indies. The former position allowed her to travel throughout Jamaica, thereby gaining insights into the unique and diverse personalities of its citizens. In her capacity as a drama officer, she would frequently share her ideas with audiences at lectures and other public gatherings. As a result, the energetic commentator garnered celebrity status in Jamaica, hence her appointment as a Member of the British Empire (MBE) in 1960. Miss Lou was loved for her dazzling performances in Pantomimes, television shows and her public appearances. Even today many recall listening to her biting commentary on *Miss Lou's View*. But most of all she was loved by children for *Ring Ding*, an intriguing programme airing from 1970-1982. Her songs such as *Long time Gal*, *Chi Chi*, *Bud*, *Jane and Louisa* and *Linstead Market* are still widely popular in Jamaica. When schools are celebrating cultural events, such folk songs permeate the airwaves.

Among her publications are:

- Jamaican Dialect Verse (1942)
- Jamaica Humour in Dialect (1943)
- Tercentenary Song Jamaica 300 (1955)
- Children's Jamaica Songs and Games (1957)
- Jamaica Labrish (1966)
- Selected Poems (1982)
- Laugh with Louise: a pot-pourri of Jamaican folklore. [1991]
- Aunty Roachy Sey (1993)

She was also the recipient of several awards including:

- Order of Jamaica (OJ), 1974
- Gold Musgrave Medal, Institute of Jamaica 1978

- Honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from the University of the West Indies, 1983
- Honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from York University, Toronto Canada, 1998
- Order of Merit (OM) – Jamaica’s 3rd highest honour, 2001

The Most Hon. Louise Bennett Coverley died on July 26, 2006 in Canada. Her body was returned to Jamaica along with the remains of her husband Eric Coverley, where they were interred at the National Heroes Park on August 9, 2006.



Figure 2: Grave site of Louise Bennet Coverley and husband, Eric Winston Coverley at the National Heroes Park.

On September 7, 2018, on the occasion of the 99th anniversary of her birth, a life-size bronze statue was unveiled in Gordon Town Square, St. Andrew in honour of the cultural icon. Miss Lou will forever be remembered as Jamaica’s national treasure.

Reference

Morris, Mervyn. *Miss Lou – Louise Bennett and Jamaican Culture* (Kingston and Miami: Ian Randle Publishers, 2014)