The Cali Mari Man – Neville Calistro is a ‘Special Person’
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Pull Quote: “Maybe, it sounded interesting to her.” - Calistro on his music, after being invited by Mrs. Burnham to join the People’s Culture Corps in the 1970s

By Rohan Sagar

Neville Calistro, more familiarly known as ‘The Mighty Chief’, has the distinction of being the first Amerindian in Guyana and possibly in the world, to sing and perform the art form, Calypso. Calistro traces his heritage back to Venezuela where his grandfather, Henio Calistro, who was a mix of Indigenous Arawak and Black, travelled to Moruca River from Angostura (Cuidad Bolivar) Venezuela in 1817.

The man was part of an escaping group of Arawaks who fought against Simon Bolivar during the Bolivarian War of Independence. Calistro’s grandmother was herself a mix of Arawak and Akawaio and spoke both languages. Both grandparents both spoke Spanish as did the rest of the Arawaks who escaped Venezuela.

The first site of settlement was Mabaruma and then they travelled down to Moruca River. Though most of the Arawaks settled in Santa Rosa, Calistro’s family went further south to the island of Hobo. Hobo was settled much earlier in the 17-18th century by the Dutch who had established a trading post from which they conducted business with the Caribs and Warraus.

Calistro’s grandfather became the first Captain or Toshao of Moruca after a McTurk, an Englishman who was officially known as the ‘Amerindian Protector’ gave that position to him. Calistro’s father who was born in 1905 later left Hobo for Mabaruma where he lived until his first wife died.

He left Mabaruma and travelled to the Pomeroon River, where he re-married and settled in the Kabakaburi community. Mighty Chief was the first to be born out of this second union at the Charity Cottage Hospital.

Mighty Chief attended the St. Monica Primary School in what is the last Carib community in the Pomeroon River and was administered by the Anglican Church.

The Mighty Chief’s adventure into the world of culture began when he was still a little boy. His father was a violinist and most of his uncles and brothers were musicians. Mighty Chief believes that this is where the strength of his musical abilities evolved. His father created a musical group that was made up of his brothers and sons and this group provided entertainment at a time when there was no other medium such as radios and juke-boxes; this group has the distinction of performing at the first Carifesta festival in Georgetown (1972).

During holidays such as Christmas, Easter, birthdays and August school recess Mighty Chief would accompany his father, mother and uncles to places and homes where festivities were being held in the village and his admiration for the musicians greatly influenced his sense of direction, and so it was that he fell in love with two musical instruments – the banjo and the sambura (a traditional drum).

As he figured out the chords on the banjo he secured a guitar and began applying the same principles. His mastery of the stringed instruments was soon to be overcome by his ability to learn the percussions of the Arawaks the Maracas or shak-shak.
The Mighty Chief' Neville Calistro

He later secured for himself a harmonica and this instrument has remained as the first love of all musical instruments for the Mighty Chief.

As a young man the Mighty Chief went to work in the mining industry in the Kamarang-Imbaimadai area. During a period of four years he travelled in that part of the Mazaruni visiting such communities as Kaikan, Eteringbang and other Akawaio villages. According to Mighty Chief he did not find the kind of gold he had heard about and very soon returned to Kabakaburi. It was about this time that opportunities were suddenly appearing and which were to redirect his life towards music and a subsequent return to his roots.

Calistro doesn’t have ‘The Chief’ title just by chance. He was once captain of the Amerindian mission Kabakaburi, down the Pomeroon River in Region Two.

It was this “captaincy” that would lead to the discovery of his music by no less a person than Viola Burnham, the wife of then Prime Minister Forbes Burnham.

During the 1970s he was given an opportunity to attend a training course at Camp Madewini and one morning during breakfast he was asked to share his experiences in the context of his being an Arawak. In attendance was Mrs. Burnham.

After the training programme ended he returned to Kabakaburi, where he was serving as Captain or Toshao, when he received an invitation (from Mrs. Burnham) to become a part of the People’s Culture Corps.

―Maybe, it sounded interesting to her,‖ he opined.

He accepted and with a team of other cultural practitioners from the village travelled to Georgetown. This invitation was to change the life of Neville Calistro forever.

As a child, Calistro first experimented with singing in school and later on fell in love with Country and Western music which he heard in Western movies or as is more popularly known cowboy movies; he learnt the songs so well he was able to both sing and accompany himself either on Guitar or Banjo.

Mighty Chief was also often called upon to provide vocal services, since as he claimed, ‘rural people were deeply in love with Country and Western music’. It was at this juncture that he began to develop an interest in calypso because it (calypso) was a genre that facilitated social commentaries. Lord Kitchener was the first artiste he came to admire the most and then later the Mighty Sparrow.

As a young man Calistro displayed a keen interest in the cultural life of the Arawaks and would attend all the ceremonies in the village. The one he was enthused with the most was the ‘Yucca Dance’ which was a marriage ceremony that tested the sincerity of would be couples.

The People’s Culture Corps, the Guyana National Service and Calypso all converged into one theme in the life of Neville Calistro. The Culture Corps, according to Calistro, was an attempt at synthesizing the diverse cultures of Guyana by the late Prime Minister Burnham. The Corps was an autonomous body of the Guyana National Service, which meant that members were not required to participate in the paramilitary component.

Calistro decided that he would use Calypso to help his people. He theorised that young women who became young mothers were placed involuntarily into a situation in their lives that required immense support.
The Cali Mari Man doing what he does best!

In other countries around the world young women in this situation would be provided opportunities to carry on with their lives, but in Guyana young women specifically young Amerindian women, believed that any upward mobility came to a sudden and crashing end. He composed a calypso that addressed this dilemma explicitly speaking to vulnerable communities that through the Guyana National Service second chances were not only possible, but with discipline through life changing skills success could actually be achieved.

‘Gie She Captain, Gie She’ became an instant hit so much so that Chief was encouraged to enter the 1977 Calypso competition. Mighty Chief went on to place third overall. Though he felt that the song deserved better he harbours no ill feeling, in fact as a result of his standing he went on tours to Cuba and Trinidad where attendees at the concerts marvelled at this ‘lil Amerindian’ who was so commanding in his performances.

He made three tours to Cuba—one for Carifesta, again for the South America and Caribbean Music Festival and again for the Caribbean Security Festival at Guantanamo, where he performed with the Guyana Defence Force Frontline, a string orchestra.

He added that many people in both countries were astonished at his heritage since they were all accustomed to seeing ‘one group of people performing calypso.’ Even during his sojourn with the People’s Culture Corps, Calistro kept his Indigenous band going, even being invited to tour England and Holland.

Mighty Chief explained that it was during this time that he went into a deep reflective mode about the art form he was engaged in and the impact or lack thereof on his own cultural heritage. The result of this process was the emergence of the Cali-Mari, which essentially was the fusion of the Calypso and the ancient Mari-Mari rhythms.

In 1986 he co-led a delegation to the Commonwealth Institute in London. Sharing that leadership was Sister Theresa. The delegation travelled to Holland, then to Brussels and on to Jamaica and Barbados.

Calistro believed that much like the other Caribbean territories who can claim ownership of Calypso, Soca, and Reggae, Cali-Mari is an authentic Guyanese art form and though it fitted well into the overarching objective of the Culture Corps, Calistro is saddened by the fact the rhythm was never given the attention it deserved.

He was also involved in the political life of the country. He entered Parliament in 1986, the same year that Desmond Hoyte contested the elections as leader of the party for the first time. Calistro held Parliamentary responsibility for the Upper Pomeroon, culturally and politically. That did not prevent him from promoting the aspect of culture that he led. After all in 1993 he was to perform before Prince Philip when he visited Guyana.

Neville’s love of music translated to his family, and upon the insistence of members of the community, he decided to form the Indigenous Calibro Band, consisting of his five sons, his daughter and a nephew. The members of the band, apart from Neville are Kennedy, Adam, Clowis, Alvaro, Macema, Valdero and Clive James.

The band was formed seven years ago and receives regular invitations to perform all over Guyana, especially in the interior. They are a popular feature at the annual Amerindian Heritage Village at the Sophia Exhibition Complex.

Calistro encourages the band to deepen its repertoire of materials but instils in them that they
are essentially an Amerindian band and must so represent the cultural heritage of their people. In an afterthought, Calistro philosophises that though Amerindian culture is not dead, it is critically ailing. He reminds his people wherever he goes that in the ancient times their ancestors did not know to read and write, but used music instead to archive their political, economic, social and cultural history.