Rudolph Dunbar
A Musician for the Ages!

One day someone will make a movie about Rudolph Dunbar.

The year was 1945 and Hitler and his troops were invading Europe. Berlin was the seat of Nazi culture but the Philharmonic Orchestra was led by a black conductor. He was a war correspondent for the United States but it was the baton that took him to the realm of the Gods. This conductor was a Guyanese who bestrode the musical world like a giant. Rudolph Dunbar mesmerized the 2000 Berliners in the audience. They applauded rapturously as he took them through the works of Weber’s Oberon and Tchaikovsky’s Pathétique. Rudolph Dunbar was given five standing ovations. During the performance Dunbar did the unthinkable. He introduced music from the Afro-American symphony to the delight of the audience. On that evening Rudolph Dunbar created history. He had become Berlin’s first black conductor.

The Chicago Tribune of September 3, 1945 carried a historic headline that read, “Negro gets Ovation for Leading Berlin Symphony Concert: Rudolph Dunbar, son of Guyana.”

Several years earlier, in England, Dunbar had grown so great that the widow of the famous Claude Debussy invited him to give a private recital in her apartment for members of the Paris Conservatoire. This was an honor that Dunbar took with great humility.

During his illustrious career, Rudolph Dunbar brought off a number of “firsts.” For example, he was the first black man to conduct the London Philharmonic Orchestra (1945), the first black person to conduct a Festival of American Music in Paris (1945), and the first black man to conduct an orchestra in Poland in 1959 and Berlin in 1964. Dunbar was also an activist. He fought for opportunities for blacks. He promoted the compositions of black composers in Europe, particularly those of William Grant Still.

Rudolph Dunbar died on a sunny day in June 1988, in obscurity. His native Guyana should honor the contributions of this great son by establishing the ‘Rudolph Dunbar Music School!’ and introducing his works in the national curriculum, among other things.

Rudolph Dunbar was a giant. Rudolph Dunbar remains to the realm of the few who could have foreseen what happened in 1930. His reputation as a clarinetist remained to this day, the standard work on the clarinet. While in Britain, Dunbar was the leader of two jazz groups, the ‘All British Colored Band’ and Rudolph Dunbar and his African polyphony’. He made recordings with both of them that set a trend for British Jazz.

If it was in 1938, that Dunbar achieved what many considered to be his finest hour. He composed a ballet score “Dance of the Twenty First Century”. This was written for Cambridge University and was broadcast nationally on NBC television with Dunbar as the conductor.

For music historians and lovers of British Jazz, it was it possible that this would have been one of the first clarinet schools that started as a music critic. After five years in London in 1931 and thirty years, after all the limelight, the life of Rudolph Dunbar took a strange twist. The concerts dried up and gradually he faded out of the public’s view. He was convinced that the BBC railroaded his career. In an interview, he said, “Had I not done this for me, it is not what we have done for Dunbar” – but it is not the British who have done this for me, it is the Americans.”

By Dr. DHANPAUL NARINE

West Indian • Feb 20, 2015 • Page 52

Guiana, for New York, to pursue his musical dreams. He found New York to be a busy place with a healthy appreciation for classical music. His ability was such that he was accepted to study at New York’s prestigious Institute of Musical Art (now Julliard). He studied musical composition and clarinet and piano.

After five years in New York, it was time for Rudolph Dunbar to broaden his musical horizons in Paris. He played with the great such as Philippe Gaubert and Louis Calauze. He also spent some time mastering the clarinet. The musicians realized that Dunbar was no ordinary apprentice. He had real talent, a gift for the clarinet. When he was 19, Dunbar left the shores of his native British