



# SAINTS PERSPECTIVES

*Things Cultural*



Dr. Dave Martins

Photo Credit: University of Guyana

## Musical Extraordinaire, David Martins, is a 'Special Person'

By Rehanna Ramsay,

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"I learned a lot from listening to the approaches of the Trinis, particularly Sparrow, and Lord Kitchener, but I was also a big fan of Lord Blakie, the man with the ribald infectious laugh, and Andre Tanker with his clever lyrics. It was then, and remains now, a treasure trove for me."

Almost all Guyanese are familiar with the lyrics of David Anthony Martins' '**Not a Blade a Grass**' and '**Is We Own.**' These songs make up a list of hit tunes which make Guyanese everywhere reminiscent of the realities which make the land mass we call home, truly unique. The songs are filled with simple colloquial terms that even a young child could sing along with grace and ease.

The artiste behind the music is every bit as easy going and engaging as the songs he sings. With several albums under his belt, the musical icon, who travelled the



# SAINTS PERSPECTIVES

## *Things Cultural*

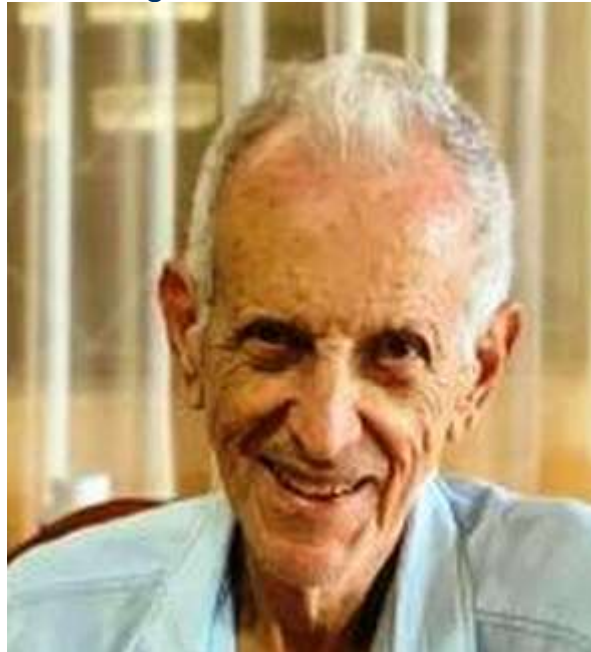
length and breadth of the Caribbean and North America, remains humble and true to his roots.

This week's Special Person is not just a talented musician but one who has used his gift to galvanize feelings of pride, patriotism and nostalgia not just among Guyanese but Caribbean nationals across the globe.

Whether it's entertaining a large crowd in New York City or a small gathering at a social event, Mr. Martins uses his talent to uplift spirits and inspire feelings of togetherness among audiences everywhere. The Guyanese musical extraordinaire is indeed celebrated in these parts.

It's no wonder his band Dave Martins and the Trade Winds, became a household name throughout the Caribbean in the 1960's.

The songwriter used his niche for humour and telling stories about his Caribbean heritage to create several beloved musical hits. The singer's work is not limited to English and Caribbean –style genres but is also rooted in Latin Culture—something inherently intertwined in his lineage.



Guyanese musical icon Dave Martins is a 'Special Person'



# SAINTS PERSPECTIVES

## *Things Cultural*

When Kaieteur News caught up with Mr. Martins, he had recently celebrated his 85th birthday. In a conversation he revealed how much his passion for the art runs deep.

### **EARLY INFLUENCES**

Reminiscent of years past, the musician told this publication that his introduction to music came from his mother, Zepherina Barcellos, the daughter of Portuguese indentured labourers. He recalled that his mother “an almost saintly figure was a central figure of their household.” She passed on her joy for living and her love for music to her children.

“She was always singing various old ballads and doing work around the house, although I don’t know where she learned the songs. The house had no electricity, but we had a small battery-operated radio and wind-up gramophone playing 78 rpm recordings at different times,” the musician said.

“Looking back on it, that was my introduction to music as well as my mother’s ballad singing,” said Mr. Martins.

As a youngster, he spent most of his boyhood days frolicking along the quiet coastlands of West Demerara. He was the only boy of the Martins clan—a family with very humble beginnings.

In fact, he explained that both his parents belonged to indentured Portuguese families. “In fact, I am told that my father, Joseph Francis Martins, was born in Funchal Madeira, an Island in Portugal. He was smuggled in a mattress aboard a ship en route to British Guiana – the place where his parents were headed to work as indentured labourers. So, my parents spoke to each other in Portuguese around the house, most of the time.”

According to the songwriter’s recollection, his father spent most of the time away, engaged with his farm in the Pomeroun. “My four sisters, Theresa, Imelda, Cecelia and Marie, and I, were all born in my mother’s Barcellos’ family home and we lived originally in a small house and later at my uncle Joseph Barcellos’ house at Hague village, West Coast Demerara ,” he said.

As they grew up, the Martins clan moved to a rented house at Vreed-en-Hoop also on the West Coast of Demerara which was more convenient for the children going to school. Being a close knit bunch, Mr. Martins said that the clan remained close to



# SAINTS PERSPECTIVES

## *Things Cultural*

their aunts at Hague and spent many weekends and holidays at that family house. By the time the young Dave Martins was a teenager, the family had moved to a rented house at Vreed-en-Hoop so that the children could attend school. "When we moved to the Vreed-en-Hoop house I was taking the ferry every day to Georgetown to attend the Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church School on Main Street.



Sibling love:

An early family photo of Dave Martins and his four sisters

Our family couldn't afford high school fees, but with the support of the Main Street nuns, I was able to win a St. Stanislaus scholarship, as did Stanley Greaves, who is also from humble beginnings and later became a famous painter," Martins told of his early days.

With the elder Mr. Martins away at his farm, most of the time, his teenage son's desire for music increased. As he matured, the young Martins would save up his pocket money and buy the occasional 78 rpm recording in Georgetown. He said that they were "largely country music, from the likes of Eddy Arnold, Slim Whitman, Hank Snow, and Eddy Arnold."





# SAINTS PERSPECTIVES

## *Things Cultural*

His interest in Caribbean music began with Tony Vieira, the man in charge of his aunts' shop at Hague. Vieira played Trinidad records in the shop– the popular drinking spot in the village. “I have a very vivid memory of a song by the Calypsonian Growler about an excursion from Trinidad to Grenada where the schooner was caught in a storm and sank. I was riveted by this dramatic real life incident, but especially by the Trini calypso rhythm; I was an immediate convert and the transformation was complete,” said Mr Martins.

A couple years later, his sisters, Imelda and Cecelia, went to Trinidad Carnival and came home, excited about their time there and bringing the top songs. Martins said this “was an injection from which I have never fully recovered.”

“I learned a lot from listening to the approaches of the Trinis, particularly Sparrow, and Lord Kitchener, but I was also a big fan of Lord Blakie, the man with the ribald infectious laugh, and Andre Tanker with his clever lyrics. It was then, and remains now, a treasure trove for me,” Mr. Martins recounted.

Over all, I had begun to take notice of the devices various North American song writers were using to come up with an approach to a song subject that had not been used before. Songs like MacArthur Park and Imagine were showing me how wide the canvas could be. I took note.”

But as a youngster his interest in pop music of the day never dwindled; Martins was into classical music as well as the folk music from countries around the world, including especially Africa, India and Israel.

After graduating from **St. Stanislaus College**, the young Martins secured a job as a Flight Clerk at British Guiana Airways, first at the Ruimveldt Ramp with the sea planes and shortly thereafter with that company's Atkinson Field office. He explained that jobs were few but his sister Imelda was a secretary at Bookers Shipping head office in Georgetown. It was through her, he got a job. Martins stressed nonetheless that there was no allure for him.



# SAINTS PERSPECTIVES

*Things Cultural*



Dave Martins and his beloved wife, Annette, enjoying some time on the beach.

He had begun learning to play the guitar with music friends, Joe and Jack Henry, in Vreed-en-Hoop and Gerry Martins (no relation) in Pouderoyen. The musicians eventually formed a small group, with Doolie Chung and Billy Stephenson on percussion, playing pop songs and the Latin tunes of that time.

“We would play evenings for our friends in various residences in that area, and even made some trips up the East Coast, but I was about 17 years old and a music career never entered my mind although I was very interested in pop music generally,” Mr. Martins noted.



# SAINTS PERSPECTIVES

## *Things Cultural*

### **CANADA**

Martins continued to play with the group until his migration to Toronto, Canada where he lived with his uncle Joe Barcellos and his family. As a young artiste, Mr. Martins said that Canada opened the possibility of earning a living as a musician. “It was a turn of the tides for me because in Toronto I saw the various small combos playing in bars and hotels – this included some Caribbean bands – and it was there that I saw the possibility of earning a living from music –something very rare in Guyana.

“I also was drawn to the very imaginative writing that is a feature of country music and Broadway show tunes – I saw how wide the canvas could be for songs – but in particular I was captivated by the Trinidad calypso genre – I saw a niche there I felt I could get into,” he said.

Also, my inclination to write songs had started in my time playing in Guyana and I now took the opportunity. I had a day job running a lithographic printing machine to do a night course in music notation and composition at the United Music Center in the city and began giving thought to forming a group to cater to Caribbean migrants in the city,” he recounted.

Given the number of Latin songs popular in Guyanese music at that time, Martins named the group – The Latins.

With a mixture of drums and two guitars, the group played a mix of some pop, some Latin, and some Trinidad calypsos. “We were getting regular gigs from the start, because of our West Indian following, but I soon saw the wider pop music market potential in Toronto and switched over to that genre, renaming the group –The Debonairs.”

The band added an accordion player and signed with a music agency which secured gigs for them across Ontario and even into Quebec.” However, after a year or two of that, the emergence of small combos in the Caribbean, as opposed to the big bands caught his attention.

This coupled with his own growing preference for Caribbean music, led Martins to break up the Debonairs in early 1966 and form the Caribbean Trade Winds with three Trinis, Joe Brown (bass) Glen Sorzano (guitar) and Kelvin Ceballo (drums).



# SAINTS PERSPECTIVES

*Things Cultural*



First band in Toronto: The Latins:

L-R Calvin Saranchuk (Canada); Eric Minns (Bahamas); Dave Martins with his first electric guitar.

There, he began writing songs influenced by his Caribbean roots. With the band formed and getting a steady gig at the Bermuda Tavern, downtown Toronto, Martins went into the studio and recorded four songs.

It was the only place in town with Caribbean music every night and the Caribbean people responded well.

“We would leave only to go away for Trinidad Carnival, and every year we would return from that jaunt to three or four islands, with a big welcome dance at a dancehall in the Toronto suburbs which would be packed with our fans, and the next week we were back at our home base the Bermuda Tavern,” he recalled with pride. By the mid-70s the band was able to acquire its own nightclub in downtown Toronto, which was named ‘We Place’





# SAINTS PERSPECTIVES

*Things Cultural*



Trade winds at Pegasus poolside in 1968  
(L-R) Dave Martins, Jeff Japal (Grenada), Clive Rosteing  
and Terry Dyal (Trinidad), Harry Cupid (Barbados)

The plan was to take the band to Trinidad carnival given its large following of Trini fans in Toronto. However, Martins recalled the band did just that but earned no money. “We earned no money and got no wider offers, so we went back to Toronto to our regular nightly gig at our own club, ‘We Place,’ downtown.

However, unknown to us, one of the four test songs, Honeymooning Couple, aired on the Sam Ghany programme in Trinidad, had become a hit all over the region, including Guyana, and Trade Winds were off and running,” he noted.

By 1968, Dave Martins and the Trade Winds were already a household name among West Indians in Toronto. “We were now firmly on the music scene in the region, returning to Trinidad Carnival 1968, playing the Grandstand show in the Savannah, and later travelling on to Guyana for gigs with local promoter Cyril Shaw,” he said.



# SAINTS PERSPECTIVES

*Things Cultural*



Photo taken in Trinidad Circa in 1967 on Trade Winds first trip to Carnival.  
(L-R) Joe Brown, Clive Rosteing, Terry Dyal, and Dave Martins

## **BREAKTHROUGH YEAR**

In fact 1968 was the breakthrough year for the Trade Winds' band. The group signed with West Indies Records and Telco records in Trinidad for regional distribution.

Martins explained that from then, "We did two trips a year to the region – one for Trinidad Carnival, one for Trinidad Independence – and began making appearances to coincide with Carnival in bookings from St. Kitts in the north to Guyana in the south and most points in between. Trinidad Carnival had been the break for us, as the gamble with the four recordings paid off big time."

By this time the band was having a regular venue for years – six nights a week in Toronto.

"It gave the band a home base, very little travelling about, and left me free of weekly financial worries, to concentrate on writing songs, and arranging the diverse band business that came for us in the Caribbean and all over North America where Caribbean people lived – New York; Orlando; Ottawa; Halifax, Vancouver, Winnipeg, etc Getting a hit record, Honeymooning Couple, with our first try in 1967, was also pivotal," he mentioned.



# SAINTS PERSPECTIVES

*Things Cultural*



Dave Martins and his beloved guitar

With popularity in Trinidad– the Mecca for Caribbean music then, the band was able to follow that push with many successful songs in later years, in a burst that propelled it into bookings all across North America and from north to south in the Caribbean.

As the band pressed on, a series of albums were recorded which boosted several hit songs. One of Martins' career highlights came when he won the Cross Canada Song Competition in the early '70s.

In a nation-wide competition, he had beaten out 1,800 other writers with his ballad 'Over You', which caused him to attract the attention of BMI Canada, who signed him to their company in recognition of my work. "It was pivotal," Martins added with pride. The singer counts the award among the highlights of his musical career.

"Winning the Canada-wide song contest is definitely one. Here I was, a country boy from West Demerara, going up against the top talent in the impressive country of Canada. I must admit I was in total shock when they told me I had won."



# SAINTS PERSPECTIVES

*Things Cultural*

Aside from his musical adventures, Martins has lived a full life. He has been married three times and loves animals.

He explained that “With my first wife Dorothy Walker, in Canada, I have a daughter Luana and a son Tony, and one grandchild. From my second wife Angela, a Caymanian, I have three children: Annika, Janine and Bryan, but no grandchildren. We had several pets, including a provocative “ricey” – a rescue we secured from the Humane Society named Baron, because of his royal look.

I have no children from my third wife, Annette, but we share her two children, Alex and Vicky, from her previous marriage. We have three dogs. Choo—the oldest, who got that name because as a pup she chewed everything in the house. Jet is Belgian Shepherd we imported from Barbados, moves like a jet and is jet black from head to toe, except for her nose. The latest edition is a bewitching Pit Bull pup, Alex’s own, known as Peppa,” Mr. Martins related.

Despite being widely recognized across the globe, with the backing of several accolades, Dave Martins remains a humble and down to earth fellow who will forever be ‘We Own’, a special person in the eyes of all of Guyana.

## Related Articles

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[Presented to David Martins at Saintsfest 2003, Thirst Park September 27, 2003](#)

**David Martins passes on**

Kaieteur News, Aug 19, 2024

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