

# Lifestyle

## Strains of praise for Sister Mary Students, musicians pay tribute to a giant

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SISTER MARY IGNATIUS... her contribution to the lives of generations of Alpha boys and Jamaican music is incalculable

WHEN most Jamaicans talk about the Alpha Boys School, inevitably the names and images of legendary hornmen like Don Drummond, Tommy McCook and Joe Harriot, come up. Besides their love for music, these venerable musicians shared the same mentor: a slightly-built nun named Sister Mary Ignatius Davies.

Sister Ignatius, who outlived three of her most famous students, died on February 9, aged 81, at the University Hospital of the West Indies, one day after suffering a heart attack. According to Sister Maria Goretti of the Alpha Boys School where Sister Ignatius worked for 64 years, she had battled heart disease in the last three years.

Though Sister Ignatius never played an instrument, she was just as influential in the development of Jamaican music as the musicians she welcomed at the Roman Catholic-run orphanage. According to Dave Rosencrans, curator at the Island Revolution exhibit in Seattle, Washington, her impact was "incalculable".

"The greatness of many Alpha musicians is well-established but what must not be forgotten is the spiritual impact she had on literally thousands of youths. For all these accomplishments and a lifetime of service matched by few of her fellow Jamaicans, she is long overdue to be awarded the Order of Distinction," said Rosencrans.

Sister Ignatius was present at the June 2000 opening of Island Revolution, a museum documenting the history of this country's popular music. It is part of the futuristic Experience Music Project in Seattle which focuses on the roots of pop music.

The frail nun donated several pieces of the Alpha music legacy to the Island Revolution exhibition which is reportedly a popular attraction at the EMP.

Johnny "Dizzy" Moore, a founding member of The Skatalites and a Alpha Boys School graduate, says Sister Ignatius'

editorial cartoon



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death transcends her humanitarian effort at the school.

"In terms of information and spirit it's a great loss," said Moore. Splash could not find out much about Sister Ignatius' early years, but gleaned that she was born in St Catherine and attended Alpha Academy; moving to the Sisters of Mercy shortly after graduating from the former in 1939; she never left.



Sister Mary Ignatius

Though the Alpha Boys Band was formed in the late 19th Century, it was not until the 1940s that the school turned out some top-notch musicians including the Cuba-born McCook, a saxophonist who would be an integral member of The Skatalites when it formed in 1964. Later, he was musical director of The Supersonics, the house band at producer Duke Reid's Treasure Isle studio, and for The Revolutionaries at Channel One in the 1970s.

Harriott, also a saxophonist, made a name for himself in Europe, but it was widely believed that Sister Ignatius had a special place in her heart for a troubled youth from nearby Allman Town named Don Drummond.

"She loved Don Drummond to death, she told me once that her favourite piece of music was (Drummond's) Eastern Standard Time," said musician Floyd Seivwright, another Alpha Boys graduate.

Drummond, like McCook and Moore, was an original member of The Skatalites. He died at the Bellevue asylum in May, 1968; he had been declared criminally insane after murdering his lover, an exotic dancer, in January, 1965.

The Alpha Boys Band never produced musicians of the ilk of Drummond or McCook after the 1960s, but it continued to be a nursery for the Jamaica Military Band. Though failing health restricted her activities in recent years, Sister Ignatius was still at the legendary Studio One last year when the band was recording the Come Dance with The Alpha Boys Band album, which featured students past and present.

She will get a chance to hear her boys perform one more time tomorrow at the Holy Trinity Cathedral, where her funeral service will be held at 10:00 am.

## TRIBUTES

**Sonny Bradshaw** (leader of the Jamaica Big Band): "I first met Sister when I was starting the Sonny Bradshaw Seven and looking for a saxophone player. She said she had the perfect person and took me to Alpha for Joe Harriott. She had a sense of being able to spot the musician in the young boy and spotting talent. We didn't have a School of Music then, Alpha was the School of Music."

**Bunny Goodison (musicologist)**: "She's the last of her kind, we won't see her like again. I detected no deep musical knowledge about her but she prepared a lot of youths for a musical future."

**Tony Green (saxophonist, Alpha Boys School graduate)**: "[She was] one of the biggest influences on me."

She caught me watching the band rehearse when I should be in class, I thought I was going to get a beating but she said, 'Anthony, do you like it?' I said 'yes', and she put me in the band the next day. She put in an extra effort for kids."

**David Madden (trumpeter, Alpha Boys School graduate):** "Sister always wanted us to do the best and be the best. Even when you left the school she wanted to know if you were on the right path."

**Neville "Sparrow" Martin: (drummer, graduate/musical director at Alpha Boys School):** "Sister taught us a lot about life. Even before she passed on she would call me in her office and we would talk. She was a well-loved person and we are going to miss her dearly."

**Derrick Stewart (drummer, Alpha Boys School graduate):** "She was unique in seeing talent, and it is amazing how she turned around the lives of so many boys. Not just musicians, but tailors, cabinet-makers and printers."

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