

Ronald “Boo” Hinkson & The St. Lucia Music Industry

by Sarah Peter and Anderson Reynolds

An artist is judged by his accumulated body of work. It forms the basis for receiving recognition from his peers, for artistic awards, for attracting future work, or for enticing the collaboration of other artists. A body of work is like a legacy. It keeps the artist alive long after the tools of his trade have been laid to rest. The name Ronald “Boo” Hinkson has become synonymous with St. Lucian music and this is no accident, for both in terms of number of albums, quality of recordings, and domestic and international appeal, the artist has and continues to pile a body of work that is unprecedented in the history of the St. Lucian music industry.

It seemed that from birth Boo was preordained to be a musician. His musical background came from both sides of his family—his mother played the guitar and his father the clarinet. For this reason Boo himself has said that it was no surprise he ended up being a musician.

Boo’s road to fame began at ten when he first picked up a guitar. Why the guitar, you may ask, as opposed to keyboards, or the saxophone or some other instrument? Well, according to Boo, his choice of instrument had to do with inspiration, availability, and convenience. He said, “I think (it was the guitar) primarily because that’s what my mom played. I came from a very humble background and it is just what we could have afforded at the time. In fact, the first guitar brought into our house was given to us by Leo St. Rose who owns Roses Enterprises. He had gone up to England and sent the guitar for my brother. And that’s the guitar I had access to. I owe a lot of thanks to Leo St.

Rose, among other people (laugh), for my success as a musician today. It is also a more intimate instrument. I can carry it around with me, unlike a piano or a keyboard. My family didn’t have a keyboard anyway, so I didn’t have a choice.”

Apparently, even at ten, Boo had music ready to burst out of him because once he picked up the guitar he forgot to



Ronald “Boo” Hinkson

put it down such that at the tender age of twelve he teamed up with his brothers and some friends to form the Tru Tones. Two years later, Boo and the Tru Tones embarked on their first Caribbean tour, and under the management and creative leadership of Boo, the Tru Tones went on to become one of the most popular bands in the Caribbean, and the greatest or most famous band to come out of St. Lucia. Along the way, Boo and the Tru

Tones produced an impressive body of work that included five albums—*Tru Tones Combo of St. Lucia* (1968), *Cream of the Crop* (1971), *Show the World* (1974), *Christmas with the Tru Tones* (1975), and *Power Struggle* (1980)—and six singles including, *Condom*, *Burning Eyes and Hungry Bellies*, and *Knickers in the Party*. In the Caribbean, *Burning Eyes and Hungry Bellies* became such a huge reggae hit that up till today many still think the song came out of Jamaica. *Condom*, a soca that brought into focus the controversy that arose between Family Planning, the Roman Catholic Church and some ministers of government when the former proposed making condoms available in St. Lucia via vending machines, also made it big in St. Lucian. And, though a soca tune, *Knickers in the Party* made it onto the British reggae charts in 1998. Since the breakup of the Tru Tones in the early eighties, Boo has added two more albums to his body of work—*Alive and Well* in 1995, and *Beyond* in 2003.

In contrast to his previous recordings, with *Alive and Well* and *Beyond* Boo made a decisive shift towards jazz and instrumental music. Why this change of musical genre?

“Maybe there is more jazz in what I am doing now,” Boo explained. “But there has always been jazz in what I have been doing. If you listen to Tru Tones, there was always a jazz influence. There has always been a tendency to lean towards improvisation. I think what influenced me to go further into it was that there was an era when I found that the soca, our popular music, was boring. There came a time when I got bored doing it. What was popular had no music

in it. We had literally began to take the music out of the music. To me there was nothing to play, so I think that made me make more of a shift. And I began enjoying what I was doing. So I stuck with it.”

Boo added that besides growing up listening to a lot of calypso and reggae, and being a big fan of the likes of Bob Marley and Tots and the Maytals, from very early on (and especially by way of the Voice of America radio program) he listened to a lot of jazz music and pan instrumentalists, including musicians like Barney Kessel, Kenny Burrell, Django Reinhardt, George Benson, Jimmy Smith, and Ramsey Louis. Therefore, the influence these artist had on him would also have contributed to his move to jazz and instrumental music.

The artist may have gravitated towards jazz, but just like, as he admitted, there has always been jazz in the popular

Blues and *All Blues* are upbeat, funky, folksy renditions with, as their titles suggest, a touch of the Blues. The last three songs on the album, *Comet*, *Prim* and *Love Everyday* are slow, mellow instrumentals and are the tracks that probably come closest to making a jazz purist happy.

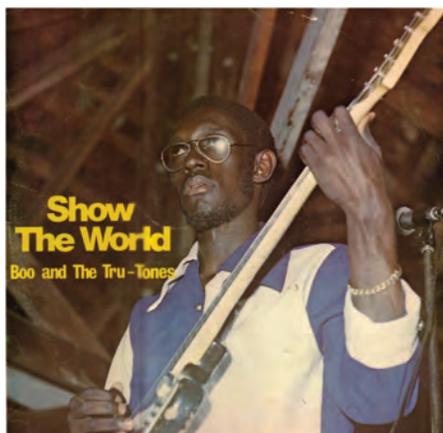
Notwithstanding the eclecticism of *Beyond*, through it all, two things stand-out: Boo’s guitar renditions and the quality of the composition. The artist’s compositions are such that the songs require no voices to convey their messages. Take, for example, *Love Everyday*, the last track on the album. The mood of the song, its composition, clearly says, without words, “evening is approaching, it has been fun spending time with you, but sorry to say, I have to go.”

Boo’s guitar is never loud, never overpowering. Rather it is quiet, almost

well received out of St. Lucia. I did a video for “*King of my Jungle*.” I have that video on BET on a fairly regular basis. I did a big performance on BET. I performed in Los Angeles, Washington DC, St. Kitts Music Festival, Anguilla Music Festival. So the CD has helped.”

Boo’s persistence, discipline and professionalism and his accumulation of a body of work has paid off handsomely. He has shared the stage with such legends as George Benson, Kenny Burrell, Al Jarreau, India Arie, and Grover Washington. Besides performing at the various Caribbean and international jazz and music festivals, his music has taken him as far afield as performing in 1979 at Superbowl XIII (featuring Pittsburg Steelers and the Dallas Cowboys), and more recently featuring in a state function for the former President of the United States, Bill Clinton.

CREAM OF THE CROP THE TRU TONES COMBO OF ST. LUCIA



music that once dominated his repertoire, there is plenty of popular musical influences in his jazz. For example, *Beyond* is reflective of Boo’s Caribbean roots and his Tru Tones days of reggae, calypso, soca, cadence, and R&B.

Indeed, *Beyond* represents a blending of Boo’s musical influences and the culmination of his craftsmanship as a composer, arranger and guitarist. Two of the tracks, *Beyond* and *Round the Corner*, have decidedly reggae beats. The fourth track, *Second Look* comes alive with pan renditions and soca and calypso rhythms. *Song of Love*, *Simply Beautiful*, and *Magic in Love* are love songs reminiscent of R&B music. Of the three, *Simply Beautiful* is probably the most interesting not only because it is strictly instrumental, but also it celebrates the beauty of St. Lucia in much the same way a lover would sing praises to his beloved. *Off the*

playing second fiddle to whatever else is going on in the song. Yet his guitar is to the music what seasoning is to bouyon, what rum is to rum punch, what raisins is to fruit cake. *Beyond* is peppered with clean, quiet, distinctive guitar notes that have become the signature of a Boo composition.

In much the same way Boo named his first CD after the breakup of the Tru Tones *Alive and Well* to signal to the world that even without the legendary band he had founded he was alive and well, the naming of his second CD, *Beyond*, was no accident. The artist admitted that he named the CD *Beyond* to signal yet another shift in his musical career. This time to take his music to a higher professional level, to take it beyond St. Lucia. And apparently Boo is pleased with the results. “I think I have succeeded in doing that. *Beyond* has been

Boo has truly emerged as an international artist. Viewers all over the world have had the pleasure of seeing and hearing his music not only on BET but also on BBC, Bravo TV, and the American program, *One life to Live*. And he has not gone unnoticed by his peers. George Benson, one of Boo’s musical idols, has praised his technical prowess and improvisation. Ronnie Laws said that Boo’s music is “extremely soulful and intense.” Similarly, Stanley Jordan considers Boo “a genuinely gifted and accomplished musician.”

We asked Boo to reminisce a bit and share with us some of the highlights of his achievements as a musician?

“The thing that stands out most in my mind is performing for and meeting Nelson Mandela, because I think that he epitomizes what a great human being is, so that’s one of the highlights of my

musical career. Also, performing at the Super Bowl because at that time it was a big cultural shock for me. There were like a hundred and twenty five thousand people there and that was the population of St. Lucia at the time. To leave here and perform to almost the entire population of my country, was for me a big cultural shock. And I was rather young at the time. There were a number of others. Like the first time I opened for George Benson. George Benson had become one of my biggest influences, I was listening to George Benson long before people (most St. Lucians) knew about him, so when I was called to open for him, it was something that I was looking forward to for a longtime.”

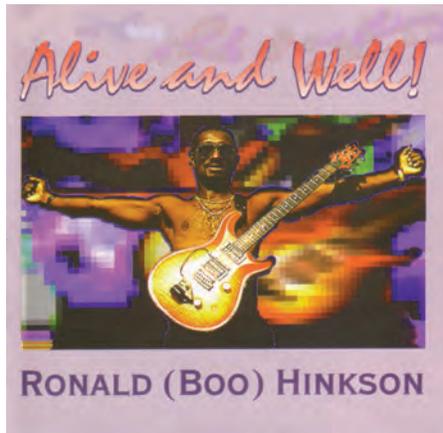
Boo’s body of work and all the international attention he is getting do not tell the whole story. The artist is nothing less than a pioneer in St. Lucia’s music indus-



try. In the seventies Boo and the Tru Tones turned professional, relying solely on music for their livelihood at a time when the term professional artist was still a foreign word to most of his fellow countrymen. Unlike today where there appears to be more recording studios in St. Lucia than there are bands, Boo and the Tru Tones recorded most of their music in an era when producing a single, much less an album, was, to most musicians from the Eastern Caribbean, not only cost prohibitive but inconceivable. Even today, Boo is still leading the way. He is one of the few St. Lucian artists who have leveraged their success at home into an international presence both in terms of performing at musical festivities and their music receiving air play.

This is no accident. Boo has always insisted on being treated like the professional that he is. Insisted on producing

and performing at international standards. And for a while now the artist has been preaching that the only way for a St. Lucian to make headway as a musician is to focus on the international market. He has often explained that St. Lucia is just too small to generate the CD sales to allow an artist to make any kind of dent. St. Lucian musicians, he insists, should produce music at a quality level and with a universal appeal to interest an international audience. Boo has said that the seasonal nature of calypso, and the overwhelming focus of calypsonians on winning the calypso crown, in the process producing songs with mostly a local theme, undermines these musicians’ chances of making an impression on the wider international audience. Calypsonians, he advised, should make the calypso competition secondary to producing for the international market.



Another aspect of Boo’s career that is not revealed in his international acclaim is that he has been able to accomplish all this without having to give up his St. Lucian residence. This is in sharp contrast to the handful of St. Lucian musicians, including Luther Francois, Barbara Cadet, and Carl Gustave, whose names are mentioned along with Boo’s and who have garnered some international attention. Most of these artists, for one reason or the other, have been spending the greater part of their professional time abroad. As a result of Boo’s musical longevity and his uninterrupted presence on the island, he has influenced generations upon generations of St. Lucian musicians. It is any one’s guess how many young persons have picked up a guitar after being inspired by a Boo Hinkson performance. All this when we haven’t even mentioned that the artist has

composed and arranged calypsos for calypsonians with which they captured the coveted calypso crown, one or two of his calypsos made it on the list of what is considered St. Lucia’s best twenty-five calypsos since the country’s independence in 1979, and he has written and arranged songs for several other artists.

Recognizing the role Boo has played in the development of St. Lucian music, we asked the artist what are his thoughts on the St. Lucia music industry?

“I think we made a mistake in allowing the music industry in St. Lucia to develop in an ad hoc manner. By now the powers that be should have recognized that music can be as big an industry as tourism or as bananas, but it is allowed to develop in an ad hoc manner. There are still kids paying import duties on musical equipment in this country. These things should have been dealt with a long time



ago so the industry can grow. Music is a thing that all young people want to gravitate towards. So we need to find the catalyst that would make it grow, make it work for the young people and for the economic growth of the country. I know there are efforts now towards that happening. Of course there are financial constraints, but the efforts have to be more aggressive than that. Also, the musicians need to start a network with each other. We need to begin to play each other’s music. And we need to understand that if Rob Taylor is up front let’s get behind him, or if “Jab” is up front, or Calixte Joseph is up front, whoever is up front, we as St. Lucians have to give them a push up. Because if one guy is on top and we’re pushing him we are all going in the same direction. I don’t think that this is something St. Lucians quite understand.”

Boo’s advice to young St. Lucian



musicians is: "Practice, practice, practice. And they must not attempt to ignore the business aspect of it. You cannot separate the business from the music. If you do that you are going to be used and abused. I must tell them that the myth that you have to take drugs to be good musicians

is just that—a myth. I know a lot of great musicians in the world. Some of them are better than the people who take drugs. The best advice I can give them is to be disciplined, be committed, be honest about whatever you do and practice because there are no alternatives to prac-

tice. You practice, you get good. You do not practice, you do not get good."

Additionally, Boo admonished young musicians to continue to be creative and go out there and play their music. "If you want to perform play some of your music. Sometimes you do not have to say it is yours—just play. You might be surprised how people will accept it. And you must be brave and bold about your creativity. I think some of the best music is yet to come out of St. Lucia. I have great faith in the young musicians in the country."

Boo's success has not been without its obstacles. As often happens, when one insists on standards, disdains mediocrity, and stands head and shoulders above most of one's contemporaries, friction arises, and it doesn't help, if, like Boo, one never shies away from speaking and writing one's mind. Some of Boo's fellow musicians have pointed out (obviously with a hint of jealousy) that Boo is too self centered, that Boo is too much about Boo. Off course, if we consider that art, in its purest sense, is more about the artist than the subject of his art, and is more about the artist giving expression to what

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is inside of him than of what's going on in society, then nothing can be more self centered than an artist being an artist.

Last year Boo found himself embroiled in a controversy with the organizers of the calypso competition. According to the artist, on the heels of the overwhelming success of the calypso twenty-five event (where what was considered the 25 best calypsos since independence were performed by their respective calypsonians, and accompanied by an all-star band that included Boo on guitar), the calypso organizers wanted the band to backup the calypsonians at the semi-finals and finals of the year's calypso competition. Although early on they had informed Boo of their intentions, no firm contractual arrangements were arrived at. When the artist finally sat down with the organizers a few weeks before the competition and quoted his price of \$23,000.00 per show, the organizers rejected the offer outright, hired a Trinidadian band instead, and complained openly to the effect that Boo was an uncooperative spoiler who had doubled the price on them. Now, at first glance, EC\$23,000.00 may appear a tidy sum, but considering that the all-star band would involve seventeen members, the take home pay of each musician would come to less than \$1,400.00. Not a windfall by any stretch of the imagination, particularly since the appointment would have included a full week of rehearsals and the musicians were among the best on the island

As far as Boo is concerned this was yet another example of the disregard some St. Lucians have for local (as in home grown) musicians. And who could blame Boo and other St. Lucian artists for harboring such misgivings. Take some of the hotels in St. Lucia. They have devised a strategy called "auditions." They invite a solo musician or a band to an audition. For the audition the artist performs to hotel guests at the same time that they would have performed if they were already hired. So in essence the hotel gets entertainment without dipping into its entertainment budget. Then the next evening the hotel brings a different group for auditioning. So by stringing along a continuous stream of auditions the hotel may never have to worry about paying musicians. Now, as if this wasn't bad



enough, recognizing the lack of opportunities on the island for musicians, some hotels orchestrate a spiral bidding process the final result of which is that the compensation of the groups that are finally hired are such that the musicians would do just as well bagging groceries in a super market, but without the cost of instruments and many late nights of performing. This is probably part of what Boo meant when he advised young musicians not to ignore the business side of the music or else they will be used and abused. The musicians are listening because they have finally gotten together to establish (STAMP), St. Lucian Association for Musicians and Composers. Hopefully, with STAMP, they will be able to tackle this and other problems hampering the development of the industry.

Apparently, Boo has taken all this in good stride. Here is how he responded when we asked him about some of the obstacles he has had to overcome on his way to success.

"Thinking outside of the box in St. Lucia can be very difficult because you can't get many people to go along with you, and you have to be very, very strong. Even if you know what you are doing is right and that's what works for you, if it is not what everyone else is doing, you end up under a lot of pressure. You have to be strong just to ignore it.

The most important thing for me is just becoming a great human being. So striking that balance for me is difficult. To become an ultimate musician requires a lot of sacrifices and I am prepared to do that only up to a point, because it is more important for me to become a great person, a well rounded and great human being. So for me, that is one of my obstacles.

"But as far as obstacles go, in terms of people, many times when people try to put obstacles in my way I just put it down as part of my growth, as one of my experiences, and I learn from it. So what people generally consider to be an obstacle, for me it is part of my evolution, part of my learning process. But there has been set backs here and there. It is difficult to get your music marketed, especially if you do not have a proper network around you. The thing is that I have often done a lot of stuff with my music outside of St. Lucia because you generally can not find the network here.

"Furthermore, because of the way I think, it is difficult for me to identify major obstacles. Because as I said I view these things as part of my evolution, part of my education, part of my learning process."

We come to the St. Lucia Jazz Festival. The same way one cannot discuss St. Lucian music without referencing Boo, one cannot talk about Ronald "Boo" Hinkson without mentioning the St. Lucia Jazz Festival, which, as we were writing this article, was only a month away. Now in its fourteenth year, the St. Lucia Jazz Festival is considered one of the very best of jazz festivals. With a mix of paid and free events, a variety of music ranging from Caribbean to quintessence jazz, a multiplicity of venues that take the musical enthusiast around the island to the most charming and picturesque of settings and with a reputation for attracting some of the biggest names in jazz and R&B, the festival is a delight for young and old, for St. Lucians as well as Caribbean and international visitors. Indeed, regardless of one's background, musical taste, and how much spending money one has, one is sure to leave the St. Lucia Jazz Festival with fond memories.

We cannot discuss Boo without bringing up the St. Lucia Jazz Festival because the event has done more than

any other in consolidating the artist's international status. Indeed, the St. Lucia Jazz Festival has served as Boo's perennial international showcase. The artist has become such a fixture of the event that one suspects that some would feel cheated attending a St. Lucia Jazz Festival devoid of a Boo Hinkson performance. *Beyond* was released in the middle of St. Lucia Jazz 2003. It was launched with such fanfare, such pageantry, and was so overwhelmingly present, that one had the impression that that year the jazz festival was organized specifically to take *Beyond* to market. The launching of *Beyond* provided us with yet another example of Boo leading the way in the St. Lucia music industry. Clearly, in the following year, given the way Robert "Zi" Taylor launched and marketed his CD, *Rise Up*, he had taken a page from Boo's book.

Here is what Boo himself had to say about the contributions of the St. Lucia Jazz Festival to the development of St. Lucia's music industry.

"Our Jazz Festival is fourteen years old, so these kids who were twelve when the festival started are well in their twenties. They have been fortunate to see the best singers, the best instrumentalists, the best performers. They have seen the highest level of production and a lot of us have been opening acts for the biggest performers in the world. So if that does not motivate us, I do not know what would. So, I really think that the Jazz Festival has done a tremendous amount of good for St. Lucian musicians.

"For myself, it has done a lot of good for me. I do not know if I would have been a regular on BET had it not been for the Jazz Festival. I have a very impressive bio. I can say I have opened for Lauryn Hill, India Irie, Lawrence Clausen, George Benson, some of the biggest names in the world and that is as a result of the Jazz Festival. What it has also done for me is that it has given me a certain stature. So now people deal with me differently. People do not deal with me as a little local boy and a lot of that has come from the Jazz festival. It has given me a more powerful network, because of the connections I have now. So it has helped me tremendously. If any St. Lucian musician has not grown, developed or benefitted from the St. Lucia Jazz Festival, it is because he does not want to.

At fifty-something, Ronald "Boo"

Hinkson's work is far from completion. The artist is still busy compiling his body of work. He spoke excitedly about a new project he is working on. "I am working on St. Lucia's Folk Music because I think we need to have our young people connect to it. It cannot be allowed to die and I think the way to keep your culture alive is to give it new life. So I am doing an album of folk songs. I am recording Charles Cadet's *Poinsettia Blossom*, because based on how well it was written and composed it is the best song ever produced in St. Lucia. I am redoing a song by Joyce Auguste, and I am also doing a version of *Calypso Jail* by Herb Black, which I think is one of the greatest calypsos which came out of St. Lucia. I think this is necessary so that our folk music does not die, and to present it to our people in a new way so that they can connect to it. We have some great music coming out of St. Lucia, and I think it is important

that we go to the cultural center and have it presented to America. Our folk music is that good. I think it is important that we do that. That is why I am focusing on that project."

Clearly, St. Lucia owes Ronald "Boo" Hinkson a lot for helping to develop its music industry, and thankfully his contributions are not going unnoticed. On the eve of our conversation with Boo, award winning St. Lucian journalist, Timothy Alfred, launched a publication titled *Tribute To The Tru Tones Ronald (Boo) Hinkson, Our Own Musical Genius*, in which he reminisces on the heyday of the Tru Tones and what they meant to him as a teenager coming of age. And last year besides gracing the front covers of Cable and Wireless telephone directories, Boo was the recipient of the prestigious St. Lucia Gold Medal of Honor, for long and meritorious contributions to music. 

