(LIVE ANNOUNCEMENT): We continue "Calling the West Indies" with this week's Caribbean voices:

PLAY: (DOX 86932) - Dur. 14' 18"

SMANZI: Henry

We have had rather a vintage month for Caribbean Voices in March, and it has been rather difficult to select programmes for comment. Very reluctantly we have had to leave out the essay on Carnival by Edgar Mittelholzer as well as "Paw-Paw Tree" by the same gifted writer. The reason for this omission is mainly that he is so much better known in the West Indies than some of the other writers whose contributions we are going to consider today. These are the poet Harold Telemaque, and the short story writer Willy Richardson. With them, we are also going to deal with "Coming of Columbus" by the Rev. Graham of Jamaica, and the long poem on Sugar by Wm. Arthur of Barbados. Oh, and I almost forget we may have time just to refer to the poem by Egbert Gibbs on La Diableresse. You have heard the names of the critics, but I might just remind you of them again. They are two of our regulars, John Figueroa of Jamaica and Gordon Bell of Barbados, with a distinguished newcomer in the shape of Squadron-Leader Ulric Cross of Trinidad. They have had all the programmes played back to them, and now the field is open.

FIGUEROA: Well, speaking as a West Indian who does a bit of writing now and then, I think we ought to leave the two Trinidadians, Telemaque and Richardson to the end, because, without wishing to make comparisons, I feel that they - how shall I say it? provided us with a greater amount of interest and pleasure, and it would be interesting to ask why.
CROSS: I agree with you there, and not only because of local patriotism. After all the growing Caribbean literature is not the property of any one small island or community. In any case, I thought all the programmes we have heard contain valuable points. All the people writing seem to have had a definite purpose.

BELL: Not merely expressing their egos, eh?

CROSS: Precisely.

FIGUERCA: Well which of them shall we deal with? The contemporary scene described by William Arthur, the legend (fable?) by Egbert Gibbs? or the history by the Rev. Graham - all building up a background for the future?

BELL: I think the poem on Sugar raised the greatest number of critical points on style.

FIGUERCA: Yes. Of course, to be frank, I do not think the description of the sugar field and factory was poetry - neither in metre nor in language nor in conception. It seemed to me rather too much like a list, and so far as images are concerned there was scarcely one picture that really got across to me.

CROSS: His images are simply not West Indian images at all.

BELL: It's not so easy, you know, to infuse sheer poetry into such a prosaic thing as the manufacture of sugar. To me the poem has structure, and the images are unmistakable, even when they are not West Indian. Could you give me an example of the kind of thing you mean by that criticism?

CROSS: Well, he talks of a "moving glacier", but I doubt if he has ever seen one, it just isn't a West Indian image.

FIGUERCA: Yes. I rather think there is a certain lack of sincerity there. Of course, if he had known a glacier, he could have used it West Indian or not West Indian, if it perfectly expressed what he wanted. But how does he know that it does?

BELL: On your premise one could just as easily condemn "Greenland's Ice Mountains", or "Tiger, tiger, burning bright", or indeed the whole of Milton's "Paradise Lost" or Dante's "Inferno". Poetry is not a matter of geography, surely.

FIGUERCA: Another image - the "coach and four" to express the sugar canes being taken away. Does he really know a coach and four.

BELL: But the coach and four was actually a feature of wealthy Barbadian planter life in the spacious days of the colony's Golden Age. And in any case it does give the feeling of leisurely gaiety and high living which he, can I say - poet - wanted to convey.

CROSS: Take "Tumbril" also to describe the cart carrying sugar cane that is a picture which is purely literary - the "Tale of Two Cities" and all that - a second-hand reference.

BELL: Well he is describing cane being taken as it were to their place of execution and "tumbrils" does sum that up.

CROSS: Apart from that, I heard a great many more cliches. "Serried Ranks", "Flashing Blade", "Perhaps who knows".
FIGUEROA: And then the metaphors change in a rather bewildering way, from battlefields and executions to the idea of cane giving life. The life blood of the aristocracy fertilising...

CROSS: And in the second part, which thought much better than the first, to describe the iron hoist, he used the metaphor of an eagle swooping on its prey. Personally, I'd much rather he had used our common West Indian "chicken".

BELL: But there are other powerful figures, aren't there? The hoist "squats upon the cane" it "gives an obscene kiss" and so on.

FIGUEROA: Yes, and I liked the phrase "postilion to fate" and the reference to the cane being cut "for great convenience of massive rollers there".

CROSS: And I thought this particular line extremely good. "A little while ago they stabbed the sunlit air".

BELL: Well, what of the total effect of the poem of the picture it paints of sugar? I still think that it was an honest attempt, with a certain clumsiness and some felicity, little originality, if you like, but a direct description for all that, of a familiar West Indian scene.

FIGUEROA: Honest, no doubt, but it is too photographic; the cane fields to sugar need more the creative picture of the artist than the photograph of the technician.

CROSS: Yes, I still think one has to be careful with metaphors and similes. For instance, in that Trinidad version of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" a lot of the pleasures I got from this useful attempt to express our common West Indian belief in the duppies of the cotton trees was spoiled by one image. He talks of the evil of the beautiful witch, brings in the "cloven hoof", and then, of all things, talks about a cow, which has a completely different significance.

FIGUEROA: Surely all this is a polite way of saying that these poems, despite their virtues were hardly successful as complete poems. But now what about the "Coming of Columbus", by the Rev. Graham?

BELL: I would say that the main disability here was the choice of the style and metre of Hiawatha, which was made more than usually hypnotic by the rather inflexible reading. One was affected by the sound rather than the content.

FIGUEROA: Well, we might suppose some certain community of interest between the Red Indians of Hiawatha and the Arawaks and Caribs. Also, I think the metre gave the writer some discipline to hold on to.

CROSS: Do you think he was in danger of falling off?

FIGUEROA: No, but I think that the poem was in a way - selected - a piece to be written up. Mark you, I think very good poetry can be written in that way, and I don't believe in the "inspired" poet getting into a frenzy and putting pen to paper. But he needs some inner drive and that was a little lacking, I thought in this production.

CROSS: I certainly thought it was worth doing - it will be of interest to people in the West Indies.

BELL: Provided they take the time to read it right through.
FIGUEROA: Oh, come now, he must tell his story.

BELL: But I felt it was unnecessarily leisurely. The major criticism to me would be the lack of spacing. It is extremely difficult with the Hiawatha metre, but important things seem to be happening in the middle of paragraphs without much introduction. And I gather that this radio version, by selecting extracts, to some extent gave it even more form than it has in the original.

SWANZY: Well, we have dealt with two or three items where praise comes at the end as a sort of consolation for criticism. I think you think that our last two programmes should start with praise tempered by a little criticism?

FIGUEROA: Certainly. He should really have used that technique all along. It struck me in listening to the work of Richardson and Telemaque that we were dealing with more matured talents, writers who were more at ease, with a beautifully clean relation between form and content with images that were genuine and particular, but going deep and setting up echoes in the mind.

CROSS: Of course, we have to distinguish between the two productions. Richardson is concerned with giving the feel of a Calypso - and I have never met such ease and mastery of the telling phrase. I have jotted down one or two ways in which he built up the atmosphere without drawing your attention to it. That phrase, "choo de crowd, den". The perfect contrast with a Calypsonian - the house agent chosen by his girl. And that wonderful little picture of him kneeling by the band to get the right minor key.

BELL: The atmosphere of restless anticipation within the Calypso tent was given with a sure touch. I admired the writer's restraint and his handling of suggestion.

FIGUEROA: I remember "scuttle", exactly the sort of borrowed but vivid word we would use in the West Indies, and the authenticity of that green and yellow dress with blotches, worn by Irma. How West Indian! The only possible criticism I have was that the story took a little time to get started. The other thing was, he didn't keep the point of view clearly enough - it is always difficult in the flash-back technique.

CROSS: Did you think so? I thought that this slight confusion was probably due to the reading. I think it might have been edited a little to make it clearer, though it was considerably clearer than most short stories over the air.

SWANZY: That brings me in as producer. In this case, we did try to get the contrast between the actual scene in the Calypso tent and the thoughts revolving in the head of the unfortunate Warrior, by getting the latter all spoken quietly right up into the 'Mike'. But it didn't quite come off.

There is one thing though. Did you get the moral?

CROSS: The moral of course was that the arrows of death caused him to change his mind.

SWANZY: No, I think the moral was wider and subtler than that.

BELL: His passion for his craft was stronger than that for Irma.

FIGUEROA: He would not 'swing' his Calypso so as to please the audience.
Now for the last programme - the poems of Harold Telemaque. It is a little difficult to comment here because you gave so strong a lead in your presentation. On the whole, I agree with your assessment.

Yes, I think this does sound a new note in West Indian poetry - it is mature and objective at its best. And that best is very good indeed.

It's the old story "Shakespeare in order to be universal had to be English". In the same way these concrete images, used so freshly and impersonally, are a great achievement. The major thing seems to me that you are not always brought back to the personality of the writer - a sure sign of the amateur.

Yes, I thought it very good. I liked particularly his technique in repetition. "Heaviness...heavy..." "shells...shells..." a very difficult thing to do.

Yes, if you are going to come down to cases, I marked the description of Courland Hill. "Bare your lush bosom" that is a very typical image, but he reinforces it with "soft as flesh" which strengthens the idea.

Actually I didn't like that so much. I feel similes could be avoided and more use made of adverbs. For example, "fleshy soft" instead of "soft as flesh".

I don't think fleshy is such an elegant term.

Certainly not. And there is the balance of words, "flesh" following "..." Another thing I liked very much was his subtlety in describing the colour question: "tint of eye", I think it was. Not even as substantial as "tint of skin".

I can only note that last stanza which was used twice, and which personally I would use on the title page of any book I was writing about the West Indies. Can I see it on the manuscript?

Yes.

In our land,
We do not breed
That taloned king, the eagle,
Nor make emblazonry of lions;

In our land
The blackbirds
And the chicken of our mountains
Speak our dreams.

That is poetry. It has a cleanness and a definition, an objectivity similar to Richardson's prose.

But is there no criticism one can make, usefully, while recognizing the definite achievement of this new poet. I thought there were two as a matter of fact. First, there was a certain amount of influence by reading, especially in the long poem about the leader and his followers, which was obscure but with indications that he had been reading modern English poets. And then in the nature poems, there was just a slight element of unrestraint. He was a little too eager to yield to his passion for colour.

I think you are right. I have noted an example. He describes stones as "white as milk". They may be, but he hasn't really thought round the comparison, since milk is such a soft, liquid thing and stones are not.
CROSS: Yes, and it is linked with the other criticism that he is occasionally not quite himself. "The moon comes down to dance upon the lake tonight" - that sounded to me slightly blase and hackneyed.

FIGUERCA: "Glorious midnight hour". And the literary syntax of that little thing about the leaf. "Though that your leaves should harden, Hang not yourself in grief, Fall dancing in the garden!"

HILL: On the whole I rather like that - there is a richness and delicacy in the inversion.

CROSS: I think again, if we can criticise production, as we should, that it lost in the reading: it is delicate poetry, with a good deal more subtlety than most West Indian productions, and the reader's voice was a bit heavy and a little too inflexible to do it justice.

SWANZ: I must agree again on that. But I hope that writers like Telemaque will enlarge the poetic response of the actors and reciters of the Caribbean.

CLOSING ANNOUNCEMENT: (Live) And that's all for tonight.

Goodnight, West Indies.