

### Sam Manning

*“Nothing’s definite about Sam Manning . . . apart from the fact that we know he existed!”*  
John Cowley, Institute of Commonwealth Studies Fellow

Sam Manning was born in Couva, Trinidad in 1897, a British colony since 1797. Its inhabitants held two conflicting world views: first the false ideal of the empire; and second that of anti-imperial rebelliousness - expressed in events such as Trinidad’s water riots of 1904.

In Trinidad, Manning found work variously as a motor mechanic, chauffeur and even as a jockey.

Perhaps to escape poverty, Manning travelled to London and enlisted into the Middlesex Regiment to fight for Britain. He served in France before being transported to the British West Indies Regiment in Palestine.

### Show Business

While waiting to be demobilised at the end of war, Manning took up *“concert party work under the Colours.”*

Once demobbed, he set out on vaudeville tours of the Caribbean islands. As an entertainer, his shows involved singing Caribbean calypso songs and performing humorous sketches and characters.

*“The girl she balled to the operator: ‘My lover, a handsome ex-soldier, murdered an East Indian’”*  
Lyrics to ‘The Bargee’ in which Manning describes an ex-soldier returning home from war.

In New York, with the help of its West Indian community, Manning made a name for himself on the Harlem circuit, creating comical interpretations of black culture for the wealthy white population.

His calypso style was strongly influenced by city’s jazz musicians. His records were sold as both traditional island folk songs and as commercial novelties.

### Radicalism

Manning increasingly associated himself with radical circles: from acting in avant-garde leftist plays in New York to becoming the Secretary for Propaganda for the International Friends of Abyssini.

He became a business partner, and perhaps lover, to Amy Ashwood Garvey (ex-wife of the Pan-Africanist leader, Marcus Garvey). Together they put on satirical shows, started a newspaper and founded the Florence Mills Social Club on Carnaby Street - the centre of London’s radical community of the 1930s.

Despite these radical tendencies, he also boasted of his soldering to the press. Manning performed for the troops in Jamaica during the Second World War, reunited with his old comrades, and attended war remembrance events.

*“He is a pragmatist, he has to keep going whatever comes up. He manages to survive, although clearly he sails close to the wind on many occasions.”*

*John Cowley, ICWS Studies Fellow*

Despite successful shows such as Caribbean Carnival, Brown Sugar and Black Magic, Manning always struggled to make ends meet. The Second World War spoilt his hopes of touring calypso bands in Britain - in competition with African-American jazz bands.

Manning died in Kumasi, Ghana in 1960.

*“We’re back to this idea, what’s nationality? What is Africa? What is Britain? What is the empire? Or, they all mixed up and you don’t know where one begins and one ends: a bit like Sam Manning’s life I think.”*

*John Cowley, ICWS Fellow*