

John Berkely ‘Peanuts’ Taylor

A condensed biography

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Many a life may be observed with some vague interest; but few inspire such awe, conviction and inspiration as the life of John Berkely “Peanuts” Taylor. This is the year 1999. It is sixty years into the performing life of Peanuts Taylor. What strikes the observer with such force when scouring the timeline of Peanuts’ life is the remarkable range of hard work, dedication, resilience and unabated enthusiasm that mark the nature of his existence. Between all these characteristics which he imbues, Peanuts has travelled the globe as a first-class entertainer, yet remained approachable and down-to-earth to those of us who pass him on the streets each day.

When an individual “makes it big” and has come from humble beginnings, somehow even the most jaded of us tend to breathe in wonder, “and just look where he came from!” The legendary tale is told of the four year-old Peanuts passing by Paul Meeres, a renowned Bahamian entertainer, who was practicing his jig in front of his popular Cabaret Club. Peanuts mischievously shot out, “I can sing and dance better than you!” To which Paul Meeres retorted, “A little ‘peanut’ like you?”. Then Peanuts showed his stuff for what it was. That was the defining moment for this legend’s true beginning.

John B. “Peanuts” Taylor was born on the 20th June, 1935 in Nassau, The Bahamas. His mother gave birth to him at Princess Margaret Hospital which sits atop Shirley Street in the heart of Nassau. Life threw its ‘monkey wrenches’ at the young boy with his mother dying at an early age and his father leaving The Bahamas to work in the southern U.S.A as many other Bahamian men were constrained to do in those days for economic reasons. Fortunately, Peanuts was cared for, and nurtured by, his grandmother Ethel Stubbs. He attended Our Lady’s Catholic School, and spent his early childhood trotting curiously about the areas of Nassau where music lived and breathed in a passionate flame of the ‘grassroot’ people’s collective soul. This was the perfect place for an individual such as himself to find free expression. And that he did – thanks to Paul Meeres – when his singing and dancing was given center stage at the tender age of four.

At that time, The Bahamas was a luxurious winter resort for mostly wealthy travellers from around the world. The moderate climate also attracted persons who were attempting to recover from illnesses that became impossible to cure in the merciless winters up north. The elixir for their ills was often found in places such as The Royal Victoria Hotel, just a short stroll away from Government House where the Duke and Duchess of Windsor resided. In 1940, at the age of five, Peanuts gave a command performance for this couple so charmed by novelty. He sang and danced in contagious merriment that night.

Of course, at this point, Peanuts is known the wide world over for his hypnotic, powerful drumming talent. However, this ability to drum was not truly known – even to himself – before the age of nineteen. So for fifteen years, Peanuts was exposed to what entertainment was all about in The Bahamas. That is, for over a decade, he crooned and swooned in all those places where the “Who’s Who” of Nassau could be found: The Jungle Club, Ardastra Gardens, The Spider’s Web, Buena Vista Restaurant, The Imperial Patio Club and the Junkanoo Club, among others.

Somewhere around the early 50's, Peanuts was asked by George Symonette (another fabulous Bahamian musician) to fill in for a drummer who was sick. What ensued from the "hitch" in that night's show can never be calculated in human terms. It is impossible to imagine when and how Peanuts would have otherwise stumbled into his destiny as a world-famous drummer!

Whatever the case, his great calling had begun. Now, uncovering forcefully the new rhythmic language of his soul, Peanuts beat his forward with incredible stamina and stage presence. He had already been named the Representative for The Bahamas Ministry of Tourism in 1952, travelling all over Canada and beginning his international globetrotting.

His pulsating strokes could be heard in China, India, Iran, Turkey, Thailand, and many other places where his Bahamian-tinged accent would never be understood by the masses.

That same year, without missing a beat, he performed for a whopping audience of 30,000 people in Earl's Court, London. Six years later, under his leadership, a Bahamian group of entertainers competed in Hawaii and their success resulted in the "Gibson Convention" being awarded to The Bahamas. Unwilling to keep his cadence secret, in 1960 Peanuts teamed up with Udel Jurgens to thrill a crowd of 40,000 on New Year's Eve in Germany. In keeping with his duty as Representative for The Bahamas' tourism industry, he has been featured in many conferences and tours abroad right into the early 1970's.

Speckled throughout the years and beginning in the late 1950's, Peanuts was invited to share his language of mesmerizing beat with celebrities and media personalities abroad, particularly in the United States. In 1956, he opened a California show for Nat King Cole, the Mills Brothers and Lancer's Show. His slight frame was captured hypnotically under the glare of lights in the following guest appearances throughout 1957: "The Steve Allen Show", "The Jack Parr Show", "The Ed Sullivan Show", "The Johnny Carson Show" and "The I've Got A Secret Show". He played with the Wheeling Symphony Orchestra of West Virginia that year, and wrote the theme song, "Calypso Island" for the movie, "Island Woman", starring Vince Edwards. He also opened for Bill Cosby's show in 1960. From the late fifties to the early eighties, Peanuts has been featured on C.B.C, on German and Swedish television, and on the B.B.C.. Amazingly, he succeeds in every genre of show business, something exceedingly rare for any entertainer of this century.

Even the international press has been unable to resist his charms, or to ignore his magnificent talent. Publications such as The Telegram (Toronto, Ontario), Newsweek, St. Petersburg Times, The Automoblist (Manchester, New Hampshire), The Jewish Chronicle (London, England), Harper's Bazaar and The New Yorker have all found themselves under the spell of this legend.

Through all of this, Peanuts Taylor maintained a series of his own nightclubs back at home. He opened his first place, Tropicana, at the age of 22. Goombay came next in 1960, then his world-famous Drumbeat Club in 1964 which was situate on Market Street in Nassau. He experimented with the Yellow Bird, the Flower Club, the Pirate's Den and the Tropical Club as his venues for performing until eventually the second Drumbeat Club was launched in 1975, located in the popular and well-received Nassau Beach Hotel. Peanuts Taylor was no less successful when in 1982 he settled into his final venue for Drumbeat, nestled on West Bay Street right before the British Colonial Hotel.

As a consequence of his unrelenting energy, his involvement in the community and his willingness to lift others up to their own forms of expression, much recognition has been given to this unassuming man. From 1975 to 1978, he received the Timothy Award for Top Entertainer and Best Night Club Show. This same year he was commended by The Miami City Commission for helping to strengthen the ties of friendship between Miami and Nassau communities. The Bahamas Ministry of Tourism selected Peanuts in 1982 and bestowed upon him The Bahamas National Tourism Achievement Award, in recognition of outstanding performance, his magnificent contribution to the expansion of tourism in The Bahamas. Unbeknownst to him at that time, he was to be given the Cacique Award in 1995, the 1996 Legend Award, the 1998 Merit of Honor Award and – that same year – a \$250.00 Coin from The Bahamas Government marking the 25th Jubilee of Bahamian Independence.

A wide variety of additional honors have been bequeathed to Peanuts, such as the Certificate of Appreciation from the Bahamas Musicians and Entertainers Union in 1988, the Distinguished Citizen's award in the Field of the Creative and Performing Arts from The Bahamas Chamber of Commerce in 1990, and the 1994 Certificate of Appreciation for Courtesies Extended from the Rotary Club of West Nassau.

It could be argued, however, that Peanuts' most spectacular, glittering recognition, has come from faraway shores: in 1993, at the age of 58, he was named a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE), an award granted by Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II. Despite the prominence of being recognized by the Queen, this did nothing to lessen the deep, enduring pride which Peanuts has experienced in his most recent honor. On the 9th September 1998, the National Trade Union of Cuban culture in conjunction with the agency, TURARTE, granted to Peanuts Taylor the "Laureate Seal of Honor", an award never before granted to a non-Cuban. This acclaim was all the more surprising as it sprang from a Cuban national and state-run association. Ironically, that was not the first time that Cuba endowed Peanuts with a special blessing. He also received in May 1999 Justice of The Peace.

Back in 1955, when Peanuts was travelling in California, he was introduced to a number of brilliant, Cuban percussionists: among them, China Poza and Candido. According to Peanuts, these artists introduced him to the congo drums on which he has performed for decades. Prior to this, Peanuts played only the goombay (Bahamian) drums which excited much furor in the old days "before there was no sterno" to heat the goatskins. He tells the story of how – on a number of precarious occasions – the fire department would clang their way down to the Drumbeat Club where, to warm the drums, Peanuts was unceremoniously holding torches of flaming newspapers to heat up the goatskins. Those painstaking days of preparation are over, and with them an era of Bahamian culture that is slipping away all too soon.

These days, Peanuts performs on center stage in the Rainforest Theatre in the Nassau Marriott Hotel & Crystal Palace Casino located on the Cable Beach strip in the northwestern portion of New Providence. It's a far cry from the Drumbeat days of old; but Peanuts hasn't changed one bit.

The concept, expression, ambiance and energy of the Drumbeat Club can almost be seen as Peanuts' trampoline leap into the world. It was from this spot that the dazzling travellers of the world met his dizzying vibrations, his talent, his energy and stood spellbound at the magic of the music Peanuts made. Not to be forgotten were the droves of Bahamian

performers (calypso singers, fire dancers, limbo kings and queens) who stood around Peanuts and, through their lively performances, enhanced and complimented the hypnotic throbbings pouring forth from Peanuts' drums.

Sitting in the audience during Peanuts' performance, one is almost out of breath just watching, trying to imagine what lies in that soul and rushes out – uninhibited – into such unspeakable energy. There are five or six drums behind which this little man sits perched on his stool. His face is glowing from his smile. Shrewd, glistening eyes scan his audience, pulling even the unwitting under his spell of pure, unadulterated pleasure. And when he starts playing, the effect is so subtle, so unpretentious, so simple, really, that you wonder, “What’s all the hullabaloo been about?”

Until you notice the way that hand flicks one place, then the next, and that elbow is brought in to strike a precise tone and then the speed is beginning and, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, it’s already too much. The rhythm of the simplest, childhood song is being deconstructed and recreated, at a speed and with an energy the ear is unable to interpret to the brain fast enough.

At some point, your brain convinces you there’s no point in trying to learn this language on an intellectual level, since you could never express it. You feel, finally, relaxed enough to simply listen with your soul to what Peanuts' soul is attempting to convey. In the final analysis, you see that his beat will go on, with or without the world, with or without someone to listen. But, if you want to listen, he'll beat that drum for you as though you're the only one on earth. That's the remarkable thing about Peanuts: the unconditional, infinite capacity of his soul to give and give and give. No matter what language you speak, the rhythm is gonna get you!