

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Irving Burgie

PERSON

Burgie, Irving

Alternative Names: Irving Burgie;

Life Dates: July 28, 1924-November 29, 2019

Place of Birth: Brooklyn, New York, USA

Residence: Jamaica, NY

Occupations: Performer; Songwriter

Biographical Note

Songwriter and performer Irving Burgie was born on July 28, 1924 in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, to a Barbadian mother and a Virginia-born father, who worked as a day laborer. In 1943, Burgie was drafted into the U.S. Army and served for three years in the China, Burma, and India Theaters. When Burgie returned to the U.S., he took advantage of the newly passed G.I. Bill, which allowed him to attend the Juilliard School, the University of Arizona, and the University of Southern California.

In 1953, Burgie performed as a singer and guitarist at the Blue Angel in Chicago, Illinois. After playing at the Village Vanguard in New York City in 1955, he was introduced to Harry Belafonte, and the two began a collaboration with Burgie as songwriter and Belafonte as performer. A year later, they released the album *Calypso*, for which Burgie composed eight of the eleven songs, including the hit “Day-O.” *Calypso* became the first American record to sell over one million copies. In 1957, Burgie wrote the song “Island in the Sun” for the film of the same name, which starred Belafonte and Joan Fontaine. Burgie was then credited for ten of the eleven songs on Belafonte’s 1957 album *Belafonte Sings of the Caribbean*, and eight of the twelve songs on 1961’s *Jump Up Calypso*. In 1963, Burgie composed the music and lyrics for the off-Broadway show, “Ballad for Bimshire,” which starred Ossie Davis. Then, while on a trip to Barbados, Burgie was invited to write the lyrics for the Barbados national anthem, which he completed in 1966. In 2011, he signed a fifteen-year publishing deal with BMG Rights Management.

Burgie released *The West Indian Song Book* in 1972, and the *Caribbean Carnival* song book in 1993. He also released the solo album, *Island in the Sun*, in 1996, which included many of his own renditions of the hits that he wrote for Belafonte. In 2007, he

published the autobiography, *Day-O!!!: The Autobiography of Irving Burgie*.

Burgie developed the Caribbean Day Assembly Program for New York-area public schools in 1973; and, in 1975, helped organize the United Black Men of Queens County Federation, Inc. He has received the Silver Crown of Merit from the Barbados government, and was awarded honorary doctorates from the University of the West Indies and St. John's University in New York. Burgie was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2007.

Burgie passed away on November 29, 2019.

Irving Burgie was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on April 9, 2014.

Related Entries

The Juilliard School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

University of Arizona School of Law [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

University of Southern California [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

U.S. Army [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1943 to 1946]

BMG Rights Management [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 2011 to ?]

Publisher

Caribbean Day Assembly Program [MEMBEROF]
[from 1973 to ?]

Developer

United Black Men of Queens County Federation, Inc. [MEMBEROF]
[from 1975 to ?]

Organizer