

# SOUL PURPOSE

Ten years after becoming the first black face to appear regularly on British TV as a calypso singer, Cy Grant began reinventing himself. Angela Cobbinah finds out what happened next.

The first night Cy Grant performed his one-man show of Aimé Césaire's epic prose poem *Return To My Native Land*, a white woman fainted in the audience.

She had come to see Cy Grant the calypso singer and matinee idol, but what she got was Cy Grant in a trenchant, if lyrical, attack on colonialism and European values.

'It must have come as a bit of a shock,' he says remembering the show's mixed reception as he began touring it in 1977.

'But for me performing Césaire was about having the courage to stand up, to shout from the roof tops "accommodate yourself to me; I will not accommodate myself to you."'

Written in 1939, *Return To My Native Land* was a philosophical call to arms for black pride, or Négritude, that came to be considered a masterpiece of the French language.

'I had never even heard of Césaire and I came across the book by accident,' recalls Grant, who, as the first black person to appear regularly on TV, film and stage in 1950s Britain, had been the post-war equivalent of a superstar, gracing the cover of *Radio Times* and on first name terms with the darling of British theatre, Laurence Olivier.

'It was a sort of epiphany. Blackness, Africa, return to my native land, to the source, to new values, caring community.'

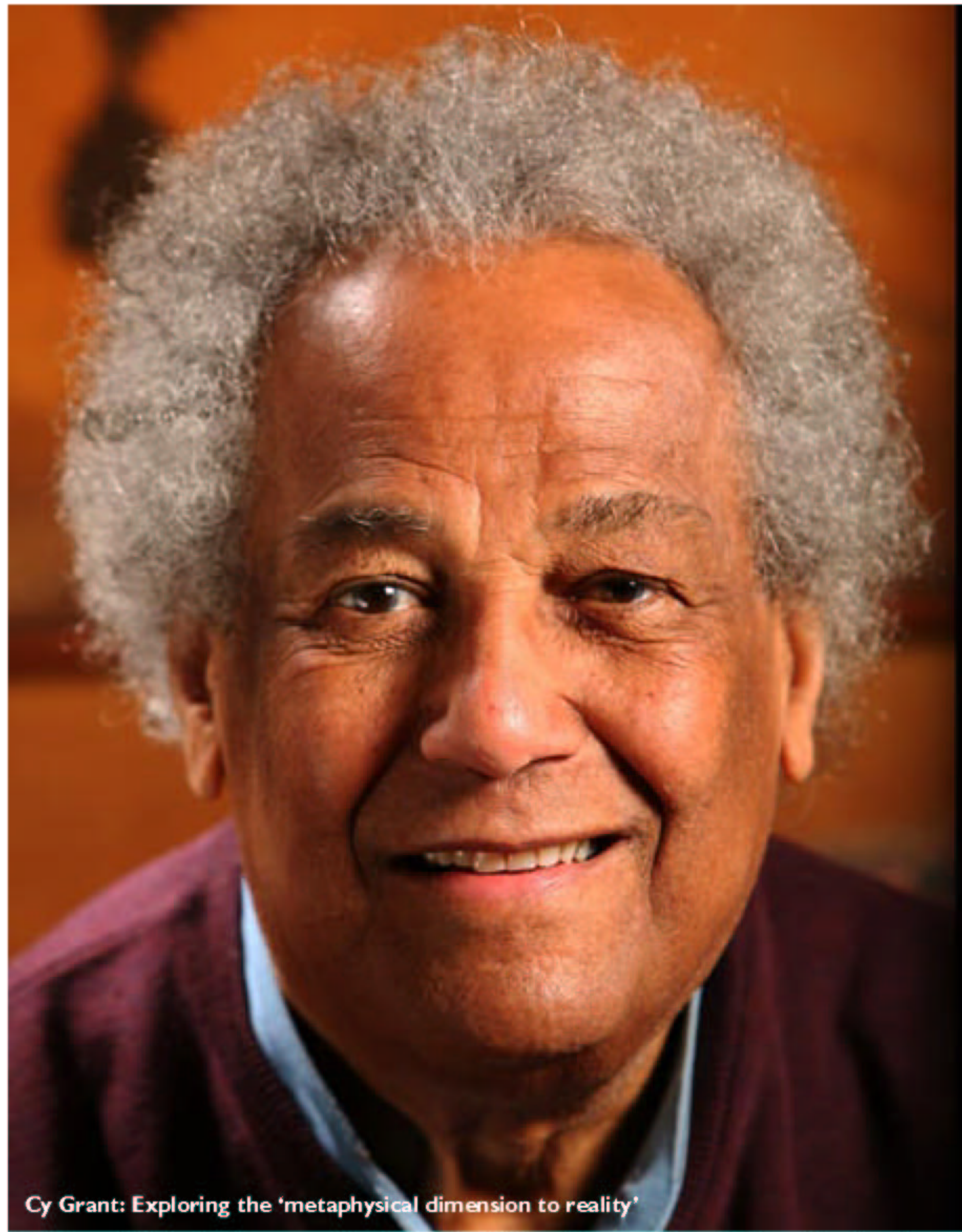
By this time he had already effectively turned his back on stardom, setting up Drum Arts Workshop as a platform for black actors and making his first forays into politically conscious poetry.

But his chance encounter with the French Caribbean writer would take him on a restless journey of self-discovery, central to which has also been the study of the ancient Chinese text, *Tao Te Ching* and its emphasis on universal balance.

He came to see that racism was a reflection of a wider western malaise that places the material before the spiritual in all things and has sent the world hurtling towards its own destruction.

It signalled a dramatic turning point but it was certainly not the first in a life that has been an exhilarating tale of the unexpected mixed in with sheer good luck.

Now a vibrant-looking 89-year-old whose straight back owes itself to regular exercise with Tai Chi, he sees it all as a rehearsal for his biggest role: 'My life has been one of synchronicity – things came to me for a reason.'



Cy Grant: Exploring the 'metaphysical dimension to reality'

Born into a middle class family in Guyana in 1919, Grant had left school with only one wish – to escape the narrow confines of life in a sleepy colonial backwater where he would only ever be a second-class citizen.

Then two years after the outbreak of the Second World War opportunity knocked. Faced with huge losses in manpower, the RAF decided to drop its colour bar and allow young men from the colonies to enlist. He was among its 500 or so Caribbean recruits and qualified as a navigator before being made an officer, one of the few black men to do so. But his flying days were to be brief. On his third mission Grant was shot down over the Netherlands and made a prisoner of war for two years.

'I had plenty of time for reflection in that prison camp – how I was fighting racism in Europe but was still subject to racism back home in Guyana.' Having resolved to study law on his release as a way of fighting colonialism, Flight Lieutenant Grant became a member of the Middle

Caribbean folk songs on the radio and in nightclubs and concert halls.

In 1956, he co-starred with Nadia Cattouse and Errol John in a BBC TV drama *Men from the sun*, about Caribbean migrants, and, acted alongside Richard Burton in *The Sea Wife*, the second of a number of films he was to appear in.

But a year later, he was to hit the stratosphere when he was asked to take part in the BBC's innovative daily topical show, *Tonight*, to sing the news in calypso. The journalist Bernard Levin provided the words and Grant strung them together.

'Calypso's natural role is as a singing newspaper hence ideal for Levin, who was up with the news, witty and quite brilliant. The show went out live – nerve racking but great fun.' *Tonight* was hugely popular and turned Grant, the first black face to appear regularly on TV, into a household name. But he left after two and a half years, anxious not to become typecast.

Although in 1965 he played Othello, his general frustration with the lack of good parts for black actors was heightened by Olivier's own 1968 portrayal of the Noble Moor, for which he had notoriously "blacked up".

'Of course I was aware of racism in British society but despite the ongoing difficulties I had been able to forge a reasonable career in show business. The crunch came with Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech in 1968. I was forced to confront myself; to stand up and be counted so to speak.'

the guitar,' he explains in a matter-of-fact tone. The move was seamless – within a short time he was singing

Temple in London, finally qualifying for the bar in 1950.

But despite his distinguished war record and legal qualifications no one was interested in giving him a job. 'This was Britain in peacetime and I was no longer useful,' he says ruefully.

Forced to find some other way of earning a living, a friend suggested acting as a temporary stopgap. At least it would improve his diction for when he finally got work at the bar. After treading the boards with what he describes as a third rate theatre-company, his luck changed sensationally with a successful audition with Laurence Olivier's outfit, which saw him perform in London and then New York. Tall, good looking and charming, he was already being eyed up as lead man material.

Even so, the roles open to him as a black person were limited so Grant decided to increase his earning potential and become a singer: 'I had always enjoyed singing and playing



Grant and Chris Mitchelmore, *Tonight*'s presenter

'Olivier was a charmer; that's why I approached him. I was amazed by his response but I suppose it was typical of opinion at the time – "you must try to be like us, old boy".'

But Drum was a landmark in the development of black theatre in which plays by leading writers – Wole Soyinka, Michael Abensettes and Mustapha Matura among them – were

performed at prestigious venues like the ICA and the National Theatre. 'Drum proved that black people could act as well as anyone else, that it was ridiculous to think otherwise.' He puts its eventual demise down to lack of support from the arts establishment and from sections of the black community.

But its absence gave him the opening to develop his one-man production of Césaire, which he toured for two years. It was, he says, one of the highlights of his career.

Another was as director of Concord, a series of nationwide festivals, which saw a vast range of international performers appearing in all manner of venues, from provincial theatres to village halls in counties like Devon and Gloucester. 'Concord championed the rich cultural diversity of Britain before the idea of multiculturalism became popular. The media ignored it despite its resounding success.'

A due to what Grant has been up to in the last couple of decades can be found in his 2007 book *Blackness and Dreaming Soul*, which begins as an autobiography but is for the most part a scholarly explanation of his personal philosophy – an attack on our secular and materialist world that has created 'the more is best spiritual vacuum of globalisation.'

As a member of the Scientific and Medical Network, a forum which seeks an alternative way of seeing things, his worldview takes in quantum physics, the ancient masters Pythagoras and Lao Tzu, and African mythology, which all expound the unity of life as against the 'dualistic delusion' of Western thought.

The anger and frustration that catapulted him towards performing Césaire all those years ago has been replaced by the calmness of one who has reached deep within himself and come up with some universal truths. 'If I have learned anything from Césaire is that we have to deal with our anger if we can ever hope to affect change in society.'

Racism, he adds, is just a symptom of the fragmentation of knowledge and issues into categories, which have no connection with each other. 'Ecological

## Black History Month

I strived for concord  
For unity in diversity  
Efforts still unheard

now the climate's changed  
awash with funds  
of appeasement  
floods that feed  
the seasonal scramble;  
tropical islanders  
grabbing trader of temperate  
tourists –  
crumbs off history's imperial table

Is it not a shame  
that black activists  
bite the bait –  
you can have de money  
if you don't buck the State;  
the only access  
minimal concessions

pawns in an achromatic  
colourless game  
that loads the dice  
of light and dark  
of men and mice.

Predators  
oblivious to their second  
class status;  
acquiesce,  
ignore the historical  
perspective  
how they were dis  
empowered

From *Rivers of Time: Collected Poems of Cy Grant, Naked Light, 2008*

## The magic of the steelpan

In 1995 I was asked to write a book about the steelpan of Trinidad and Tobago. From the very start of my research I realised I was dealing with something very special and quite magic – the story of the only acoustic instrument to be invented in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It was the mythic story of the transmutation of industrial waste material into a musical instrument, which led me to explore the nature of sound and the harmonics of music.

In making the steelpans, the top of the drums are sunk into a concave surface. This is followed by marking the notes and grooving, all of which disturb the molecular and crystalline balance of the steel which is corrected by tempering – the drums are heated for a specific time over intense heat to make the metal stronger and more ductile, the soul

of the material lingering on, induced into liquid iridescent sound colours or overtones.

In Trinidad in the middle of the last century, discarded oil drums were transformed into a highly tuned percussion instrument without its innovators being aware that they were alchemists.

Much despised at first, the steelpan is now the national instrument of Trinidad. It has healed a divided society and it is played by all races. Today the music of pan resonates around the world.

In my book [*Ring of Steel*, 1999 Macmillan], I proposed that the universal appeal of steelpan music may be due to its special harmonic structure. I also suggested that steelpan music produces healing natural harmonics by virtue of its unusual and complex acoustics and tuning.



The humble steelpan, created out of industrial waste

What seemed certain is that the sound the instrument makes follows the rules of physics, which are universal.

From *Blackness and the Dreaming Soul*

problems, like racism, go back a long way but as they are directly linked to the psychological rift between man and nature, they cannot be seen as unrelated to each other – making it impossible to express concern for ecology and be racist at the same time.'

He insists that there needs to be a fundamental shift in politics to bring about real change. 'We are one human race with the same needs and desires. We live on a small and beautiful planet in which everything we need is provided. We evolved by symbiosis and not, as Darwin claims, by ruthless competition. Until we know and acknowledge this, we will hasten the end of life on earth as we know it.'

*Blackness and the Dreaming Soul: Race, Identity and the Materialistic Paradigm by Cy Grant is published in the UK by Shoving Leopard, price £14.99. Also by the same author, Member of the RAF of Indeterminate Race, Woodfield Publications, 2006*



His one-man show of Césaire's poem was one of the highlights of his career



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## Death and the King's Horseman

by Wole Soyinka

★★★★★

Evening Standard, Financial Times, Guardian, Metro

'VISUALLY RAVISHING.' Mail on Sunday

'Magnificent performances.' Observer

Nigeria, 1943. The King is dead, and his Horseman must escort him to the Ancestors.

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