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## Mervyn and all that Jazz : 09th Death Anniversary of Mervyn de Silva today

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by Errol Alphonso All I had to do was ask him if he liked Benny Goodman or Fats Waller or Louis Armstrong. At the time, I knew nothing of his chosen musical confections, for that would have made the writing rather more about the Mervyn I knew, than the one I had to get to know through distance learning.

For, indeed, I received a large part of my education from him in language, letters, foreign affairs and intellectual wrangling, with a safe spatial interval between us. About the jazz, I learned only after he was gone, and that too, from something Dayan had written. I don't know if I can be faulted for not making a first approach. He seemed unapproachable, and after the experience a friend, to whom I used to retail Mervyn's salon style, underwent, I decided that distance did lend enchantment. This encounter took place in the lobby of 'Lake House'. My friend was there on some routine matter. He saw Mervyn, and in a mighty flush, went quickly up to him and asked 'Excuse me, but are you Mr. Mervyn de Silva?' Mervyn gave him one of those looks reserved for the briefest of brief encounters, said a short 'No', and turned on his heel. The poor man was devastated, and I had to coax his savaged feelings back to health over long days. Those were Mervyn's bright times. He knew of no such thing as the retort courteous, and did get a rise out of taking down those he could not suffer gladly. There was a weekly column in the 'Daily News', pseudonymously authored by 'Adonis'. After quite a number of these had appeared, Mervyn got out his jousting lance, and after referring to the writer as not so much. 'A-don-is' as 'A-don-was', toppled him with his closing line. 'I suppose old dons never die, they just lose their faculties!' He was also very good at mimicking informal speech. I still remember bits and things of the dialogue he wrote. Thus, he specially saw the humour in some telephone talk between two ladies discussing their fashion choices for the evening, with one of them indicating that the way to salvation lay in donning '...the dot, dot, dot saree.' This was all 1960s stuff. I read him and listened to him, as a man who needed very much to learn, and was hardly disappointed. It was around this time, that I first saw him at Radio Ceylon, and heard him doing his talks including some of those penetrating book reviews, which as I sat in the continuity studio, I listened to him deliver from the talks studio down the way. There are two of these I remember with a staggering vividity. One was Mervyn's review of John Le Carre's 'Call for the Dead'. At first, I didn't pay particular attention, as I went about attending to some of the clerking duties that went with the territory. Then suddenly, my blood caught a chill. Mervyn, was reading that deadly passage where George Smiley kills his friend and cold war adversary, the East German intelligence operative, Dieter Frey. The words tumble in my ears after a space of forty and more years, and I quote now without benefit of text: 'They met in the clearing of a timeless forest, two friends rejoined and fought like beasts. Dieter had remembered and Smiley had not.' Mervyn paused, then he ended his review with the words Smiley kept repeating to himself in a delirium. It was from John Webster's dark tale 'The Duchess of Malfi'. I bade thee when I was distracted of my wits go kill my dearest friend, and thou hast done it. It was worth the ticket. A while later, Mervyn appeared at the continuity studio to have his payment voucher endorsed by me. I tried to look in awe, but he was having none of it. Always an elegant dresser. Mervyn anticipated third-degree brand building or whatever it is that advertising men talk about today, long decades earlier. Clashed in his hand was a tin of the most fashionable foreign cigarettes, with silver lighter topping it. It was pure posh. This takes me to the other talk of Mervyn's, again unforgettable. Ian Fleming had created James Bond, and Bond was brought to the big screen in the shape of Sean Connery. Who can forget Connery saying: 'Bond, James Bond.' This was an irresistible character for Mervyn, who was particularly taken by Bond's love for the finer things in life. Apart from his faithful Walther PPK, Bond drove fast cars and was faultless in his choice of women. He was impeccably outfitted, and everything he owned had the stamp of high class. About this time, a group of local spoilers mounted an attack on Bond, calling him a dangerous and culturally detrimental representative of the West. Mervyn was cut to the quick, and responded with his classic piece delivered on radio, in the form of an address to the jury, called 'In Defence of James Bond'. I can hear him now, his mannered voice and measured style, with his habit of sometimes sliding one word into another, making this masterful performance. I sat riveted in the studio. This later appeared in print, but it was no match for his original delivery. Mervyn moved on to his later, and even greater moments. He came to be one of the best foreign affairs analysts and political commentators of his time. Two occasions on which I saw him outside Radio Ceylon were when he presided over lectures delivered by Krishna Menon, the great Indian intellectual warhorse. And yes, there was one other, when he spoke at the Centre for Society and Religion, with Felix Dias Bandaranaike, and a bill of speakers including Amaradasa Fernando. This was almost immediately after the UNP landslide in 1977. I remember Amaradasa Fernando making some palliative remarks, and Mervyn who followed him, started out by saying: 'I don't know if Mr. Amaradasa Fernando is trying to make a virtue out of necessity.' 'But it will be interesting to recall as an aside, that FDB himself began by saying. 'It is not often that Satan comes to the Centre for Society and Religion', in an illusion to Dr. N. M. Perera's greatly favoured description of him at the time of the United Front Government. While Mervyn was comfortable with the cognoscenti, he did bring intellectual discourse close to a wider public with his journal 'Lanka Guardian'. Some of the best minds contributed to it, and even grudging wallets like mine gladly gave up the small sum needed to attend the feast. For me, Mervyn's grand period was in the 1990s, when he wrote in a microprocessed style. It had 'everything inside.' This was his Sunday column, full of brilliance for what he did not say. Staccato sentences, dots, pauses, perfectly placed quotations, and of course, much mischief, which even then he could hardly resist, as in '...the Hoo and Pee, Chee, dirty, no?' A brief rewind. Mervyn had a remarkable sense of time and place. The 1960s did not offer opportunities of frequent travel for most of us. Mervyn being in journalism was more fortunate. Writing once about a visit to Greece, he described how he stood on a particular spot, and then in tones that were highly evocative, added 'Here Homer

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sang.&rdquo; It&rsquo;s all been said before. Mervyn, the great journalist, the outstanding editor, the innovative publisher, the learned commentator, the intellectual gymnast. My choice of legacy is out of another box, Dayan. This is Mervyn&rsquo;s living legacy, and rarely is it known to happen. In intellectual sweep Dayan has outdone Mervyn. Dayan brings to his daily exercise in existence, a swathe of experience that makes him stride with the mighty and hold the magic to touch people. We are talking fine steel forged out of the hottest fire. All that jazz? Second chances don&rsquo;t come easy, so I&rsquo;m asking Dayan right away. Do you like Duke Ellington? (Courtesy : Sunday Observer and Sunday Island)