

# NGC's failure to execute Banyan archive plan left door open—source



Former NGC chairman Michael Louquan, now deceased



Banyan co-founder Christopher Laird

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Barbados' purchase of the Banyan Archives is now being described as the story of how Trinidad and Tobago bungled a critical cultural resource.

On Friday, during the opening of Carifesta XV, Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley announced that her government had acquired the historic Banyan collection— more than 1,000 hours of digitised film and video chronicling Caribbean life over several decades.

She promised the material would be made publicly accessible across the region, giving young people “the opportunity to build and create more as a people.”

For many in T&T, the announcement was a shock.

The archive, built by Banyan co-founders Christopher Laird, Dr Bruce Paddington and the late Anthony Hall, had been described as a national heirloom. Yet, after years of local appeals for support, it was Barbados that stepped in.

A source yesterday told Guardian Media that when Banyan first approached the then People's National Movement (PNM) government, Prime Minister Dr Keith Rowley agreed the National Gas Company (NGC) should acquire the archive on the country's behalf. NGC already had a programme for cultural investment, purchasing artworks and artefacts, which made it a logical choice. Under such an arrangement, ownership would rest with the company, while the collection could be managed by institutions such as the National Archives, NALIS, or the University of the West Indies.

Then NGC president, the late Mark Loquan, announced the purchase of the archive at the T&T Film Festival in 2022.

“When we were presented with the opportunity to pursue the ownership of these archives on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, we did not hesitate,” he said. “Today, it is our great privilege to announce that NGC is pursuing acquiring this archive and will from here forward, be joint custodians of this massive vault of Caribbean memory and history.”

The statement was met with massive applause then, while Christopher Laird said in response, “This is an occasion that has me totally bowled over, that we should be recognised by our peers while we're still alive...a very unusual thing in Trinidad.”

But the acquisition never materialised.

“They just didn't do it. We thought it was a done deal, but they never followed up,” the source said yesterday, adding that a senior executive had “run them around” before retiring and leaving the matter unresolved.

Guardian Media has seen a copy of Banyan's proposal to the T&T government, which sought US\$250,000 for the full archive, including compressed and uncompressed formats and all rights “in perpetuity.”

The document emphasised the cultural urgency, noting that it was “the only available resource with which it is possible to see moving pictures of Caribbean festivals, luminaries, artists, writers, performers and ordinary citizens, some born over 100 years ago.”

It warned that young Caribbean people were “more familiar with hip hop stars than calypsonians” and that generations were growing up without visual records of their own history.

The Barbados government has not said how much they paid for the archives.

By 2019, Banyan had been forced to relocate its physical tapes to the National Archives after losing the vault that had housed them, though the digitised collection remained intact.

With its founders retired and unable to maintain the archive, the company argued that any purchaser—whether a media house, library, or university—would “benefit tremendously by having exclusive and unfettered access” to a resource of “irreplaceable, high quality and award winning” Caribbean content.

The breakthrough finally came not in Port-of-Spain but in Bridgetown.

Last week, Laird and Paddington were inducted into the Caribbean Broadcasting Union Hall of Fame during its Annual General Assembly. There, Laird was personally honoured by Prime Minister Mottley. Within 24 hours of their meeting, Barbados moved to finalise the purchase, ending years of drift and ensuring the collection’s preservation.

Guardian Media sent a number of questions on the issue to NGC yesterday. The company promised to respond but up to press time had not furnished any.

We also contacted Culture Minister Michelle Benjamin and are awaiting a reply.