CALYPSO: SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER, 1962-2012

UNDERSTANDING A SOCIETY IN TRANSITION

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Since the emancipation of Africans in the Caribbean in 1838, the calypso has undoubtedly become the music of the chain of islands in the Caribbean with political ties to Britain, as well as the US Virgin Islands,[1] although other forms of music exist throughout. As a music that dates back to the enslaved Africans protesting their enslavement in song, Trinidad and Tobago has become known as the land of the calypso, principally because the main changes to the musical structure over the years were all started by and among Trinidadians and spread to the other Caribbean islands and people of the African diaspora.

History has played a decisive role in shaping and changing the calypsonian's outlook, oratory, music and themes. From an enslaved African to a post-emancipation chantuelle to a 20th century calypsonian; from basic African rhythms to a present-day soca style; from sugar and cocoa estates to kalenda[2] and Dame Lorraine[3] yards in the 19th century; from calypso tents in the 1920s to neon-lit forums in the 1960s; and from protestors to entertainers, calypsonians have today become skilled craftsmen and professional artistes singing a genre of world music. By 1962 when Trinidad and Tobago gained its independence, the calypso had weathered the storm of censorship imposed on it by Colonials in the 1940s and 50s, and had become, as Calypsonian Valentino sang in the 1970s, "the only true opposition"[i] to upper class groups and the neo-colonial governments. Truly, it had set the stage, song-wise, for a political overthrow of the British Colonial system of government. Whereas before the 1960 era there were few calypsonians, by 1962, hundreds of singing youths throughout the Caribbean were laying claim to the esteemed title of calypsonian and commenting in song on enslavement and colonialism.

Photograph: Stephen Broadbridge

Undisputed Calypso King of the World, The Mighty Sparrow

With more and more singers doing recordings in the 1950-1960 era, with the advent of Sparrow and Eric Williams in 1956 – Sparrow revolutionising our musical world with his unique and historical *Jean and Dinah* composition and Dr Eric Williams winning with his PNM[4] party at the polls and going on to change the political landscape to usher in party rule, internal self-government and a Cabinet system – by 1962, the stage was set for an overflowing of joy and patriotism in the future of Trinidad and Tobago. The joy was so overwhelming that despite the setback of the breakup of the West Indian Federation in 1962, independence for Trinidad and Tobago was the natural result of the peoples' joyful dance and song in that historical year.

In 1962, therefore, the first Independence Calypso Competition took place at the then Town Hall[5] on August 15th to mark the Independence of Trinidad and Tobago, set to occur on the 31st of August. The stage was set, then, for a rather unique competition, since it was the first of its kind outside of the

normal Calypso King[6] contests that took place on Carnival Sunday night.[7] Moreover, there was such commitment and fervour among the singers that whereas in the calypso king contests six singers were always chosen to participate in the Finals, 12 contestants had to be selected for this historical-singing-experience. The contest was won by Lord Brynner[8] who, using his shaved head as a metaphor to depict both the African and the Indian, prevailed on the crowd the need for racial unity. Sparrow placed second; Nap Hepburn was third and Lord Pretender fourth. Most calypso lovers believe, however, that on the basis of the lyrics espoused by Sparrow demonstrating that a model nation had at last been established, Sparrow had won, indeed. In fact, all the other singers that night were, as it were, in tune with Sparrow's dictum: a model nation of unity among diverse and disparate groups had at last been formed. The upper and lower classes in Trinidad and Tobago then had a reason to accept the calypso as one of the cultural artifacts that served as a rallying call for all ethnic and racial groups to unite and see themselves as Trinidadians first. As a further testimony to the call for unity there were several calypsoes. Chief among them was the call of the Mighty Sniper in his winning calypso of 1965 for unity of the races since we were all living in "King Solomon's mine,"[ii] and Baker in 1967 noted that "here the Indian, the African and the Syrian jump together in a band" and their children "play together in the sand."[iii] By 1969 too, the calypsonian was reminding the upper classes that, in keeping with Eric Williams' saying, "Massa Day must done,"[iv] class domination must end. Thus, it must be seen, that the calypso, like the steelband, supported Eric Williams' call for unity of the races, and above all, for nationalism. While Williams used the steelband as a tool in the promotion of nationalism in the 1960s (see Steve Steumpfle's dissertation),[9] calypsonians sang the messages that oozed out of his many speeches: colonialism, divisiveness, and rule by the upper classes must all end.

Before the 1960 era, the calypso as an art form was not accepted in many upper-class areas or by many upper-class people. According to sociologist Pete Simon, it was yet a degraded art form (Simon 1969, 32-36).[v] It was not sung in churches. More so, school children in most Christian schools were made to do penance during the holy season of Lent, to atone for the many sins that were committed "during the season of license and festivities…every calypso was another wound in Christ's side and in the sacred heart of his mother" (Rohlehr 1972, 8).[vi] As late as 1968, calypsonian Chalkdust was dismissed from his teaching job for singing calypsos for financial gain while employed as a teacher. Of course the real problem was the fact that Chalkdust's singing was seen as one that was inimical to the job of teaching in that the singing of calypsoes was undermining the noble profession of teaching. So deep was the bias against calypso that calypsonian Kitchener in 1964 was calling for calypsoes to be played during the season of Lent by the radio stations.[vii] Thus it was associated in many circles with "the devil's work."[10]

After being reinstated in his job, Chalkdust's pioneering victory set the stage for a number of public servants who were singing calypsoes undercover to come out of the musical closet. In this respect, calypsonians Supreme Happiness and Danny Boy who were employed by the Police and Fire Services respectively were thereby given permission by the relevant Service Commissions[11] to sing. By 1969, calypsonian Composer noted that a change had taken place; calypso and steelband, as art-forms, were now being accepted by all. In fact, according to calypsonian Mighty Composer: "even magistrate and police (were) beating dey pan and jumping in peace" (Composer, 1969).[viii] Primary schools like Nelson Street Boys' RC with Eric Anatol,

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and secondary ones like St Augustine Girls led by Anna Mahase were now holding calypso contests in schools. By 1970, most of the churches, professional bodies and upper classes identified with calypso; schools, corporate bodies and elite social organisations and state boards annually held calypso competitions while the professional calypsonians enjoyed a much higher standard of living, a great change from the earlier 1960s when they were described as "social libertines given to wine, women and song" (Pete Simon 1969, 33).[ix] A new and further dawn in the acceptance of the art form arose. That new dawn led to the acceptance and hug of the "soca."

Influenced mostly by musician Ed Watson who on returning from Nigeria gave him a Nigerian recording, and to a lesser extent by the Indian culture that surrounded him at Lengua Village in South Trinidad where he grew up, calypsonian Shorty between the years 1974 to 1977 applied the "soca" rhythm to his calypsoes and thereby brought about a significant change in the music's structure. The change was basically one relative to the bass. Instead of the bass making the normal two beats to a bar of music, one on each 2/2 beat, the two beats were now concentrated on the second half of the bar with a rest on the first. The Nigerian and Indian rhythm structure had, in Shorty's view, complemented the 2/2 or cut time rhythm of calypso. Shorty had grown up in the era of American Soul music of the 1960s and he, conscious of the need to internationalise the calypso, felt that it needed more soul. In his view the combination of the "Nigerian and Indian rhythms could make the thing more danceable" and bring about the spirit or soul needed. Thus he called the change "Soul Calypso or Soca."[x] The change caused a ripple effect in that ever since its introduction, singers began to experiment with Spanish, French and Cadance-like rhythms in their recordings in an effort to further internationalise the calypso and sell more recordings. This drawing down of rhythms from all over the world in keeping with the advance of technology has continued ever since, so that today even though the calypso is yet written with a 2/2 tempo, one hears all types of bass runs and derivatives of the traditional calypso within.

The soca change, the increase in the number of calypsonians, calypso tents and prize money all added up to making the period 1970 to 1990 the golden era of calypso. Where before the 1960s the number of calypsonians could be counted on one's fingers, as many as seventy were facing the judges in the mid-1970s and over two hundred in the 1980s, for the Calypso King contest. Where before few women participated in the art form, there were so many females in the 1970s that a Calypso Queen contest started and the Calypso King contest had to be renamed the Calypso Monarch in 1977. Where before the 1960s, calypsonians had to wring the hands of the CDC,[12] in song, to get more than the "brass crown on dey head,"[xi] by the 1970s the prize money rose to a thousand dollars ($1,000) and to five thousand ($5,000) by the 1980s. In fact, in 1993, the prize for the top singer was $20,000. While a special prize of $2 million was granted to the champion singer in year 2011, the prize has reverted today to that of $.5 million, yet a far cry from Sparrow's calypso of 1957 bemoaning the poor prizes given to calypsonians then. Where before the 1960s, there was only one main competition open for calypsonians, by the golden era, calypso promoters such as the National Joint Action Committee (NJAC), William Munroe and Claude Martineau[13] introduced several competitions that brought to the fore youngsters such as Bally and DeFosto who today are shining lights in the art form. Where before the 1960s too, few singers made recordings, urged on by the available technology of the 1980s, most singers were able to make recordings in the United States (USA) to the effect that Sparrow and Kitchener no longer held any monopoly

on the Monarch and Road March[14] contests. Recordings in the USA were so commonplace that Lord Relator was forced to sing in the 1980s that "it is a sad blow…we now importing we own calypso."[xii] Where before the 1960s, few singers travelled abroad, by the 1980s singers from Trinidad and Tobago ruled the roost in the US Virgin Islands, the British Caribbean, New York, Toronto, Miami, Montreal and London. Not only did the calypso spread, but the political calypso made a great impact on listeners throughout the Caribbean diaspora.

The advent of Eric Williams to the throne of Trinidad's politics, the attempts to silence calypsonian Chalkdust, the 1970 Black Power confrontation, the army revolt led by young lieutenants in 1970 and the national elections of 1986 and 1991 were all events that led to a spate of political calypsoes in the 1970 to 2000 era. There have always been political songs throughout the history of the calypso but the era of 1970 to 2000 was one where, seemingly, the singers rose to claim their freedoms and to state openly to the politicians that theirs was a responsibility to speak on behalf of the underdogs of society. The more the politician spoke or ranted and raved, the more the calypsonian not only sang but demanded his space to do so. For example, there were over (150) songs alone dealing with Eric Williams and his policies as Prime Minister and perhaps another one hundred that criticised his regimes. Singers such as Valentino, Black Stalin, Chalkdust, Duke and Relator in the '70s and '80s; Delamo, Pink Panther, Watchman, Sugar Aloes, Cro Cro, Luta and Penguin in the '90s, demonstrated, by their compositions, that they were not compromising their freedoms and that the calypso would forever be a barrier to anyone or to anything that served to degenerate the Trinidadian and Tobagonian citizen. Standing out

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Photograph: Stephen Broadbridge

A class act: Professor Liverpool tells it like it is

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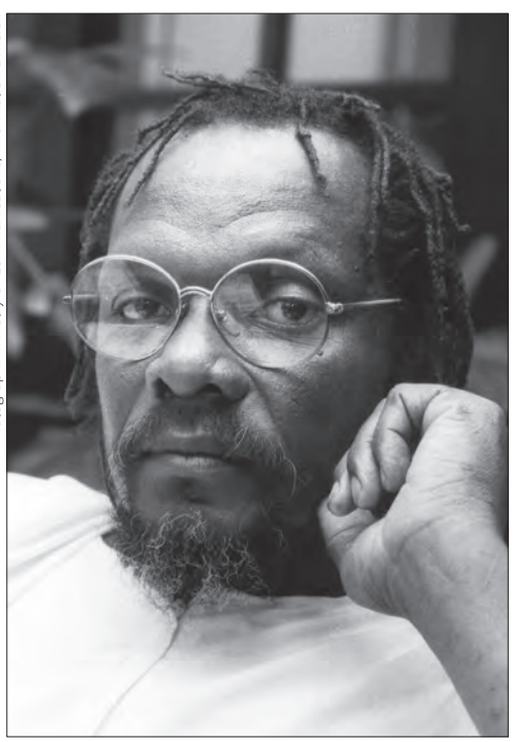
like a high rock in the political ocean was Gypsy's *The Ship Sinking*. It was thought by many that that song was, to a large extent, responsible for the downfall of the PNM in 1986.[xiii] Throughout the period since Independence and especially in the 1990s and the decade after the turn of the century, calypsonians have maintained their scrutiny of politicians, social services, crime, budgets, and notably areas of corruption. The political calypso, though frowned upon by many especially those who have been attacked or are the object of the singers' ire, remains yet a weapon to ensure that the highest standards of freedom and democracy are maintained. Calypsoes such as Chalkdust's *Somebody Mad* (1972), Relator's *Deaf Panmen* (1974), Explainer's *In Parliament they Kicksin'* (1979), Sparrow's *Steel Beam* (1984), Stalin's *Wait Dorothy Wait* (1985), Watchman's *How Low* (1994), Aloes' *Ah Ready to Go* (1998),

Photograph: Ministry of Communications, Information Division



Soca originator, the late Ras Shorty I

Penguin's *Criminals* (1997), and Luta's *Pack Yuh Bags* (1998), are all examples of calypso gems that served to pull feathers off the wings of the elites and politicians and ensure that they fly an ordinary pitch. Yet it must be observed that while many basked in the political songs, particularly those that were used on the platforms during the pre-national election campaigns of 1986, 1991, 2000, 2001 and 2002, there were others, though in the minority, who were using newer forms of soca to state non-political issues.

The late 1980s and 1990s dawned with a number of non-calypsonian composers who saw the need to compose songs for the upsurge of new singers aiming to gain laurels for themselves without having the ability to compose. Non-calypsonian composers brought into the limelight many young singers such as Machel Montano, Devon Seales, Tigress, Singing Sonia, Rikki Jai, Kizzy Ruiz and Karen Eccles, to mention a few. They all went on to make a name for themselves in the calypso world. Composing for others was nothing new; as far back as the 1960s, one or two non-calypsonians assisted a few bards with their compositions.[15] In the 1990s, however, the assistance given to non-composers grew into a thriving industry. As more and more school children participated, so too more of their teachers, eager to come into the calypso limelight, became overnight composers. Some fell by the wayside but others have weathered the test and are now assailed yearly for compositions in all the varied genres of calypso. The industry, whereby songs are purchased as products, has, however, given to the calypso world many important and outstanding compositions, as well as monarchs such as Singing Sandra (1999 & 2003), Karen Asche (2011) and Duane O'Connor (2012).

Hand in hand with the non-calypsonians as composers, the late 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of a number of calypso hybrids such as Ragga soca, Rapso, Pitchakaree, Soca Parang, Chutney and Soca Chutney to colour the musical

landscape of the nation and spread their hue overseas throughout the Caribbean diaspora. For many, the new hybrids of calypso as well as the non-calypsonian composers led to a fall in the standards of the compositions.[16] Out of the loud musical noises of chutney and soca, however, came Machel Montano in the 1990s to revolutionise the soca calypso with international recording contracts and mega-concerts that have shown that the calypso has great potential for innovation and business enterprises.

As business entrepreneurs, calypsonians Machel Montano and Iwer George have scaled the ladder. They have used their foresight, knowledge and family connections to establish and manage companies proving that there are many business opportunities in the realm of culture. This, too, is a far cry from the pre-1962 era, when so many persons refused to sing calypso since calypsonians lived then on the fringes of the poverty line. History has shown too, that up to the 1990s, most of the singers died penniless and their families depended on state handouts for burials. In addition to Machel and Iwer George, there exist today many more who, through recordings, other technological developments, concerts and travels throughout the Caribbean diaspora earn for themselves wages for which many learned men yearn and dream to possess.

While many have progressed monetary-wise and while many have risen to the cream of the crop of the calypso world, the era witnessed the deaths of many bards that served to leave the art form weaker, owing to a notable fall in standards. During the period under review calypsonians who could be described as the spine of the calypso structure passed on to the great beyond. The calypso world lost Kitchener, Nap Hepburn, Striker, Beginner, Iere, Ras Shorty I, the Mighty Duke, Cypher, Pretender, Spitfire, Terror, Tiny Terror, the Roaring Lion, Gibraltar, the Hawk, Christo, Melody, Dougla and Young Killer, to name the more important and skilled ones.

The era 1962 to 2012 was truly a watershed in the history of the calypso. It was a time when the calypso rose to great heights and at times dropped low owing to the death of bards and a consequent fall in standards, as well as the mixing of the calypso brandy with water by those whose main aim was financial gain. ▪

1. St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John form the U.S Virgin Islands.
2. The stickfight ritual that began on the estates of the Enslaved.
3. French for "fashionable lady," it was an important masquerade ritual of the 19th and early 20th centuries.
4. People's National Movement
5. Now known as "City Hall."
6. The annual contest to select the champion calypso singer.
7. The night preceding the two days of carnival.
8. Kade Simon, Lord Brynner, shaved his head in keeping with the image of the American film star, Yul Brynner.
9. Steumpfle, Steve. "The Steelband Movement in Trinidad and Tobago: Music, Politics and National Identity in a New World Society." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1990.
10. A term used by many teachers during my secondary school days at St. Mary's College in POS., Trinidad.
11. The Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago calls for Service Commissions to regulate and manage teachers, public servants and police officers.
12. Carnival Development Committee—the body responsible for the management of Carnival then. Today, it has become, via legislation, the National Carnival Commission.
13. NJAC was responsible for many contests such as the National Calypso Queen, the Young King and the Calypso Pioneers contests; Mr. William Munroe ran the famous "Bucks" contest that paid a larger sum to the winner than that paid to the Calypso Monarch; Mr Martineau promoted the art form through shows held throughout the year.
14. The calypso played most on the road during the two days of Carnival.
15. Outstanding non-calypsonian composers of that era were Pete Simon and Winston DeVignes.
16. Lord Kitchener, among many, complained about the fall in the standards of the compositions owing to the many new hybrids.
i. Phillip, Emrold. "The Only Opposition." The Author's Calypso Collection, 1970s.
ii. Ward, Len (Penman). "Portrait of Trinidad." Sung by Mervyn Hodge (Sniper), Calypso King Competition, Queen's Park Savannah, POS. 1965.
iii. King, Kent (Baker). "God Bless our Nation." Calypso King Competition, Queen's Park Savannah, POS., 1967.
iv. Liverpool, Hollis (Chalkdust). "Massa Day Must Done." Calypso King Competition, Queen's Park Savannah, POS. 1970.
v. Simon, Pete. "Calypso." Art and Man. Act 2, Sc. 1 (February): 32-38, 1969.
vi. Rohlehr, Gordon. "The Development of Calypso, 1900-1940." St. Augustine, Trinidad: University of the West Indies, 1972.
vii. Roberts, Aldwyn (Kitchener). "Ah Go Dance In The Lent." The Author's Calypso Collection, 1964.
viii. Mitchell, Fred (Composer). "Steelband Progress." The Author's Calypso Collection, 1969.
ix. Simon, Pete. "Calypso." Art and Man. Op.cit. 1969.
x. Liverpool, Hollis. See "Garfield Blackman, (Ras Shorty I)." in From the Horse's Mouth. POS, Trinidad: Juba Publications, 2003, pp. 195-217.
xi. Liverpool, Hollis. "Andrew Marcano, Lord Superior." In From the Horse's Mouth. Op. cit. 152-175.
xii. Harris, Willard (Relator). "Importation of Calypso." Nostalgia. Rape 0003-Stereo, 1983.
xiii. Peters, Winston (Gypsy). "The Ship Sinking." Calypso Monarch Competition, Queen's Park Savannah, POS. 1986.

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