

# 50 YEARS OF TRINIDAD & TOBAGO CULTURE

## WEAVING THROUGH A RICH MOSAIC



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When calypsonian Funny sang “25 years have gone, how yuh feel?” in 1987, few could envisage where we would be 25 years down the road. My pick for that 25th anniversary of Independence calypso monarch title, Funny was edged out by the diminutive Cro Cro, but Funny’s question lingers – after 50 years of statehood, where are we culturally as a nation and people?

For the 1962 Independence Calypso Monarch competition bald-pated Kade Simon (Lord Brynner) took the crown from the much touted Mighty Sparrow. Back then, calypso, pan and the indigenous culture of newborn Trinidad and Tobago had a much less vibrant form than it acquired over the past 50 years.

Our indigenous art forms were still kept under a bushel as we remained imbued by the cultural mores of North America, Europe and India. Fortunately though, in the relatively short span of half century our culture has progressed by leaps and bounds, so much so various genres of indigenous culture now have their own unique branding and have spawned several icons and world renowned luminaries

Coming immediately to mind is the Mighty Sparrow (Slinger Francisco), the undisputed Calypso King of the World, and Calypso King of 1962, the year of Independence. No calypso bard has recorded more calypsoes, won more crowns or performed in as many countries as Sparrow. If there is a living symbol of calypso and the growth and international acceptance of the art form it is the Mighty Sparrow.

The past 50 years also fed the calypso art form with stalwart calypsonians, composers, musicians and administrators, men and women who either created new vistas for the art form, or won individual fame and recognition. Among them are calypsonians like Lord Kitchener, Mighty Bomber, Mighty Duke, Chalkdust, Calypso Rose, Black Stalin, Bro Valentino, Cro Cro, Zandolee, Blakie, Brigo, Lord Shorty (aka Ras Shorty I),

Shadow, Blue Boy (aka SuperBlue), Crazy, David Rudder, Machel Montano; musicians like Frankie Francis, Art de Coteau, Ed Watson, Earl Rodney, Roy Cape, Pelham Goddard, Carl “Beaver” Henderson and Leston Paul; and, administrators like Carl “Jazzy” Pantin, Sonny Woodley, Claude and Frank Martineau, William Munro.

If the 60s marked an ascendancy in calypso, the decades of the 70s and 80s can be epoched as a jet-propelled age for the art form. Significant milestones of the period include the Mighty Duke attaining the only calypso king beaver trick of victories; the birth of soca; and, Calypso Rose becoming the first woman to win the national calypso king title, and Road March title.

The late Ras Shorty I is credited with creating the then revolutionary genre of soca music, out of which subsequently emerged other hybrids, inclusive of Rapso, Ragga Soca, Parang Soca and Chutney Soca.

Other Soca contributors include Goddard, Paul, Watson, Henderson, Maestro, Merchant, Blue Boy, Machel, Iwer George, Ronnie Mc Intosh and Destra.

Crazy, Scrunter and Marcia Miranda are considered the main exponents of Parang Soca, while among the stars of Chutney Soca have been Sundar Popo, Drupatee Ramgoonai and Rikki Jai, and more recently Raymond Ramnarine and his Dil-e-Nadan aggregation, Ravi B and Karma, and Veerendra Persad and JMC 3Veni.

Rapso was born in East Dry River, primarily propagated by the Network Riddim Band, inspired by the late Lancelot Kebu Layne, and vigorously nurtured by the likes of Brother Resistance, Karega Mandela and 3 Canal.

Outside of the forementioned genres and artistes, indigenous music also has a place of favour through other forms, produced by artistes like Andre Tanker, Clive Zanda, Michael Boothman, Fitzroy Coleman, Richard “Nappy” Mayers and Ella Andall.

Another indigenous art form to flourish these

Opposite: 50th Anniversary of Independence Chutney Soca Monarch winner, Rikki Jai

past 50 years has been the steelband. At the 1962 Steelband Music Festival, 31-year-old Anthony Williams led Pan Am North Stars to victory. However, the following year saw the staging of the first Independence Steelband Music Festival, won by Crossfire, playing Lionel Belasco's Juliana Castellana. The Ping-pong category was won by Ralph Ryce of Sundowners, playing Umilta Mc Shine's People of The Islands.

The first official National Panorama competition was staged by the National Association of T&T Steelbandsmen (NATTS) in 1963, with 21 steel orchestras competing. Playing Sparrow's *Dan is the Man*, North Stars emerged champions, four points ahead of Sundowners, and five points ahead of third-placed Desperadoes.

In 50 years of Panorama competition, there have been a mere dozen national champions – North Stars, Cavaliers, Desperadoes, Harmonites, Starlift, Trinidad All Stars, Hatters, Renegades, Phase II Pan Groove, Exodus, Nu Tones and Silver Stars.

The much coveted title of supreme steel orchestra has been a fiercely debated topic for the past 50 years but, because of winning the most titles at national level, Witco Desperadoes is the premier steel orchestra on the planet, rivalled most stringently by Trinidad All Stars.

Stalwart pan icons are Anthony Williams, Neville Jules, Ellie and Vernon "Birdie" Mannette, Anthony Prospect, Rudolph Charles, Curtis Pierre, Lennox "Bobbie" Mohammed, Bertie Marshall, Jit Samaroo, Sterling Betancourt, Othello Mollineaux, Leo Coker, Kelvin "Zuzie" St Rose, Bertram Kellman, Herman Guppy Brown, Lincoln Noel, Rudy "Two Leff" Smith, Oscar Pile,

Ray Holman, Len "Boogsie" Sharpe, Pelham Goddard, Liam Teague, Ken "Professor" Philmore, and Earl Brooks.

Fifty years have also been served by some dedicated pan administrators like George Goddard, Roy Augustus, Arnim Smith, Owen Serrette and Patrick Arnold.

The J'Ouvert morning Bomb competition was another post-independence steelband innovation and was started in 1963 by Neville Jules and Trinidad All Stars along Park Street, and sponsored by Penguin Monte Carlo Club. Six years later, in the south, businessman John Hoyte sponsored a similar competition in San Fernando.

Though being a platform for foreign classical music, the steelband music festival also contributed greatly to the progress of steel orchestras and the musicianship of pannists. The first one of these festivals organised by Pan

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Photograph: Anthony Howell

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Trinbago, the child of NATTS, was in 1973, 11 years after the attainment of Independence; the final held on Friday 7th December. The championship was won by Nu Tones of Arima, followed by Samaroo Jets and Trinidad All Stars.

The first time Pan Trinbago single-handedly produced a Panorama competition was in 1976. That year also saw the introduction of zonal competition, with four zones competing, with each zone crowning its individual champion.

For the first time ever that a Pan Parang competition was held was in 1990, staged by Pan Trinbago, in conjunction with Arima Angel Harps Steel Orchestra. The winners were Laventille Sound Specialists (conventional) and Voices (traditional). With the blessings of Pan Trinbago,

Exodus Steel Orchestra held the first edition of another steelband innovation – the Pan Ramajay competition – in 1989. Fernandes Vat 19 Fonclaire and Samaroo Jets were the joint champions.

The years of Independence have also seen the culture of art, theatre, dance and folk enriched by several very creative people, including Boscoe Holder, Aubrey Adams, Astor Johnson, Pat Bishop, Julia Edwards, Andre Ettienne, Carlton Francis, Beryl Mc Burnie, Joyce Kirton, Carlisle Chang, Peter Minshall, Wayne Berkeley, Thora Dumbell, Sat Balkaransingh, Carol La Chapelle, Noble Douglas, LeRoy Clarke, Wilbert Holder, Ian Ali, Hazel Ward-Redman, Sam Ghany, Bob Gittens, Pat Mathura, Sham Mohammed, Horace James, Holly Betaudier, Errol Sitahal, Ralph Maraj, Paul Keens Douglas and Willi Chen.

One significant folk innovation during the past 50 years was the birth of the Prime Minister's Best Village Trophy Competition, initiated by late prime minister Dr Eric Williams and administered by Joyce Wong Sang.

This novel community programme embraced all aspects of culture, including music, dance, culinary skills and sport. It has survived the test of time, primarily through the unstinting input of coordinators like Lester Efebo Wilkinson, Norvan Fullerton, Torrance Mohammed and Eric Butler. The annual Best Village competitions have unearthed a plethora of talent which would not have been otherwise discovered.

As Trinidad and Tobago embarks on a further 50 years of Independence, indigenous culture is well poised, on the threshold of not just achieving even greater accomplishments but to make an indelible mark on the global stage of arts and entertainment. ■

Photograph: Stephen Broadbridge



Brother Resistance: at the forefront of Rapsoc