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# *Carnival Music in Trinidad*



EXPERIENCING MUSIC,  
EXPRESSING CULTURE



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## The Man of Words



Although the name “calypso” probably was coined in Trinidad, the roots of this music lie in African song as well as in European folk traditions such as ballads, a combined heritage that manifests itself throughout the Caribbean. Calypso is performed at seasonal celebrations in the English-speaking islands, such as Carnival in Trinidad, Crop Over in Barbados, or Junkanoo in the Bahamas. With the advent of the recording industry in the early twentieth century, calypso also became a mediated “popular music,” and the Trinidadian version gained particular fame and influence in the Caribbean and internationally. Calypsonians from Trinidad made recordings in New York as early as 1912, and in 1914 Victor sent a recording expedition to the island. Decca and Sony later recorded many calypsonians as well. Trinidadian calypso enjoyed significant commercial success in the United States from the 1930s through 1950s, which, along with the entrepreneurship of local record producers and distributors, boosted distribution of Trinidadian music throughout the English Caribbean. Today, despite the vitality of several other local calypso traditions, Trinidadian carnival is generally recognized as the hub of the art form.

Because the appreciation of text and language is fundamental to calypso, the calypsonian is a good example of what folklorist Roger Abrahams calls the “Man of Words,” a broad performance tradition in the West Indies, and African American culture generally, that stresses both verbal dueling and elegant formal speaking. According to one theory, the very word “calypso” is rooted in an appreciation for verbal dexterity: the term is thought to be an anglicized version of “kaiso,” a word that may derive from the Hausa language in Africa and that is still used by Trinidadians to express their pleasure at a clever turn of words in a calypso performance. Because Trinidadians prize the verbal tradition of calypso so highly, I have chosen to begin with a focus on calypso texts, leaving more detailed discussion of their musical setting for Chapter 3.

## FROM CHANTWELL TO CALYPSONIAN

Modern calypso in Trinidad is related to the functions of the nineteenth-century *chantwell* and the contrasting contexts of the road and the tent. The first calypsonians were, in fact, *chantwells* (carnival band song leaders) who around 1900 began to perform in temporary carnival season structures for audiences who were eager to hear a preview of the new carnival songs. Since as early as 1921, when Chieftain Douglas contracted with a group of *chantwells* to perform for middle-class Trinidadians in his Railroad Millionaires calypso tent, this practice has been a formal entertainment business. Douglas catered to people who were interested in the public carnival and its music but preferred to listen to the *chantwells'* songs in a controlled and safe environment. One of the first singers to make the transition from *chantwell* to calypsonian was a middle-class jacket man named Julian Whiterose, whose calypso name was the Iron Duke and who was himself a stick-fighter and a *chantwell*. His 1914 song, "Iron Duke in the Land" (CD track 5), the first calypso to be recorded in Trinidad, is spiced with the patois argot of the stick-fighter, as well as grandiloquent English that proclaims him to be both a fighter and a formidable man of words. The words of the second verse, chorus, and third verse are as follows:

*At my appearance upon the scene  
Julius the devil played the Cord  
And still I am the head of fraternal order  
Calling, sweeping to all the agony  
Achieving my surprising majesty  
In blending, beaming, and swaying  
Jumping this way, bawling, "Clear de way, Whiterose joli  
Djable re-re-o" [Handsome Whiterose, the devil king]*

(Chorus:)

*Iron Duke in the land  
Fire brigade  
Iron Duke in the land  
Fire brigade  
Bring the locomotive  
Just because it's a fire federation  
Bring the locomotive  
Just because it's a fire federation  
Sans humanité*

*It was a modern manifestation  
Of the elder civilization  
That muh carnival celebration  
Of this social organization  
It called to mind to an abstention  
Over all the population  
I, Julian, taking the social décor, deh who whey, Whiterose Union  
Sans humanité*

In the early days of the tents, confrontations between calypsonians were staged in song duels called *picong*. The term "picong" also refers more broadly to derision and insults, including those traded between calypsonians, whether or not they share the same stage (examples of both song duel and indirect picong, between the Mighty Sparrow and Lord Melody, can be heard on Rounder's *Calypso Awakening* album). Whether or not songs were about fighting and confrontation, it remained common practice throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s to sing the refrain "sans humanité" (without pity) at the end of calypso verses, a convention that probably derives from *kalenda* stick-fighting songs.

In addition to their role in interband conflicts, *chantwells* were entertainers, and their jokes, obscenities, and spicy commentaries on the political and social scandals of the day delighted the crowds. Carnival revelers responded to and encouraged the *chantwell's* improvisations by singing along at the chorus. With the advent of the calypso tents (Chapter 3), these choral refrains and improvisations became the basis for more elaborate and lengthy compositions. Some of the different themes and styles of calypso—for example, social and political commentary, boasting, humor, smut (obscene calypsoes), nation-building, and road march—will be illustrated here in the works of a few modern calypsonians.

## THE LORD KITCHENER

One important category of calypso is the road march, a song for dancing in the street on carnival day. Words are important for a good road march, since the public likes to sing along while dancing, but this type of calypso is judged as much by its rhythms and melodies as its text. A calypsonian whose music set the standard for the road march during the 1940s through the 1970s was the Lord Kitchener (Aldwyn Roberts). One of the few modern calypsonians who actually got his start singing

as a carnival *chantwell*, Kitchener began performing in his home town of Arima in the 1930s (Figure 2.1). Kitchener, whose prodigious career spanned the six decades before his death in 2000 and who was affectionately known as the “Grandmaster,” was especially popular with the steelbands because his music made people want to dance and sing along even in instrumental rendition. Kitchener’s contributions to calypso are broad, but I will postpone further discussion of his music until Chapter 5, where I focus on the way he composed for the steelband.

### THE MIGHTY SPARROW

Many Trinidadians argue that the Mighty Sparrow (Slinger Francisco) is the greatest calypsonian of all time (the Lord Kitchener being the other favorite for this honor). The Mighty Sparrow began his career in 1954 and, although he has withdrawn from the tents and from competition, he was still performing at the time of this book’s writing. His songs span the gamut of calypso themes, from smut to politics, usually combining serious commentary with humor. Even his stage name is an ironic



FIGURE 2.1 *The Lord Kitchener (Aldwyn Roberts), dressed in the hat and suit favored by early twentieth-century calypsonians. CD cover from ICE 941802, 1994.*

commentary on the tendency of his contemporaries to choose intimidating sobriquets. His choice of the name “Mighty Sparrow” suggests that the speed and wit of a little bird can prevail over a Roaring Lion, a Lord Kitchener, an Atilla the Hun, or a Mighty Bomber. Unlike most calypsonians, Sparrow is known for his rich and nuanced singing voice, and has recorded many ballads as well as calypsoes. Sparrow is also a charismatic performer, dancing and teasing with impeccable timing as he tells his stories (Figure 2.2).

The song “Jean and Dinah” (CD track 6) won both the Calypso King and the Road March titles in 1956, an extraordinary feat that cemented Sparrow’s reputation as a new star. The Calypso King competition (or Calypso Monarch competition, as it later became titled to include female calypsonians) is based on performances for seated audiences in the calypso tents, while the Road March is the most popular tune for dancing on carnival day (Chapter 3). Although it is extremely rare for the same song to be the favorite on the road and in the tents, most good calypsoes combine danceability and fun with a message of some kind. “Jean and Dinah” is energetic and fun for the road, but at the same time its lyrics say something important about social experience and history.



FIGURE 2.2 *The Mighty Sparrow (Slinger Francisco). CD cover from ICE 921002, 1992.*

At the time Sparrow wrote the song, the U.S. Navy had withdrawn many of its troops from its base in Trinidad, established with England's consent during World War II (the base was finally closed in 1967). Sparrow uses the distress of prostitutes in Port of Spain as a metaphor for the fears many Trinidadians had about the economic losses that would result from the departure of U.S. armed forces. The characterization of the losers in this development as prostitutes pokes fun at such economic fears, depicting Trinidad's relationship to the Americans as a greedy sellout.

*Well the girls in town feeling bad  
No more Yankees in Trinidad  
They gonna close down the base for good  
Them girls have to make out how they could  
Brother is now they park up in town  
In for a penny, and in for a pound  
Believe me it's competition for so  
Trouble in town when the price drop low.*

The tone of the chorus is celebratory, as Sparrow mocks the prostitutes pitilessly and proclaims the restoration of his own authority (and, by extension, Trinidad's control over its own affairs). On carnival day in 1956, thousands of Trinidadians exuberantly endorsed these sentiments as they sang Sparrow's bouncy chorus in the streets (as you can hear at the end of the steelband rendition of "Jean and Dinah" in CD track 7):

*Jean and Dinah  
Rosita and Clementina, round the corner posing  
Bet your life is something they selling  
And if you catch them broke, you can get them all for nothing  
Don't make no row  
The Yankees gone, Sparrow take over now*

It is difficult to characterize "Jean and Dinah" as just one type of calypso, since the song combines social and political commentary with humor and smut, all set to an engaging and danceable melody. The ability to entertain and educate simultaneously has been characteristic of the Mighty Sparrow's style and career.

### THE MIGHTY CHALKDUST

In contrast to the Mighty Sparrow, the Mighty Chalkdust (Hollis Liverpool) is known as a calypsonian who specializes in one type of ca-

lypso, political commentary. This is not to say that Chalkdust is not versatile; he delivers his messages with plenty of humor and sexual double entendre, too. Chalkdust initially made his reputation, however, as a critic of the government during the 1970s, when Trinidad was experiencing the social upheaval of the Black Power movement and the economic turbulence of the oil industry's boom and bust. These events contributed to a sober reassessment of Trinidad's progress after the euphoria of independence and provoked extensive political commentary from calypsonians. Although he is not known for his road marches, Chalkdust has been highly successful in the tent, winning the Calypso Monarch title five times between 1976 and 1993 (Figure 2.3).

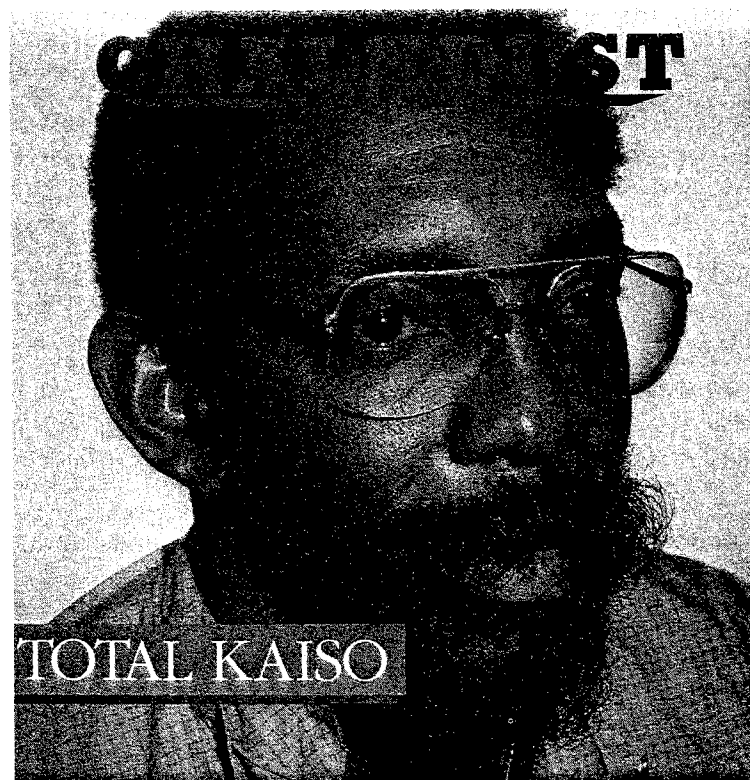


FIGURE 2.3 The Mighty Chalkdust (Hollis Liverpool). Album cover from Total Kaise, Straker's GS 2298.

The sobriquet "Chalkdust" refers to Liverpool's profession as a schoolteacher. The pursuit of a nonmusic profession is typical for most calypsonians, because singing is seasonal work in Trinidad, and (with the exception of a few stars like Mighty Sparrow, Lord Kitchener, and David Rudder) few calypsonians can get enough work abroad to make a living outside the carnival season. Chalkdust strengthened his intellectual credentials when he completed a Ph.D. in history and ethnomusicology at the University of Michigan in 1993. This is an unusual accomplishment among calypsonians, who have traditionally been regarded as common people who just happen to have a sort of "native wit" and understanding of history, society, and politics. There have been other educated middle-class calypsonians over the years, though, including jacket men like Julian Whiterose and Atilla the Hun (Raymond Quevedo), who served on the Port of Spain City Council and on Trinidad's colonial Legislative Council during the 1940s and 1950s.

Chalkdust's 1989 song, "Chauffeur Wanted" (CD track 8) which won him the Calypso Monarch title, is an attack on the government of the National Alliance for Reconciliation (NAR), which had recently dealt an election defeat to the PNM, (inextricably associated with the charismatic Prime Minister Eric Williams until his death in 1982) for the first time since Trinidad's independence in 1962. Chalkdust uses the metaphor of a maxi-taxi (a sort of minivan bus or taxi) with a bad driver to criticize the new prime minister, A. N. R. Robinson, in particular:

*You asking me what is wrong with Trinidad  
You can't understand why things gone so bad  
You find we so rich in human resources  
And yet the country going to pieces  
Well let me tell you my friend where we went wrong  
After Eric Williams old car break down  
We called in NAR, we ordered a next car  
And installed a new driver*

*With thirty-three passengers from the party  
We gave him a maxi-taxi  
Fitted with mag wheels, tape deck, computer  
Air conditioned, eight cylinder  
With posh new fittings this maxi-car arrive  
Then it start to swerve and nose dive  
It took a year for passengers to realize  
They say, "The new driver cannot drive"*

Notice that the target of Chalkdust's critique is never named, but simply is referred to as the "driver." It is a common convention in calypso to avoid naming the target of one's derision and satire explicitly, a convention Chalkdust himself calls the "mask" of the calypsonian. This form of etiquette has a precedent in West African tradition and was reinforced during slavery, when songs were used to convey secret messages that the masters could not understand. The cloaking of sexual references in double entendre (Preacher's song about "fruit," for example, in Chapter 1) is another expression of this principle. Because calypso uses so much metaphor and double entendre, much of which refers to local people and events, it is often difficult for non-Trinidadians to understand everything that is being conveyed; early in the history of calypso the same could have been said of upper-class Trinidadians who were unfamiliar with lower-class speech idioms. While Chalkdust's driver metaphor is relatively obvious, others are more subtle, and calypsonians even delight in seeing people enjoy their music when they don't really understand what is being said.

## DAVID RUDDER

David Rudder burst onto the calypso scene unexpectedly in 1986 when he became Calypso Monarch in the same year that he won the Young Kings, a junior calypso competition. Since then he has not won the Calypso Monarch title again, partly because of questions about whether his music can properly be considered calypso. Even his decision to perform under his own name instead of adopting a calypso sobriquet offended some purists. While his innovative experiments with calypso have caused him problems with the Calypso Monarch judges (he no longer participates in the competition), they have inspired many fans both in Trinidad and abroad, and Rudder has become the most successful recording artist in Trinidad. Rudder has said that he is true to what is most important about calypso, speaking to the experience and concerns of the people, but he does not feel bound to abide by all of calypso's rules and conventions. Unlike most calypsonians, David Rudder over the years has worked fairly consistently with the same band, known originally as Charlie's Roots. Together they have written songs and arrangements that draw on Trinidadian folk music; on Spiritual Baptist and Orisha religious music; on Caribbean and Latin styles such as reggae, salsa, and samba; and on U.S. rhythm and blues, soul, and gospel. Rudder has a reputation as an intellectual and a visionary; he

writes songs that call attention to problems as well as songs that celebrate the beauty and goodness of Trinidadians and Caribbean people generally (Figure 2.4).

David Rudder's 1998 song, "High Mas'" (CD track 9), is an example of the latter; it also might fall into the category of a "nation-building" calypso (although it is not as overtly patriotic or political as many calypsos of this type). The title of "High Mas'" plays on the Trinidadian word for "masquerade," casting the bacchanal of carnival as a spiritual experience akin to the Catholic high mass. This analogy challenges a view that dates from the English colonial period, and that is still held by many people in Trinidad, that carnival—in particular the kind of sexual license that people take in carnival dancing—is essentially immoral. Instead the song implies that music, "wining" (a kind of dancing that involves winding the waist and pelvis) and "having a good time" (including "liming," or socializing/partying with friends) are spiritually healing. The lyrics of the verse are suggestive of the Christian Lord's Prayer ("Our Father who art in heaven") and are sung in a monotone

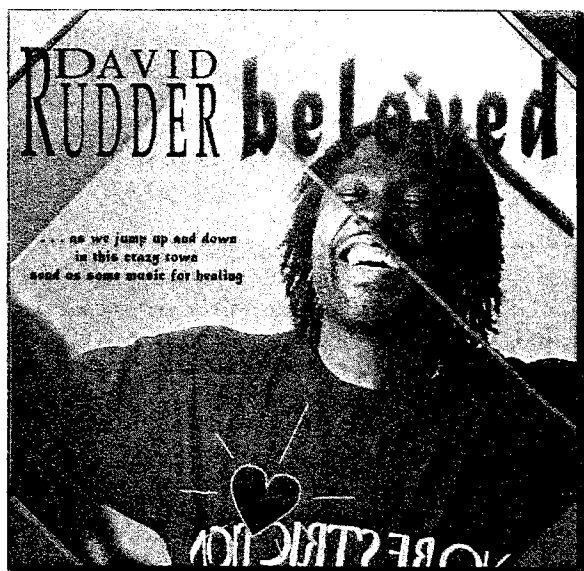


FIGURE 2.4 David Rudder. CD cover of *Beloved*, Lypsoland CR 028.

that invokes the style of plain chant used in Anglican or Catholic church services.

*Our Father who has given us this art  
So that we can all feel like we are a part  
Of this earthly heaven  
Amen  
Forgive us this day our daily weaknesses  
As we seek to cast our mortal burdens on this city  
Amen  
Oh merciful father, in this bacchanal season where men lose their reason  
But most of us just want to wine and have a good time cause we looking  
for a lime  
Because we feeling fine, Lord  
Amen  
And as we jump up and down in this crazy town  
Send us some music for some healing  
Amen*

The chorus is more melodically energetic and invites listeners to participate, both by joining in the call-and-response singing and by putting up their hands. Similar instructions to the dancers can be heard in many contemporary carnival songs (such as Superblue's "Pump It Up," described at the beginning of Chapter 1). However, the exhortation here to "give praise" and the invocation of Jah (the Rastafarian name for God) also evoke the common use of this gesture in charismatic Christian worship services.

*Everybody hand raise  
Everybody give praise  
Everybody hand raise  
And if you know what I mean...  
Put up your finger  
And if you know what I mean...  
Put up your hand  
And if you know what I mean...  
Put up your finger  
And if you know what I mean then scream  
Oooh! Give Jah his praises*

While its melody might not be jumpy enough for a steelband on j'ouvert morning, "High Mas'" is a calypso that is thought-provoking

(in a more intellectual and serious way than “Jean and Dinah”) and dance-provoking at the same time.

### SINGING SANDRA

One of the most powerful voices of social conscience to emerge in calypso during recent years is that of Singing Sandra (Sandra Des Vignes). Sandra began in the tents in 1984 and gained wider attention when she began to sing with three other women (Lady B, Marvelous Marva, and Tigress) as the United Sisters in 1991. This was an unusual strategy for calypsonians, who almost always perform and promote themselves as individuals (to even have a regular band, as David Rudder does, is fairly unusual). The United Sisters who had a big hit in 1993 with the song “Whoa Donkey,” projected a powerful and confident female identity in a profession that is notoriously sexist. In 1999 Singing Sandra, performing by herself again, was crowned Calypso Monarch, the only woman since Calypso Rose (who won in 1978) to win the title (Figure 2.5).

Sandra’s moralizing stance and emotionally intense performance reflect her upbringing in the Spiritual Baptist church, and her solo calypsoes have been of the social commentary variety, stressing issues such as economic injustice and gender inequality. Her winning song in 1999, “Voices,” drew attention to the misery and frustrations of Trinidad’s urban poor. In 2000 she sang about the problem of fathers who don’t raise their children in “Caribbean Man Part 2” (CD track 10):

*Two adults in the home but only one parent  
Well this is the modern Caribbean scene  
Go to any PTA meeting or any school sports day  
And you gon’ see exactly what I mean  
Caribbean man you abdicate your throne  
The task of rearing children falling on woman alone  
So the youths embracing crime and it getting worse  
There’s only one way for this to reverse—Hear me!*

*Your duty you must affirm,  
Man contribute more than sperm  
Our young sons you got to shape  
So they won’t abuse and rape  
The youths today they getting a fright; too much deadbeat fathers and that  
ain’t right*



FIGURE 2.5 Singing Sandra (Sandra Des Vignes) at the 2000 Calypso Monarch Finals, dressed in an elegant version of the Spiritual Baptists’ traditional white dress and turban.

*Instead of romping in the bedroom, your headship role you got to resume  
Caribbean man  
Instead of looking ’bout for romance, pull up your zip, time to wear the  
pants  
Caribbean man*

This song plays on the title of Black Stalin’s 1979 song “Caribbean Man,” in which he called for unity between people who shared the same African heritage and the same history of slavery and social struggle. Sandra’s reference to that message does not diminish the importance of



racial pride or solidarity, but it questions whether this goal can be achieved without justice between the sexes, or within families. Sandra thus engages in a sort of time-lapse picong with Stalin, but her message is aimed more broadly at the complacent sexism about which most contemporary male calypsonians choose not to sing. While calypso throughout the twentieth century has clearly been a *Man of Words* tradition, Sandra's success and her uncompromising conscience are helping to make a place for more women's voices. Indeed, another woman, Denyse Plummer, opened the twenty-first century by winning the 2001 Calypso Monarch title.



I have chosen to introduce calypso through a discussion of words and texts because this is the aspect of calypso that is most frequently cited as its distinguishing feature. In performance, of course, calypso texts are rendered in melody and accompanied by musical instruments. Sometimes calypsoes are even performed without words, as in the renditions by steelbands. Calypso must also be understood, therefore, as a genre that is characterized by particular conventions of melody, harmony, rhythm, form, instrumentation, and so on that constitute a *musical style*. The next chapter describes calypso musical style in relation to its main performance contexts.

## Calypso in the Tent and on the Road



During the weeks preceding carnival, calypsonians perform in several theaters or auditoriums in Port of Spain, permanent structures that are referred to as calypso "tents." The term dates from the 1910s, when calypso began to be sung in temporary structures erected for carnival. Performing in a tent before seated audiences, singers tend to focus on storytelling and word play, and it is here that calypso's verbal tradition has its greatest scope. But some of the songs performed in the tent are also popular for dancing to at fetes and on carnival day. Calypso, therefore, is also dance music, and, despite the diversity of themes in calypso lyrics, its dance function is the basis for a certain consistency in the musical setting. This chapter briefly reviews the performance contexts of calypso, and then discusses aspects of calypso musical style as they relate to its dual functions of storytelling and dance.

### THE TENT

Calypso tents open soon after New Year and stage nightly performances all the way up until carnival. The most popular tents in Port of Spain include Spektakula, Calypso Review, and Kaiso House, each of which has exclusive performing contracts with fifteen to twenty calypsonians (calypsonians thus do not perform in more than one tent, although they may still record and perform at fetes and concerts elsewhere). To draw an audience, a tent must have a number of popular veterans in its stable, but tents also recruit new talent—singers who become known through junior calypso competitions or acquire a reputation performing at fetes. An evening's performance consists of a dozen or more calypsonians singing one at a time. The less well-known artists tend to perform early in the evening, while the big names sing at or near the end so the audience won't leave early.

Although every tent has its own unique physical layout, each of them features a raised stage from which singers look out toward a seated audience. The calypsonian is alone at the front of the stage with a hand-held microphone, pacing or sometimes dancing to and fro, while a chorus (usually of three female singers, but sometimes including a man) stands to one side, singing intermittently and swaying to the music with elegant coordinated movements. At the rear of the stage sits the house band—typically consisting of electric keyboard, guitar, bass, drumset, percussion, saxophones, and trumpets—which accompanies every singer. A master of ceremonies (who is as important as the calypsonians to a tent's success) introduces each singer and tells jokes between appearances.

Each calypsonian performs two songs during his or her turn on stage. Often one of these songs has a more serious tone, dealing with social issues, political controversies, or national pride, and the other song is more light-hearted and festive. This formula is repeated at the annual Calypso Monarch competition, in which the winning calypsonian is awarded a new car, a substantial cash prize, and a great deal of prestige. The Calypso Monarch competition acknowledges calypso's role as a music of festivity and dancing, which is one reason calypsonians often include one "up-tempo" song in their tent repertoire, but the judges tend to give more weight to more slow-paced narrative "message" calypsoes. Some calypsonians who specialize in particular types of songs, such as humor or political satire, may depart from this formula to exercise their own strengths and preferences.

The audience in the tent enjoys the music, and people may occasionally even stand up and dance, but the atmosphere in the calypso tent is characterized by careful attention to the words and their delivery. Audience members regularly shout their approval at a clever double entendre (a disguised sexual reference), a funny story, a political criticism, or a humorous imitation of another calypsonian or a public figure. A calypsonian whose song is applauded enthusiastically will come back to sing an extra verse. A few singers can improvise these new verses on the spot, while others must compose an extra verse or two for encores. As the season progresses they often compose more verses for a successful song. Calypsonians sometimes respond to and challenge one another in song, and audiences particularly enjoy this kind of picong, although it is rarely done today between two performers sharing the same stage.

Calypsonians singing in the tent cultivate a distinctive stage persona through their choice of a calypso name, the style of songs they sing, and

the way they dress. The Shadow (Winston Bailey) always wears somber black clothing to match the carnival theme of death and mystery that his name conveys (Figure 3.1). Singing Sandra wears elaborate head wraps and gowns that reflect her Spiritual Baptist faith (Figure 2.5). The Mighty Chalkdust wears elegant and colorful shirt jackets that may be seen as modern manifestations of the African heritage he often points to in his songs. Denyse Plummer often sings songs about carnival festivity and spirit, and her costumes reflect the extravagant and dazzling styles of modern carnival masqueraders (Figure 3.2).

### THE ROAD

While costumes, gestures, and sometimes even brief skits add flavor to the calypsonian's storytelling on stage, these dramatic embellishments are possible only on the stage of the calypso tent. For the road on car-



FIGURE 3.1 *The Shadow (Winston Bailey) at the 2000 Calypso Monarch Finals, dressed as usual in black.*



FIGURE 3.2 Denyse Plummer at the 2000 Calypso Monarch Finals, evoking the spirit of fancy mas' with a glittering costume.

nival day, the drama is left to the masqueraders. Songs must stand on their own, either in recorded versions or in steelband renditions. The expectations of dancing masqueraders on the road differ in important ways from those of seated audiences in the tents, and this difference in context corresponds to a somewhat different musical style in calypsoes that are intended as "road marches."

On carnival Monday and Tuesday, the streets of Port of Spain are criss-crossed by masquerade bands. Some are small neighborhood bands with homemade costumes, while others have thousands of members who are grouped in sections, each with matching costumes that form a shifting spectacle of beautiful colors and shapes as they pass. Big or small, every masquerade band has music. Music sets the pace at

which the masqueraders move, gives them the energy to "play mas'" and dance for hours, and regulates their movements and moods, as frenzies of excitement and energy alternate with more relaxing grooves. In Port of Spain today most masquerade bands hire one or more DJ trucks, flatbeds loaded with massive speakers that blare recorded music. Some trucks also carry live bands featuring popular calypsonians and soca singers. In the 1950s and 1960s, steelbands were the music of choice for the road, and calypsonians depended on the steelbands to popularize their songs (in instrumental renditions) on carnival day. Whatever the format—live or recorded, instrumental or vocal—music for the road has always been essential to carnival, and it has been the job of the *chantwell* and the calypsonian to supply it.

Compared to calypsoes for the tent, songs for the road are generally faster in tempo, have catchier and more singable melodies (often featuring call and response at the chorus), have a more energetic rhythm, and use exciting breaks to stimulate the dancers. These differences form part of the distinction between calypso and the more recent genre of soca, which is the favorite music today for the carnival road and at fetes (Chapter 6). But the line between calypso and soca is sometimes blurry, in part because calypso has a long history as dance music. Indeed, the distinction between road march and tent calypso dates at least to the 1910s, when *chantwells* first came off the street to perform in tents.

Each year the Road March title is granted to the singer whose song is played (live or recorded) the most times by masquerade bands as they pass the judging points. On a few rare occasions the same song has won both Road March and Calypso Monarch honors (e.g., Mighty Sparrow's "Jean and Dinah" in 1956, David Rudder's "Bahia Girl" in 1986). Many calypsonians, however, have won Road March and Calypso Monarch title in different years, which further underscores the important relationship between music for the road and music for the tent. It is plausible, therefore, to discuss calypso musical style in terms of certain elements that are normative both for the tent and for the road, provided that one is attentive to how these elements vary in different performance contexts and in different historical periods. I have chosen here to discuss instrumentation, form, rhythmic feel, phrasing, and breaks.

## INSTRUMENTATION

One of the largest differences between calypso recordings from different eras is the instruments accompanying the singer. Although singers in the tents today are accompanied by a large band with brass and electric instruments, most calypsonians also can sing while accompanying

themselves on guitar, and they occasionally perform this way in intimate contexts. A calypsonian typically crafts a melody and chord progression that will work well with simple guitar accompaniment, so calypsoes tend to be less dependent than some other genres of song (such as reggae, rock and roll, or rap) on a specific instrumentation, arrangement, or studio production.

In CD track 5, "Iron Duke in the Land" sung by Julien Whiterose in 1914, the accompanying instruments are guitar and cuatro (Figure 3.3). The guitar picks out a sort of melodic baseline. The cuatro, a four-string guitar-type instrument from Venezuela, strums the changing chords in a consistent rhythmic pattern. These instruments were popularized in

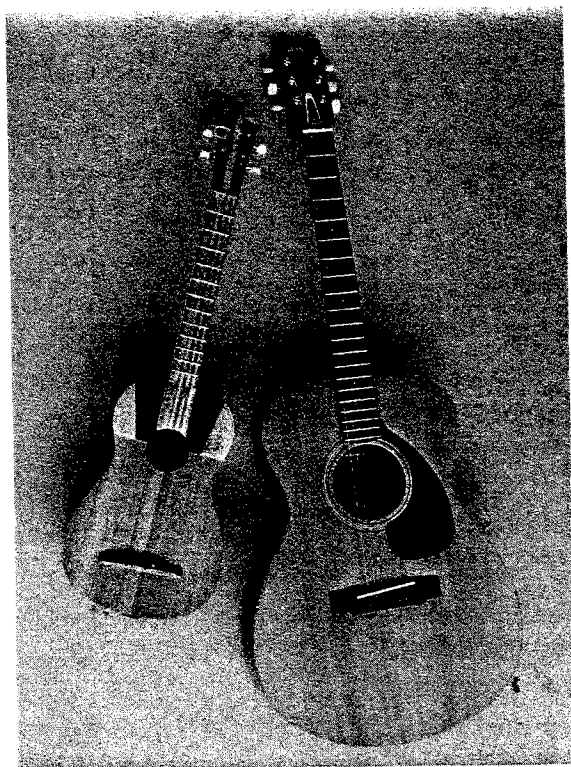


FIGURE 3.3 The conventional six-string Spanish guitar (right) and the small four-string Venezuelan cuatro.

carnival by nineteenth-century Venezuelan-style string bands that also included violins, upright bass, and piano. The cuatro, in particular, became a favorite instrument for calypso because of its piercing sound and driving rhythmic energy. The use of a rhythmic strum has remained fundamental to calypso style, whether played on a cuatro, a guitar, an electric guitar, a steel pan, or an electronic keyboard (see Activity 3.1).

**ACTIVITY 3.1: LISTENING—CUATRO VERSUS GUITAR IN "IRON DUKE IN THE LAND"** *Try to distinguish the guitar from the cuatro as you listen to "Iron Duke in the Land" CD track 5. The cuatro plays chords (several notes together) in a regular rhythmic strum, while the guitar plucks single, lower-pitched notes that are constantly changing (basically the guitar is playing a bass line).*

From the 1920s through the 1940s many calypso recordings featured a jazz style instrumental accompaniment, sometimes including banjo, upright bass, piano, trumpet, and clarinet or saxophone (many included violin as well, an influence of the Venezuelan string bands). This reflected the international popularity of jazz and also attested to the fact that calypsonians were making recordings that sold not only in Trinidad but in the United States and other countries. In fact, many of the calypso records during this time were made in New York City. The Keskidee Trio, for example, featuring three of the most popular Trinidadian calypsonians of the 1930s—Atilla the Hun, Lord Beginner, and Tiger—recorded "Congo Bara" with an introduction that almost sounds like the contemporary music of Duke Ellington (CD track 11). Because "Congo Bara" is presented as a folk song, the rest of this performance uses an older style of instrumentation, but most recordings by these same calypsonians used jazz instrumentation throughout. To this day, in fact, a brass section of trumpets and saxophones continues to be an integral part of the calypso sound, playing occasional countermelodies or answers to the singer (e.g., in the chorus of "Jean and Dinah") and often providing an instrumental rendition of the melody as an interlude between the sung verses.

By the 1950s, calypso recordings showed the influence of instrumentation in other styles of popular music, such as rhythm and blues and Cuban *son*. Mighty Sparrow's 1956 recording of "Jean and Dinah," for example, features electric guitar, drumset, and bongos. In later eras percussion instruments became increasingly prominent in calypso recordings, which is indicative not only of changing ideas about instrumentation but also of changing recording technology. The maracas, for example (or *shac shacs*, as they are called in Trinidad), which were commonly used to accompany live calypso performance in the early twentieth century, tended not to be used on records. This may have been partly because of the aesthetic preferences that prevailed in recording studios, but in the early days of electronic recording it was also difficult to record maracas without drowning out the singer. By the 1960s, however, the drumset became common on calypso recordings, and from the 1970s onward the use of cowbells, congas, and synthesized drum sounds proliferated (see Activity 3.2). The same period saw increased use of electronic instruments (bass, guitar, keyboards) and synthesized sounds. The synthesized sounds and studio production effects of some recordings played on the road today cannot be accurately reproduced by live bands in the tents (a change associated especially with soca that will be discussed further in Chapter 6).

**ACTIVITY 3.2: INSTRUMENTATION IN "JEAN AND DINAH" AND "HIGH MAS"** Compare the instrumental accompaniment in the Mighty Sparrow's 1956 song, "Jean and Dinah" (CD track 6), with David Rudder's 1998 song, "High Mas" (CD track 9). Notice the greater variety and prominence of percussion in "High Mas" that is characteristic of modern calypso recordings.

## FORM

The form or structure of a calypso song is related closely to the structure of its text and to its performance context. Carnival songs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were called *lavways*, short refrains sung by a chorus and interspersed with the improvisations of a solo singer. As noted previously, this call-and-response format gave the

*chantwell* the opportunity to lead the song and display his improvisatory skill, while at the same time encouraging participation from others who sang the chorus or played accompanying rhythms on percussion instruments. Listen, for example, to "Congo Bara," an old *lavway* that the Keskidee Trio preserved on record (Activity 3.3; CD track 11).

**ACTIVITY 3.3: "CONGO BARA"** CD track 11 is a 1935 recording by the Keskidee Trio of a famous nineteenth-century *lavway*. The words express the laments of prisoners, and the song is named after the prison guard Congo Bara. The singers take turns playing the part of song leader, singing most of their solos in French patois, the language of working-class Trinidadians in the nineteenth century. The chorus is also in patois:

Prisonniers levé.  
Mettez limié bai Congo Bara

[Prisoners arise,  
Give Congo Bara some light]

After learning to sing the chorus in patois, try to come up with a chorus in English (or whatever language you like) that is patterned on the melody and rhythm of the "Congo Bara" chorus but relates to an interesting event at your own school, in your family, or concerning some subject that is meaningful to you. Have different people come up with solos (patterned rhythmically and melodically on the solos in the recording) that are thematically related to your chorus.

When you perform your song (accompanied by guitar and maracas if possible) you will be singing in the true calypso tradition of verbal invention and topical commentary.

Old *lavways* are sometimes incorporated into the choruses of modern calypsoes; call and response thus continues to be an important small-scale form within a larger form. The Lord Kitchener's "Pan in A Minor" (CD track track 12) uses call and response in the chorus, where the words "beat pan" are answered by changing instrumental lines. This kind of

use of call and response goes over especially well on the road, where people enjoy joining in the singing of the chorus.

While calypsoes may incorporate call-and-response form in certain sections, the overall form of calypso songs is always *strophic*, meaning that several different verses or stanzas of text are set to a repeated melody. Most calypsoes also have a chorus, a recurring section of the song in which the same melody *and* text are repeated. This “verse and chorus” form parallels the *lavway*’s alternation of soloist and chorus, but on a much more extended time scale, and usually without improvisation (although a few calypsonians are still expert at improvising in rhyming verse, a practice referred to as “extempo”). Like the *lavway*, the modern calypso chorus is usually written to be catchy and singable and invites the public to participate. Both “Iron Duke in the Land” (CD track 5) and “Jean and Dinah” (CD track 6) have simple verse and chorus structures: the calypsonian sings several verses, each of which has new words, and after each verse a group of singers sings a repeated chorus.

Other calypsoes may only have one line of repeated text in each verse, which we could describe as a “refrain” rather than a chorus. The Mighty Chalkdust’s “Chauffeur Wanted” is an example of this: “The new driver cannot drive” is the refrain that is sung at the end of each verse. The phrase “sans humanité,” heard in “Iron Duke in the Land,” was also a stock refrain used by many calypsonians. The use of a brief refrain at the end of a long verse is a convention that was established in the early 1900s, when calypsonians began singing eight-line “oratorical” calypsoes, and that continued in the narrative “ballad” calypsoes of the 1920s and 1930s that told stories for listening in the tents rather than for dancing and singing along.

Many calypsoes use standard chord progressions that also contribute to our sense of form in the music—the predictability of certain sequences of chords, that is, gives experienced listeners a sense of direction, progress, tension, and resolution. The verse of “Iron Duke in the Land” is an example of the “old minor,” or “sans humanité,” calypso—a standard chord progression along with which the first line of text is usually repeated (although not in this example) and each verse ends with a consistent refrain, often the formulaic “sans humanité” (see Activity 3.4). Because the old minor calypso form was so common in the 1910s through the 1930s, it is often remarked that calypso uses a limited number of stock melodies. This, of course, made text and word play all the more important.

**ACTIVITY 3.4: “IRON DUKE IN THE LAND” CHORD PROGRESSION (CD TRACK 5)** A chord is combination of three or more notes that sound together. Each chord is built on a “root” note that is one of the steps of the musical scale, so chords are often described with roman numerals that indicate the root. “I” indicates a chord built on the first step of the scale, “V” indicates a chord built on the fifth step, and so on. A series of chords, called a “chord progression,” functions musically to create harmonic tension, anticipation, and resolution.

In this diagram the text is organized in terms of musical meter. Each “/” represents the beginning of a new measure, a regularly recurring period that measures the musical time. Chord changes occur at the beginning of a measure, following a predictable rhythm. Even if you don’t really know what the roman numeral symbols mean, try to hear the *cuatro* changing the chords it strums as you listen.

It was a

modern manife-	/station	of the	/elder civili-	/zation	Thay my
i	i		V	i	

carnival cele-	/bration	of this	/social organi-	/zation	It
i	i		V	I	

called to mind an ab-	/stention	over	/all the popu-	/lation I Julian taking the
I7	iv		VII7	III

social décor, deh who	/whey Whiterose Union /	sans humanité
I7	iv	V7 i

The chorus of Mighty Sparrow’s “Jean and Dinah” uses a different chord progression in the major mode that is also common to many calypsoes (see Activity 3.5). (Jazz musicians will recognize the second half of this chord progression as “rhythm changes” named for the George Gershwin song “I Got Rhythm.”)

**ACTIVITY 3.5: "JEAN AND DINAH" CHORD PROGRESSION (CD TRACK 6)** See Activity 3.4 for an explanation of this diagram. The strum here is more difficult to hear than in "Iron Duke," so it may be easier to detect the changing chords by focusing on the bass line.

Jean and Dinah	/Rosita and	/Clementina	/round the
I	I	V	V
corner posing	/Bet your life is	/something they sellin	/And if you
V	V	I	I
catch them broken.	/you can get them	/all for nothing	/Don't make no
I	I7	IV	iv
row. the	/yankees gone.	/Sparrow take over	/now
I	I vi	ii V	I

Since the 1960s, calypsonians have used increasingly complex verse forms and more diverse chord progressions. This has occurred partly in response to the musical needs of steelbands (Chapter 5). It also reflects the increasing exposure of calypsonians to other popular music traditions through radio and records, as well as new opportunities (exemplified by the success abroad of the Lord Kitchener and later the Mighty Sparrow) to succeed as international entertainers. Despite the increased variety of forms and chord progressions, however, calypso's basic rhythmic structure, what I will refer to here as "rhythmic feel," has remained fairly constant.

### RHYTHMIC FEEL

Calypso's rhythmic character derives from its function as dance music for the road and carries over into other contexts. Like many other genres of dance music, calypso has a rhythmic quality that is distinctive and recognizable. If you are Trinidadian, your body will recognize this "rhythmic feel," and you will likely to respond to it by dancing. I attempt here to describe aspects of calypso's rhythmic feel in words; but people more commonly express their understanding of this feel by moving, dancing, and singing. Because the rhythmic feel of calypso is fun-

damentally connected to Trinidadian styles of dancing, you must have the experience of dancing to it to really understand calypso!

On the road at carnival time, people travel as they dance, processing down the street in costume or just tagging along behind the band in their street clothes. The main style of dancing in this context entails a simple alternation of the feet—left, right, left, right—in a swaying short-stepped kind of walk referred to as "chipping" (the name comes from the sound of leather shoe soles scraping the pavement in unison—"chip, chip, chip, chip"). Listen to the bass in the Mighty Sparrow's "Jean and Dinah" (CD track 6), and you will hear that it plays on a steady pulse, matching the pace of a dancer's evenly spaced footsteps. This regular pulse is enriched by off-the-beat rhythms in the bongos and guitar strum and the varied rhythmic accents of the singer and horns. While the "on-beatness" is unequivocal, the music is also rich and complex because of the interaction of different parts.

Rhythmic feel is the product, then, of interaction between different parts, not fully expressed in what is played by the bass, the guitar, the singer, or any one part. Calypso, like many dance musics of the African diaspora, is *polyrhythmic*, meaning that it features a constant rhythmic feel, or "groove," that is created by the interaction of repeating and contrasting parts. Diagram (a) in Activity 3.6 depicts the rhythmic interaction between different instrumental parts in David Rudder's "High Mas'" (see Activity 3.6). These rhythms are fairly typical of calypso generally, and you should spend the time to understand them well (see Activity 3.7). The interaction between the on-beat kick drum and the syncopated (i.e., "between-the-beat") keyboard strum produces the composite rhythm notated in Figure (b) in Activity 3.6. This bouncy exciting rhythm, produced by contrasting parts, is fundamental to all calypso music. The off-beat high hat is also standard in most calypso, and the pitter patter of the bells contributes to a dense texture that is typical of carnival street music. The patterns in Diagram (a) in Activity 3.6 are repeated throughout the song and can be referred to as "fixed rhythms."

**ACTIVITY 3.6: CALYPSO RHYTHMIC FEEL IN "HIGH MAS'"** Diagram (a) depicts the rhythms of different instruments in your recording of "High Mas'" (CD track 9). All of these are "fixed rhythms," which means that they repeat throughout the song. Because they also contrast with each other they cre-





## BREAKS

Another variable event in many of these songs occurs at moments when the instruments come to a dramatic and unexpected stop, perhaps punch a rhythm together, and then resume the flow of their fixed rhythms. This is referred to as a "break," and it is an important device for creating excitement and rhythmic energy. A break is a momentary suspension of a kinetic energy that inexorably returns, and its excitement is most strongly felt in our bodies as an experience of movement and anticipation (see Activity 3.9). As such it is a common device in dance-oriented calypsoes and soca music.

**ACTIVITY 3.9: BREAKS** In *Super Blue's "Pump It Up"* (CD track 1), an extended break on the repeated words "I wish I could" sets up the dancers to boost their energy to a new level when the fixed rhythm returns with the words, "wine on you!"

In the chorus of "*High Mas*" (CD track 9), the music stops and Rudder sings by himself, "and if you know what I mean, then scream!" Coming after several repeats of the phrase "if you know what I mean," this break makes a climactic and dramatic transition into the next section.

In the chorus of "*Jean and Dinah*" (CD track 6), the voices and all the fixed rhythmic parts stop at the words "don't make no ROW." A unison horn line fills the space, and then the voices and fixed rhythm resume.



Calypso has become associated not just with carnival celebrations, where it is heard most often, but also with Trinidadian cultural identity generally. Many Trinidadians will tell you that it is their national music because it has a long association with carnival and communal festivity and because its lyrics contain an accumulated wealth of social and historical commentary. While calypso is the *genre* of music most often associated with Trinidad, however, the national *instrument* of Trinidad and Tobago is the steel pan, the subject of the next chapter.

## The National Instrument



In 1992 Prime Minister Patrick Manning declared the steel pan Trinidad and Tobago's national instrument, giving official recognition to a sentiment that many Trinidadians had shared for a long time. "Pan," as most Trinidadians call the instrument, first became an emblem of intense pride for people in poor neighborhoods of Port of Spain and elsewhere, as the creative achievements of early panmen defied establishment efforts to suppress the steelbands. In the 1950s and 1960s, people of more diverse backgrounds came to identify with the accomplishments of steelband tuners and musicians, so that pan is today seen as something more than a signifier of lower-class communities and histories. According to mas' man (masquerade designer) Francisco Cabral, "Pan, calypso, and carnival are the only things we have to make us proud today and in the future; and of these, the only one we can claim entirely is pan. This is the cornerstone of our culture."<sup>4</sup>

It is common, of course, for musical genres, instruments, sounds, or lyrics to trigger feelings of belonging—of community, ethnic, or national identity—but in the case of the steelband this identity symbolism is particularly important. For Trinidadians who view the steel pan as a symbol of their nation and society, the telling of its history is a way of telling something about themselves. Different tellings give importance to different people, different neighborhoods, and different events. I begin this chapter with one person's account of the steel pan's origins and then go on to discuss the transformation of the steelband's social status—a story of struggle and triumph that makes pan a compelling symbol for the nation. Finally I discuss, in turn, the instrument, the ensemble, and steelband musical style.

Ganase, Pat (1993). "Return of the Savage." *Trinidad Guardian Magazine*. Port of Spain. April 25, p. 3