

CALYPSO—MUSIC OF THE ANTILLES

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THE music of Trinidad is beginning to enjoy a vogue here, but the musicologists have had nothing to do with it. For years tourists have come back with reports of the amusing songs heard there. Then they brought back records. Then the musicians themselves were brought up, and now the United States is the principal export market for Calypso music. English lyrics in some of the songs stimulated interest, plus just enough similarity in the music to that of the rumba to make the lay listener feel he is not in completely unknown territory. There is also the indisputable fact that here is an excellent example of the ballad tradition manifesting itself before our eyes. The recording companies have recently sent equipment to the island itself. When I arrived in Port of Spain, a native walking on Frederick Street stopped me and said: "I suppose you would like to see the building where the Decca Company made the recordings last year."

Calypso is the Negro music of Trinidad. (The island population is made up of a few whites, a few mulattos, some Chinese, more Hindus and an overwhelmingly pure-black majority.) Its exponents have various contentions as to the origin of this music but there is general agreement that the idiom came into being in the earliest days of colonization and slavery. "True Calypso" is still sung in *patois*, a dialect similar to the Haitian *créole* which contains a good percentage of its original African material. However, the tendency is away from this *patois* toward English. There is no doubt that Calypso songs were used, like our spirituals here, as a clandestine means of spreading illegal knowledge among the slaves. The religion also, because of its animist nature, was kept fairly occult. These two factors — religious and social repression — are perhaps largely responsible for the excellent preservation of the African element in the music. The slave system was officially abolished in 1838 but it goes without saying that actual democracy has not yet arrived in Trinidad. Plenty of Calypso songs today decry British colonial oppression and racial inequality, with

the result that all the lyrics are now subject to strict censorship. There have been numerous confiscations of recordings.

The popular present-day Calypso, like our swing (not our blues-singing), is an urban product, and enjoys about the same means of dissemination: it is played over the radio, made into records, given in park concerts, used to entertain at cafés and at dances. Lyric sheets are hawked on the street. There is also the annual tournament of Calypso, a healthy phenomenon notably lacking in our swing scene.

Every February at Mardi Gras all the musicians of the island come to Port of Spain in brilliant carnival costume. There each group sets up a tent which is its own territory, and then proceeds to "invade" another group's tent. Upon entering, the leader, who is the vocalist of the invading band of troubadours, sings a war declaration challenging the leader of the other group to engage in a battle of song. The battle is one of extemporaneous dialogue between the two contestants. Polite insults are exchanged in verse. Wilmoth Houdini, probably the best-known Calypsonian, explained it to me thus: "You have to sing in such a way as to tangle up your adversary. You can tell in a minute if he is really improvising, or only singing something he has made up beforehand. If he is doing that, it is your place to sing in such a way that when his turn comes to reply he *must* make it up on the spur of the moment in order to answer you. Singing is just like boxing. You use ring tactics all the way." Clever use of long words, rhyme and melodic invention within the given limits of the form chosen by the challenger, are elements considered by the public in selecting the winner. Each singer has a favorite key which best suits his (or her) voice and tastes, and the challenger makes it his business to choose a key as remote as possible from that one in order to "put him out." There must be no repetitions of verses, and the improvising continues until one of the opponents hesitates or stops entirely, at which point, if the other has not already denied him the privilege, he may cry "Bar!" Then begins a duet in which the singer on the defensive improvises a sixteen line lyric on any subject, and the aggressor attempts to make himself heard above the melody by contriving a contrapuntal melody which takes advantage of each rest and long syllable to make itself heard. Here syn-copation reaches its height, and the crowd is likely to cry: "Rusó!" which seems to be the "Olé!" of Trinidad. The rules of the contests are as complex as the fine points in bullfighting and the public knows them all.*

The rustic Calypso orchestra is composed pretty much of homemade

*In a regular band repertory, improvisation naturally does not play such an important part, although it is never absent.

instruments, of which the bamboo is outstanding. There are two types of bamboo execution. For the "cut-in," a fat bamboo-trunk about four feet long, stopped at one end, is hit with a hard mallet. The other is the *foulaing*, and consists of a pair of eight-inch sections of trunk which are struck together. The *vira*, Trinidadian variation in metal of the Cuban notched-gourd *guiro*, the gin-bottle, either empty or tuned with water, the *cuatro*, oversized ukelele, and a small hand-drum complete the group. This is by no means representative of the big-time bands of the towns, where the first addition is the flute, and then, as the process of urbanization goes on, the clarinet, trumpet, sax, violin or piano. The orchestra may use any combination; there may be two pieces or ten. All sound fairly well, although the saxes are too heavy for the nervous accompanimental figures. Muted trumpet and clarinet over guitar and piano with percussion, suit the idiom best. Even though the orchestra seldom provides more than an accompaniment to the vocal line, its ingenious ornamentations are always in evidence and form no small part of the music's charm.

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The composers and orchestra-leaders (generally identical), place no musical restrictions upon themselves. They tackle all the forms known to them with equal zest. Their repertoires include rumbas from Cuba, fox-trots from the United States, pasillos and waltzes from the neighboring mainlands of South America, and even that polyglot old trouper, the tango. Most of the foreign pieces are unsuccessful. The rumbas are unsubtle, and not really rumbas at all; certainly no Cuban would claim them. Their fox-trots and tangos are laughable. Perhaps the Colombians and Venezuelans would not go so far as to complain that their pasillos (which term is corrupted into *paseo*), are unrecognizable, even if the islanders do make them simpler and more deliberate than those I have heard in Colombia. The waltzes, incidentally, they play quite well, outlining with percussion the particular distortion of waltz rhythm consisting of a rapid 6-8 taken in three, with secondary accents on the second, third, fifth and sixth eighths.

But their true understanding is reserved for the material of strictly local origin. This finds its expression in the form-categories of the *calypso-ballad*, the *leggo*, the *kalender* and the *shouter*. Where a song does not fall under one of the indigenous or foreign subheadings it remains just a calypso-ballad, and this general category embraces the majority of pieces.

The ballad's thematic material suggests purely European derivations:

English and Spanish, and perhaps some French folk-tunes and children's song-games. An intensive use of syncopative distortions and a tendency to rather urbane harmonic progressions make a relatively sophisticated product. The rhythm approximates that of the *biguine martiniquaise* played a little too slowly, and in general the rhythmical pattern is far less complex than that of the Cuban *son* with its stately frenzy. There are in general two basic melodic plans, called by the natives double and single tone Calypso. Double-tone may be in major, in which case the four phrases of a refrain will be: 2A unresolved+B+A resolved, or a variation of it. If it is in minor the third phrase will modulate rather complicatedly to the relative major, and the fourth will modulate back. Double-tone is the duller musically, because the melodic line is not short enough to have any hypnotic effect in its repetitions. The listener knows what is coming, but he always has to wait a little too long for it. On the other hand, the single-tone (two identical or two alternating strophes, one solo and one chorus, using simple I, V or I, IV, and V backgrounds in either major or minor), makes a different music (in sound rather like that of the Ibani in West Africa) and is much more successful. Being violently repetitive, it often stirs the soloist to lyrical improvisation and even the members of the chorus to occasional outbursts of frantic melodic variations and misplaced accents. This kind of Calypso approaches an inspired *son* in its effect, but never in quality. The *son* is both purer and more evolved.

The *leggo* is a primitive form of single-tone Calypso. Here the percussive element is much more evident; its African ancestry is clearly discernable. A plectrum instrument is sounded carelessly a few times to indicate the tonic and dominant, the soloist announces phrase number one, and then phrase number two, the chorus responds with number one, which henceforth is to be its private property, uttered with unchanging uniformity throughout the song. After two or three responses a police whistle is blown, the signal for the entrance of the battery of percussion. Then everything goes on together until there are no more words, at which point the piece stops suddenly. The percussionists are allowed less rhythmical variety than in the *son*.

The *shouter* is a translation into English of songs about performances of the shango and bellé, ritual dances of animism, dances dealing with mass hypnosis and secret-society-songs which are survivals of African ritual. The relation is pretty distant by the time the shouter is made.

The *kalender* was evolved for a specific purpose: the accompaniment

to jousts of club-fighting. It is lusty and strident, sung to rhythm provided only by a powerful metallic battery which has long passages to play alone.

For the subject-matter of the Calypso's lyrics, let me quote a few of the several hundred titles of records available in the United States now: *The Devil Behind Me, The Lindbergh Baby, African War Call, Roosevelt Opens the World's Fair, Civil War in Spain, Ramon Navarro, Bastardy, Seven Skeletons Found in the Yard, The Strike, We Mourn the Loss of Sir Murchison Fletcher, The Horrors of War, Lavabo, The History of Man, The Rats, Exploiting, Why I Killed Winifred, Zingué Talala, Joe Louis, Workers' Appeal, The Shop-Closing Ordinance, Who Has Done the Best for Humanity?, Trinidad Loves to Play Carnival.*

Unfortunately the musicians of Trinidad are impressed by the tunes and effects of Tin-Pan Alley, which they generally discover a few years late. Too often they scatter undigested bits of New York pap through their own music, or even make an old piece over to suit themselves, and certainly the Calypso versions are no improvement on the originals.

Each exponent of Calypso adopts an official *nom de guerre* before he organizes his group and leads it forth to its first battle. Thus the heroes of Trinidad call themselves variously The Tiger, Attila the Hun, The Executor, Lord Beginner, King Radio, The Growler, The Caresser. All these are managed by a gentleman from Madeira by the name of Eduardo Sa Gomes who, like the Baida Brothers in the world of Arab music, has a monopoly on Calypso in the West Indies. Sa Gomes owns a network of stores throughout the Antilles and even in British Guiana where he sells the records of the men he controls. In Jamaica, for instance, more Calypso records are sold than in Trinidad; they are more popular than the native *mentor*, more popular in Guiana than the *badji* of Demerara, in Barbados more popular than the Brumley melodies. Mr. Sa Gomes has made a special point of seeing that the idiom becomes a favorite. Commercialism is no respecter of tradition. Calypso is fast becoming a kind of international Caribbean swing, reaching from Jamaica to the southernmost tip of the Antilles, a hybrid novelty for Pan-American consumption.

Here is one of the few gay folk musics of the world. It is a hybrid, true, but it has a certain quality of completeness. With the loss of insularity it faces, in its present form, the danger of disintegration. Let those who have a taste for shouters, leggos, kalendars, collect their records now—Calypso may not be with us very long.

EXCERPTS FROM CALYPSO LYRICS

EDWARD THE VIII

It's love it's love alone
That caused King Edward to leave the
throne,

We know Edward is noble and great
But love caused him to abdicate.

It's love it's love etc.
(*Refrain repeats after each couplet*)

Oh what a sad disappointment
Was endured by the British Government,

On the 10th of December we heard the
talk

That he gave the throne to the Duke of
York.

Am sorry my mother is going to grieve,
But I cannot help I am bound to leave.

Old Baldwin try to break down his plan;
He said come what may the American.

And if I can't get a boat to set me free
I'll walk to Miss Simpson across the sea.

He said my robes and crown is upon my
mind,

But I cannot leave Miss Simpson behind.

JOHNNY TAKE MY WIFE

VERSE I

After Johnny eat my food
After Johnny wear my clothes
After Johnny drink my rum
Look, Johnny turn round and take my
wife.

Ah looka misery
Wherever I meet Johnny
People, people will be sorry to see
The grave for Johnny and the gallows
for me.

VERSE IV

I went in the house to get my gun
My wife see me coming and she start to
run

But let me tell you where I lose my head
Mr. Johnny was hiding underneath the
bed

Ah looka misery
Wherever I meet Johnny
People, people will be sorry to see
The grave for Johnny and the gallows
for me.

HE HAD IT COMING

Chorus

He is stone cold dead in the market
Stone cold dead in the market
He is stone cold dead in the market
I ain kill nobody but my husband

VERSE II

All of his family they're swearing to kill
me

All of his family they're swearing to kill
me

All of his family they're swearing to kill
me

And if I kill him, he had it coming.
Now, he is stone cold dead in the market
— Murder

He's stone cold dead in the market — the
criminal

He's stone cold dead in the market
I ain kill nobody but my husband.

VERSE IV

There is one thing that I am sure
He ain't going to beat me no more
So I tell you that I doesn't care
If I was to die in the electric chair.

HOT DOG, HOT DOGGIE

I must buy me a hot dogs stand
Now that hot dogs is in demand
Hot dog has really made its name
Through their Majesty with title and
fame.

VERSE I

With the King and Queen hot dog made
a hit

So my friends, let me tell you this
At Hyde Park you people didn't know
That hot dogs came in and stole the
show

Hot Dog, Hot Doggie
Hot Dog, Hot Doggie — Oh what a dog
At Hyde Park you people didn't know
Hot dogs came in and stole the show.

VERSE II

King George did not use his knife and
fork

He said I will do nothing of the sort
So he held hot dog in his hand
And face hot dog man to man.