

Part 2. Trinidad Carnival Is . .

A celebration of the spoken word

In Trinidad and the West Indies in general, speech ranges from urbane and cultivated to creole, urban or rural. Speech is always musical but the creole can be hard to understand—especially if the speaker doesn't want you, the visitor, to understand. But I find the effort to understand worthwhile because I love the humor and sly wit in West Indian speech and expressions.

Story-telling, poetry and folktales are cultural legacies of a time before modern media and are kept alive in events all year long in Trinidad. For instance in the fall I attended the "Village Chat, Short Story and Poetry Finals," one part of the Prime Minister's *Best Village Competition*. The poets ranged from a funny little 10-year-old boy to sincere college students to a 60-year-old Chinese-ancestry country fellow whose poem about the ways environmental changes affected the creatures in his pond featured a refrain that contained some amazing vocal effects – chirps, glunks, and sounds I never heard a human make delivered in a syncopated rhythm. The audience was delighted -- by the 4th verse, they were chanting the refrain with him.

Instead of, or in addition to, European fairy tales, there are stories of bad spirits such as Jab-jabs or Succoyants. These characters can turn up in Carnival celebrations, as this Jab-jab and his keeper did. These are powerful images in Trinidad – the revelers grew silent when these two went by.



Carnival-related “talk” entertainments included two Carnival Comedy Picnics and nightly shows at Kalypso Revue, Kaiso House and Talk Tent 2010 (“where talk is Art”). At these performances stand-up comedians, calypsonians, actors and actresses present folksy humor and skits with a great deal of underlying sophistication. I knew from experience that most of the humor (especially the bawdy parts) would be in heavy creole and I would be sitting looking puzzled while everyone else was roaring with laughter, so I decided to save these for next year.

West Indian wit is nowhere more evident than in calypso (aka kaiso). Calypso rhythms and tunes may be jaunty and jazzy but it’s the lyrics -- impudent or ironic or ribald -- that give it impact. They offer an opportunity for pungent political and social commentary that is sometimes very effective, as this year vividly illustrated.

I attended the calypso shows at the Normandie, a venerable and very upscale hotel deemed totally safe for evening occasions by Jesse James, the Concierge Par Excellence for all cruisers in Trinidad. The Normandie is right next to the Prime Minister’s mansion; a 15’ high concrete wall separated the two properties and became the butt of many jokes. In the courtyard there was a huge samaan tree that was lit from below to producing an amazing visual effect created by the canopy layer swaying gently in the evening breeze, making you feel as if you were looking up at the evening sky from underwater.



The canopy of this tree is 80’ up. Stage roof below it at lower right.

That is, if you ignored all the live action on stage below the tree.

The shows at the Normandie, featured small polished jazz ensembles and venerated calypsonians such as Gypsy, Black Stalin, Shadow, and Rootsman. There was political and social commentary aplenty. For the benefit of off-island visitors, all the lyrics were intelligible. For me the Calypso Ex Tempore performance ably hosted by Gypsy (aka Minister of Parliament Winston Peters), was the most memorable. Four (very) seasoned performers created lyrics on the spot on themes proposed by the audience and engaged in calypso duels (like a poetry smack-down) featuring good-natured insults and taunts in rhyme. These duels were improvised to an all-purpose calypso tune played by the band – sort of like “Hey Lottie” with a lot of elderly strutting. . It was delightful.

Gypsy’s day job is Minister of Parliament. His stage ensemble also featured light blue pants and shoes.



Shadow, Black Stalin (80+) and Gypsy rockin’ across the stage.



In addition to the professional shows, there are competitions for Calypso Monarch and junior Calypso Monarch, watched by large crowds at Queen’s Park Savannah. Contestants write original lyrics, and in some cases melodies, that are widely circulated many weeks before Carnival, with people commenting freely on who they think is best.

This year’s Junior Calypso Monarch was an amazing 6-year old, Aaron Duncan, with his song “Doh Waste It”. On Carnival Sunday on the big Dimanche Gras stage he performed it dressed in a snappy cream-colored suit with orange shirt, with all the moves of a seasoned performer (think of a very miniature Satchmo). He was quoted in the *Daily Express*: “I feel very good. My mom and my teacher helped me with the song.” Second place went to teenager Victoria Cooper with “a stirring performance on teenage pregnancy.”

This year's Calypso Monarch was Defosto with his composition *In a Palace State of Mind*. It was addressed to the then current (and now former) Prime Minister Patrick Manning whose time in office was characterized by total neglect of boring infrastructure like roads, water supplies, and sewer systems while he inflated his ego with showy, outsized and unneeded "first world" construction projects, such as the 28-story skyscraper in Port of Spain built next to the new matching Hyatt Regency Hotel. Supposedly intended for government offices, it sits totally empty. Manning's most visible excess was the (US) \$45 Million Prime Minister's Mansion, to which he added one year later a \$10 Million "Diplomatic Center" to entertain the VIPs attending the Nov 2009 Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (CHGOM). Here is the chorus of Defosto's song:

"Ah want ah palace just like yours
with about 300 doors.
Calypso cyah give me that
ah tellin' yuh flat, flat, flat.
One dish for \$2000,
I want about 10 dozen
Diplomatic centre too
and a gym to keep fit like you.
Patrick could we start building soon? (Yes)
Could we start in the month of June? (Yes)
Did you take land from the poor? (Yes)
Would they still vote for you for sure? (Yes)"

Three months after Carnival, Patrick Manning was forced to call elections and to the relief of almost all, his party lost. This was one kaiso tune with measurable impact . . .

Soca lyrics are short on wit compared with Kaiso,. One letter-writer in the Daily Express offered the following examples of how a calypso and a soca song would treat a deeply unpopular motion to institute property taxes in Trinidad (the electorate was further inflamed when one of Manning's over-privileged cabinet ministers said Trinis were too fat and could afford more taxes).

Letter by Neil Kalicharan, *Daily Express*.

"First, the calypso version:
'Minister Taylor, meek and mild
Speaks to us, as to a child
Talking 'bout the property tax
That's the tax we'd like to axe.
. . . [verses omitted]
We sit in traffic and we stew
No police escort to speed us through.
We pay taxes, that's for certain
No three million to spare for curtain'
. . . [rest of verses omitted, you get the idea]

Now the lyrics-rich soca monarch version:

'He say dat we too fat
How could he say dat
He say dat we too fat
How could he say dat
Wine, wine, wine, wine*
Jump, jump, jump, jump
Wave, jump, wave, jump ‘ ‘

*For definition of “wine”, see Part 3.

I will end this blog about calypso by invoking the names of Mighty Sparrow and Lord Kitchener. These eminent Trinidadian calypsonians were active in the 40's and 50's. I encourage you to Google them and sample their work. Mighty Sparrow was crowned Calypso Monarch 11 times. I only know a few of their songs but I consider Mighty Sparrow's "Philip My Dear" to be all-time. This calypso is a ribald embroidery on an incident early in Queen Elizabeth's reign when an intruder got into Buckingham Palace at a time when Prince Philip was away. She is the speaker in the song and it is fairly complex, loaded with innuendo related to the rumors and politics of the day. When Fred gets too fulsome in his admiration of luscious young bosoms and bottoms on the beaches, I begin to croon the chorus:

There was a man in de bedroom
He be jes' like you . . . but
Younger
Stronger
Harder
(I leave it to you to finish the refrain).