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Paper delivered at World History Association Annual Conference  
San Juan, Puerto, Rico  
June 29, 2019

## Calypso Is Dead, Long Live Calypso!

by J. Hunter Moore

Calypso is dead or dying. Calypso will endure. Which is it? That depends on who you ask.

People said both things to me during the 2018 Carnival season in Trinidad and Tobago, home of calypso. In the weeks leading up to Carnival, well-known calypso tents in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago's capital city, either reduced the number of nights they were open or closed down entirely, blaming a lack of funds. The short-term explanation was that a reduction in government support for the tents, part of a general belt-tightening, was the culprit. In the broader picture the reduced nights and early closings were a continuation of thirty years of declining attendance at the calypso tents. Calypso is rarely heard on radio today in Trinidad and Tobago, outside of a few specialty shows (Ballantyne 2019). The awarding of the Calypso Monarch crown, traditionally calypso's biggest night, registers only half-filled stands (Felmire 2019). Audience members at the tents which I attended appeared to be closer to retirement age than to middle-age. The days when Mighty Sparrow and Lord Kitchener played nightly to packed tents seemed very distant. And yet, two of the biggest calypso awards in 2018 went to young or youngish men, one defeating a veteran who possessed multiple awards (Matroo 2018) the other, 24, won the prized Calypso Monarch crown (James 2018). In 2019 the Calypso Monarch crown and the Extempo Monarch crown were once again won by young men (Khan 2019). So, is calypso dead, or alive?

I argue that calypso, as an art form, is very much alive, though it faces significant challenges. Following a brief history of calypso, I will take advantage of the spirited debates about calypso that occur every Carnival season by quoting from the country's oldest newspaper,

*The Guardian*, allowing the columnists to raise the questions, then letting the calypsonians answer the critics. I will draw from a few scholarly sources and then follow with observations based on four months in Trinidad and Tobago in 2017-2018 when I interviewed ten calypso composers as part of a Fulbright grant. Based on that experience I believe the best testimony to the health of calypso is the dedication of the composers themselves to the art. I will share a few snippets from those interviews, but I hope that readers will be intrigued enough to listen to the interviews for themselves using the link I provide at the end of the paper.

Calypso is a term most likely derived from a Hausa (West African) word: *kaiso*, which is often used as an exhortation during or after calypso performances (Warner 1985) in Trinidad and Tobago. The word first appears in a Port of Spain newspaper in 1900 (Cowley 1996). Short Pants Mac Intosh, a respected calypsonian, author of one of the top 200 calypsos of all time, “The Law Is an Ass,” according to the National Library and Information Service Authority of Trinidad and Tobago’s website and the host of a weekly calypso radio program, says calypso is a specific type of song and has certain features, though it has evolved over time and boundaries aren’t rigidly set. According to Short Pants, calypsos have four stanzas with a chorus, and one can differentiate between the stanza and the chorus. There is a theme, though there is no restriction on the theme. Calypsos have been written about every topic under the sun. The best, Short Pants says, contain social or philosophical commentary. The use of double-entendre is common, going back to the days when calypsonians had to mask the true intention of what they said or risk arrest. According to Short Pants, to be truly great, a calypso must have an angle or a point of view. This makes it “very different from the ordinary pop song or folk song (Short Pants Mac Intosh 2019).

Calypso has its roots in traditions brought from West African by enslaved Africans.

Trinidad was a Spanish possession from 1498 when Christopher Columbus claimed it for the King of Spain, naming it for three high hills visible from the sea (Cowley 1996). French Catholic plantation owners brought their African slaves to the island beginning in 1776, encouraged by the Spanish crown. Trinidad started late with slavery and its slave population was never large. When Britain gained control of the island in 1797, Trinidad had a total population of 18,400. Of these, roughly 10,000 were enslaved Africans or of African descent. In 1837, when Britain abolished slavery in Trinidad, 18,000 slaves were freed compared with over a quarter million when slavery ended in Jamaica (Hill 1993). Africans brought with them traditions including playing musical instruments, singing, dancing, stick-fighting, and story-telling (Hill 1993).

Creating songs that praise or insult is a long-standing West African tradition. Willem Bosman, a Dutch sea captain whose description of an annual festival in the city of Axim on the Gold Coast was published in 1721, observed the following:

The Devil is annually banished (from) all their Towns with abundance of Ceremony, at an appointed time set apart for that end. I have twice seen it at Axim, where they make the greatest stir about it. This Procession is preceded by a Feast of eight Days, accompanied with all manner of Singing, Skipping, Dancing, Mirth, and Jollity: In which time a perfect lampooning Liberty is allowed, and Scandal so highly exalted, that they may freely sing of all the Faults, Villanies, and Frauds of their Superiours as well as Inferiours, without Punishment, or so much as the least interruption; and the only way to stop their Mouths is to ply them lustily with Drink, which alters their Tone immediately, and turns their Satyrical Ballads into Commendatory Songs on the good Qualities of him who hath so nobly treated them. (Bosman 1721, 133)

American anthropologist Milton Herskovits searched for evidence of African culture that had survived the transatlantic journey in the remote northeastern town of Toco. He found evidence of traditions brought from Africa that included dance and song similar to calypso, “even to the impromptu character of improvised comment on a theme of current interest”

(Herskovits and Herskovits 1947, 317). West African *griots*, or wise women and wise men, are popularly believed in Trinidad and Tobago to be the musical ancestors of calypsonians today (Lord Superior 2017).

French Catholic plantation owners and their families celebrated the days leading up to the beginning of Lent. The French in turn encouraged their enslaved workers and families to celebrate in a similar fashion (Hill 1993). Many of today's Carnival traditions have their roots in these celebrations (Cowley 1996). Following emancipation, freed slaves and free African immigrants began moving to populated areas (Williams 1963) and developed their own Carnival traditions resulting in the *diametre* or "jamet" Carnival. The jamet Carnivals of the mid- to late-nineteenth century included "the West African tradition of satire singing" whereby "prominent men and women were ridiculed in burlesque" (Magid 1988, 75). As Carnival songs and celebrations became louder and more boisterous, municipal authorities reacted by passing restrictions. Masquerading was outlawed in 1858 and obscene songs in 1868 (Hill 1993). Riots broke out during Carnival in 1881 and 1884 (Williams 1963).

As the nineteenth century wound down, the language of Carnival and of Trinidad became increasingly English. One of the earliest forerunners of calypso known today was written in English and dates from 1898. It illustrates a political tradition that will carry forward into calypso: "Jerningham the governor, it's fastness into you, it's rudeness into you, to break up the laws of the Borough Council" (Williams 1963, 179) A rising Afro-Trinidadian middle class moved Carnival away from rude expressions of the jamet Carnival of the 1800s to fancy masquerade costumes and bands sponsored by social unions in the first decade of the new century. "Chantwells" who formerly led rival stick-fighting bands now led these fancy 'mas

bands (Hill 1993, 67). Chantwells, rehearsing with their bands in preparation for Carnival, soon began drawing their own audiences. A few enterprising singers set up tents and entertained apart from their bands. This was the origin of the first calypso tents and of the modern-day calypsonians.

In August 1914, the Victor Recording Company announced it would soon be arriving in Trinidad to record “a complete repertoire of Trinidadian music” which included “carnival and patois songs” (*Gazette* 1914a). Within two months an advertisement appeared for one of the earliest artists to describe himself as a calypso singer, Julian Whiterose, offering “Four Popular Calipsoes” (*Gazette* 1914b). These recordings included “Iron Duke in the Land,” an illustration of Carnival’s shift from French to English. Most of the lyric is in English, but the chorus’s refrain of “san humanite,” is a reminder of Carnival’s and calypso’s nineteenth-century French roots (Hill 1993). Spontaneous calypso, known today as Extempo, still employs this refrain.

Calypso continued to grow in popularity in the 1920s and thirties. In 1934 Atilla the Hun [*sic*] and Growling Tiger traveled to New York City to record for Decca Records and performed on a national broadcast of popular singer Rudy Valle’s show (Hill 1993). Calypso’s popularity did not blunt its satirical edge. As an indication, a 1934 ordinance was put into effect requiring singers to submit their lyrics to censors for approval before they could be sung in public (Hill 1993).

During World War II the United States maintained a large base in northwestern Trinidad. U.S. troops were exposed to calypso music for the first time. A U.S. entertainer on a USO tour heard a calypso written by Lord Invader, set to a folk melody (Hill 1993). The entertainer, Morey Amsterdam, put his name on the song and passed it along to the Andrews Sisters. “Rum and

Coca Cola” went to number one in the United States in 1945 (*Billboard Magazine* 1945). Lord Invader was forced to sue to get a share of the royalties (Hill 1993). Calypso reached beyond Trinidad for a second time when American-born singer Harry Belafonte, whose mother was Jamaican, released his album *Calypso*, which, in fact, did contain a few calypsos. The album spent an incredible 31 weeks at number one on the U.S. pop chart (*Billboard Magazine* 1996).

At the same time, a legendary calypso superstar was enjoying his first success. The Mighty Sparrow *aka* Slinger Francisco won both Calypso King (the predecessor of Calypso Monarch) and Road March (the most performed song during the Carnival Tuesday parade) with “Jean and Dinah” (Dudley 2004), the beginning of a groundbreaking career that yielded eight Calypso crowns and eight Road March titles (Mighty Sparrow n.d.). Sparrow’s rise was simultaneous with the movement toward Trinidad and Tobago’s national independence in 1962 and the political ascendancy of Dr. Eric Williams, the independent nation’s first elected prime minister. Williams, acknowledging the power and popularity of calypso, referred to “Jean and Dinah” in one of his campaign speeches. Williams, running on the PNM ticket, answered hecklers trying to drown him out with calypsos by adapting the words of Sparrow’s Jean and Dinah “Sing Yankee gone and PNM take over now” (Anthony 1987, 100).

The 1970s brought both social and musical change. The Black Power movement brought with it a style combining rap with calypso, known, logically enough as rapso (Dudley 2004). More importantly, the artists known as Lord Shorty and later as Ras Shorty I began experimenting with a new combination of soul, calypso, and the Indian music he heard growing up. The style would eventually become known as soca (Dudley 2004). As with many genres that are birthed from older traditions, soca was not identified as a separate genre immediately. But

the best-known calypso performers and audience were not always receptive to the innovations. No less an authority than Kitchener announced that soca wasn't calypso. Yet Kitchener himself would have his own soca hit not long after (Short Pants Mac Intosh 2019).

The rise of soca coincided with a long decline in the general popularity and consequently commercial prospects of calypso and calypso artists. This negative effect wasn't immediately apparent. Calypso still had a relatively large audience, at least in Trinidad and Tobago, but younger people preferred soca and calypso gradually became the music of their parents and eventually, their grandparents. Soca rather than steel bands became the preferred music for the Carnival parade, broadcast at a volume that drowned out the steel bands (just as steel bands had driven out their predecessors, the tambu bamboo bands) (Lord Superior 2017). Soca's lyrics emphasize the celebratory and participatory elements of Carnival over calypso's tradition of social and political commentary. In the 1990s, calypso was still doing a good business, but without new audiences, any genre must suffer as its audience ages and ultimately disappears.

A bright spot in the midst of the slow decline in calypso's commercial fortunes was the success of David Rudder. Rudder began singing back-up vocals for Lord Kitchener in Kitchener's Kalypso Revue tent. Rudder soon began releasing his own records. He continues to perform, and made several appearances in Port of Spain during the 2018 Carnival season. Rudder, like Kitchener and Sparrow has been able to create authentic calypso while transcending the genre through his artistry, a rare skill (Short Pants Mac Intosh 2019).

Rudder's success masked the general decline in calypso's popularity. Mighty Chalkdust, Black Stalin, and Mighty Shadow, made strong contributions during the 1980s and 1990s, but none had the international appeal of David Rudder.

This brings us back to the current state of calypso in Trinidad and Tobago. Is the decline irreversible? Calypso is clearly struggling financially, but what about the current health of the practice itself? Though calypso doesn't interest as many Trinbagonians today, the topic still stirs up passionate debate, particularly during the height of Carnival season.

In a column written for *The Guardian*, published with three days left in the 2019 Carnival season, Tony Rakhall-Fraser captures many of the conflicting ideas about calypso's health. Rakhall-Fraser begins his column by quoting a journalist friend who "in a Facebook post announced to the national community the 'death of calypso.'" A response to the friend's post was even more blunt: "'stale news, calypso died some time ago.'" Rakhall-Fraser then points out what he believes to be the reason for calypso's struggles: a lack of quality compared to calypsos in the past. While granting that there are still a "few of the quality true, true calypsonians and calypsoes still editorialising in quality lyrics, sweet melodies and with the 'rapier touch,' the lyrics cutting on both sides like the 'doctor shop knife,'" but for the most part "traditional calypso has gone dull, boring, monotonous with dirgelike rhythms . . . there is an absence of melody and tune-full sweetness designed 'to turn ah woman body into jelly.' No imaginative creation of storylines with a sting in the tail. Double entendre, clever wordplay, and satire are unknown arts in today's calypso composition. No memorable recording of the history of ordinary people" (Rakhall-Fraser 2019).

I heard similar complaints while in Trinidad and Tobago from longtime calypso fans about the overall quality of the calypsos. They pointed out many of the same deficits, a lack of melody, not enough humor and wit, singers instead tending to "rant" on an issue, or making one-dimensional appeals for peace, understanding, or nation-building. One authority on the



subject has speculated that the lack of humor in calypsos in recent years is, "Because life has become so grim that few can find humor in current events" (Rohlehr 1998, 93).

Dr. Hollis Liverpool, anthropologist and faculty member at the University of Trinidad and Tobago, who in addition holds the record for most Calypso Crowns as his alter ego Mighty Chalkdust, admits to the difficulties. In an article written in response to a different critical piece by Rakhal-Fraser written the preceding year, he states that the tents and that calypso itself is worth saving, "I know of the dying mode of the calypso tents and of the current economic position of the country. I am the person who sang 'Calypso in Hospital' in 1992" (Liverpool 2018a). Chalkdust argues for the importance of the tents: "Since the calypso tents have been in existence since 1914 and have helped considerably not only in music education in our society, not only in the development of artistes of all kinds but also the general stability of the society, they being a source of catharsis for many and a pillar for our people's mental health, there is a need to save them from dying." Chalkdust goes on to cite actions taken by himself and local promoters to change the tent shows to make them more appealing. He also acknowledges "the falling standards of calypsonians" and actions he and others have taken "to improve the lyrics, melody, and delivery of the songs to the public." Part of this effort has included adding a college level course at the University of Trinidad and Tobago "in lyric writing for calypsonians" Chalkdust cites other reasons for calypso's woes. A dependence on government subsidies has been harmful for calypso when in other parts of the world "it is the firms, banks, social institutions and companies that uplift the arts and save them from destruction and decay." A lack of radio airplay has contributed to individual calypsos being less memorable, says Chalkdust, because

into the 1970s and 1980s, programs from the tents “were aired daily by all the radio stations during the season and for the entire year of their production” (Liverpool 2018b).

The mayor of San Fernando, a city in south Trinidad, in an article published March 3, 2019, pointed out the lack of support for “calypso and for Dimanche Gras, traditionally the night of calypso’s most important competition. What transpired in the years gone by is no longer exciting to some people. Young people are bringing a new approach. Look at the calypso tents for instance. Look what happened last night with the Dimanche Gras show. It does not have that captive audience as before. We have to go with the times.” The mayor also mentioned that members of a longtime “ole mas” band were thinning out due to age (Felmire 2019). The differences between the tastes of older and younger generations are often cited as the reason for the change.

Short Pants attributes calypso’s struggles to several of the issues mentioned so far, but puts them into a broader context. At the outset of World War II, he says, calypso was a folk culture, with the international fame and interest brought to the form, first by the Andrews Sisters hit with “Rum and Coca Cola,” by the presence of U.S. G.I.’s presence on the island and their exposure to the music (and thus the USO tour that brought Morey Amsterdam), and the 1956 platinum success of Harry Belafonte’s interpretation of calypso. The ascendancy of the Mighty Sparrow in the 1950s continued this success. Short Pants points out that the success of calypso, which continued into the 1970s propelled by Sparrow and Kitchener’s popularity, brought other, less-talented individuals into the business. He also believes that brilliant individual artists like Sparrow and Kitchener come along only every so often, and lift the

fortunes of the whole genre. Calypso is currently awaiting that artist, he believes (Short Pants Mac Intosh 2019).

Short Pants doesn't believe calypso is dying. He says there are 10-20 active young calypsonians today in Trinidad, but they are all struggling. He thinks highly of Helon Francis, the young winner of the 2018 Calypso Monarch crown, and believes that if Francis continues to work hard and learn, and "not be in too much of a rush," that he can do well (Short Pants Mac Intosh 2019).

Sophia Chote, in a February 2018 *Guardian* column, tied many issues relating to calypso's struggles together. Chote began by praising soca, saying that "it has overtaken the parade of the bands, calypso, and indeed every other form of cultural expression during Carnival" (Chote 2018). Soca's ascent paralleled and fueled a new phenomenon, one that competed directly with the calypso tents for money and attention, the all-inclusive fete, or party. Chote says, "Calypso became less appealing as the phenomenon of pre-Carnival parties emerged. People preferred and apparently still do, to pay their money to dress to the nines and to spend an evening out partying with friends . . . the partying public is young or youngish. They want escape, not insights into politics, race, or the human condition" (Chote 2018).

I was very aware of the "all-inclusives," during my time in Trinidad and Tobago. These parties were frequently advertised in the press and on radio in the months preceding Carnival. As the name implies, attendees of fetes pay a single price at the door, sometimes into the hundreds of dollars, for all they can eat and drink with entertainment from some of the top performers. These events are held by charities and schools as fundraisers, by performers, and by promoters.

Chote then broaches a topic that is tied to longstanding tensions between Trinidad and Tobago's two largest ethnic groups, those of African descent and those whose ancestors came from India. Chote explains, "As someone of the East Indian community, I can say I stopped going to the tents for various reasons . . . of course there were those calypsonians who made disparaging generalizations about persons of East Indian ancestry . . . Many persons I know, who are not of East Indian ancestry were similarly offended or simply did not want to pay to listen to people singing lyrics which were divisive or which diminished people for not coming from the right place, for being gay, for supporting different political parties and so on" (Chote 2018). During a 2019 phone conversation G. B. Ballantyne told me that the loss of the East Indian community's support and attendance at the calypso tents had been substantial.

At the same time, G. B. said he believed that calypso "is alive and well in part because "a culture cannot die, it's part of people's soul." He believes that the pundits are guilty of comparing contemporary calypso to the calypso of Sparrow, Kitchener, and other past masters when it will by nature "change form" and adjust to the influences around it. The problems of the tents are a separate issue and related to the need for a different marketing strategy. G. B. also mentioned the lack of radio airplay as a significant factor in calypso's decline in popularity, "you can't remember what you don't hear" (Ballantyne 2019).

Newspapers in Trinidad and Tobago can carry good news about calypso. In 2019, three family members won the trifecta of the Junior Calypso Monarch, the Extempo Monarch, and the Calypso Monarch crowns. Ronaldo London, winner of the Calypso Monarch title, was 21. Brian London, winner of the 2019 Extempo crown said of his nephews' success: "I think the future of kaiso is in good hands. You always hear the talk that kaiso dying. You always hear the old adage

that kaiso dying and who is going to stand up and take the reins of kaiso and I think these young people have been standing up and holding onto the reigns and carrying kaiso along their backs.” Ronaldo, winner of the Calypso Monarch crown is quoted as saying, “I didn’t have anything to lose being the youngest competitor in the competition so for me it ain’t about the win, it’s just about keeping calypso alive” (Khan 2019). And it was in the headlines when Myron B. won the 2018 Extempo crown over the veteran calypsonian Gypsy. Gypsy held ten Extempo Monarch titles (Matroo 2018). A 24-year-old calypsonian, Helon Francis, took the Calypso Monarch crown in 2018.

Evidence of a new generation who can carry calypso into the future is good news. Rakhal-Fraser, following his friend’s remark about calypso’s demise, says there may be hope for calypso in the form of its musical kin, soca. Describing soca as “calypso’s very close cousin,” Rakhal-Fraser believes that soca might “serve to reinfuse its older and more venerable cousin with vigour, and a reason to keep fighting for survival” (Rakhal-Fraser 2019).

What about soca? It was seen by calypso traditionalists as an unwanted step-child when it first appeared in the 1970s. Only small differences exist between the two in terms of rhythm. Lyrical content and vocal treatment are the main differences between the two (Dudley 1996). Composer and former Calypso Monarch judge and commentator, Alvin Daniell, is quoted on the subject by Shannon Dudley in *Ethnomusicology*: “There’s absolutely no difference between soca and calypso . . . try to tell them stop pushing this soca nonsense, and just deal with soca as a highly rhythmic form of calypso, end of story, but call it calypso” (Dudley 1996, 294). Dudley, describing how vocals are used in soca, points out that in soca the singer is able to “participate more as another instrument in a rhythmic and timbral ‘groove’ that is created for a party

atmosphere and dancing.” He theorizes that soca’s downplaying of the importance of the lyric “can be attributed to, at least in part, to soca’s international marketing . . . in any case it violates the expectation of elaborate oratory that is fundamental to many Trinidadian calypso lovers” (Dudley 1996, 294).

Gordon Rohlehr, a retired University of the West Indies professor and authority on calypso, attributes the contest between calypso and soca and other hybrid blends of calypso to the tension between preserving tradition and wanting access to international markets (Rohlehr 1998, 84). The blending of calypso with other styles is the result of “the tendency of calypso over several decades . . . to move toward a musical resolution of internal ethnic and aesthetic conflicts. Whereas the local music scene has provided opportunities for musical diversity, the international scene has had a homogenizing effect” (Rohlehr 1998, 85). As for the death of calypso, Rohlehr says, “Calypso is alive in all its various forms, though one type, soca, receives a disproportionate amount of airplay at Carnival time” (Rohlehr 1998, 94).

Lord Superior, who toured with Kitchener and was taken in as a young musician by the brilliant Mighty Spoiler, told me in our interview that he believed calypso’s future was in its past (Lord Superior 2018). Superior said this after we had both attended a concert celebrating the 1934 trip to New York City of Atilla the Hun and Growling Tiger. The concert had been well-attended and featured the songs of Atilla and Lion with commentary about the trip in between songs. Superior meant, I believe, that calypso now qualified as a traditional music versus a contemporary style and was hopeful that this could be a way out of calypso’s current dilemma. As a case in point, during the 2018 Carnival season, the National Trust of Trinidad and Tobago sponsored a historical Carnival arts tour that included Might Sparrow’s museum, Lord

Kitchener's home, "Rainorama," and had as its last stop a luncheon and concert by Lord Superior at his home.

When I arrived in Port of Spain in the fall of 2017 for the first of two two-month stays, I took advantage of the limited calypso performances that were available during October's Calypso History Month. I also began interviewing calypso composers as part of my Fulbright grant project. My friendship with retired federal judge Ray Funk, a fellow Fulbright scholar for Trinidad and Tobago and longtime resident of Fairbanks, Alaska, who has been traveling to Trinidad and Tobago for extended stays for more than twenty years to collect and preserve Carnival culture, has been extremely helpful. Ray had given me his detailed appraisal of the calypso scene in Trinidad and Tobago based on his twenty years of work there. He also provided me with introductions and suggestions of which composers might be best to seek out for interviews.

During the few calypso performances I attended in the fall, and the many I attended during January and February of 2018 I noticed the relatively older age of the audience members, the average age of the performers (there were young performers), and the number of unfilled chairs in the tents/auditoriums. I attended "Extemporama," an event showcasing the extemporaneous calypso that featured stalwarts like Gypsy, but also young talented performers like Kevan Calliste, who would win Junior Extempo Monarch during the upcoming Carnival and was the grandson of legendary calypsonian Black Stalin. As a student of calypso, I was in heaven during these shows. The performers were spirited, but I noticed organizational improvements that could be made that might increase the appeal of the shows without diluting the music.

While I was thrilled to hear live calypso, I could understand many of the criticisms and complaints that I heard.

During the fall of 2017 I also taught a course at the University of Trinidad and Tobago's Academy for the Performing Arts in the notational system used in Nashville recording studios known as the Nashville Number System. I read the local newspapers and listened to local radio daily, the latter while at the gym. The bulk of music I heard outside of the calypso performances was soca (great for working out). The only calypso I heard on the radio, with a rare exception, was the specialty radio show hosted by Short Pants Mac Intosh on Sundays. I was able to attend the first round of preliminaries to qualify for places in the calypso tents in the upcoming Carnival season.

I'm glad I followed the advice of Ray Funk and interviewed nine out of the ten composers before I returned for my second two-month stint beginning in January of 2018. After Christmas performers were busy readying themselves for the upcoming Carnival season. When the tents opened I attended as many and as often as I could. From the outset of the season there began to be problems, with some tent organizers not receiving their promised "subventions" or government grants to cover expenses. This made it clear that the tents had come to rely on government assistance for survival. For many years the government had been prosperous from oil royalties produced by Trinidad and Tobago's offshore oil resources, but that production was diminishing and so was the government's ability to support the arts. While the diminishing of oil money was affecting the economy as a whole, and the public's ability to pay for non-necessities, like calypso tents, I noticed the popularity of the all-inclusive fetes. The



fetes were a strong competitor with the calypso tent for the disposable income of people of all ages.

The calypso tents featured live bands, which I appreciated, but the backing musicians most almost seemed poorly rehearsed, particularly the horn sections, which by their very nature stand out. The tents featured a mix of younger and older performers. Some were well-known veterans, on the bill by virtue of their reputations, while others had won a spot through an audition.

So, what is my personal evaluation? Is calypso alive or dead? I believe it is alive. The young (or younger) winners of the major crowns in 2018 and 2019 indicate a healthy changing of the guard. The spirited Junior Monarch semi-final competitions I witnessed, the younger extempo contestants at Extemporama, all bode well for the future. But I base my ultimate evaluation on a different source: the ten practitioners of calypso I interviewed as part of my Fulbright grant. The express purpose of the interviews was to learn about the writing methods of these composers. I didn't ask them to reflect on the health of calypso and in retrospect, I'm glad I didn't. What I got instead was a very lively response to my questions about the topic that interested them most and how the act of creation happens for them. Instead of a rehash of opinions that I could read in the daily papers, what I got was an indication, expressed uniquely by each person, of their continuing connection to an art that remains very much alive for them.

I remember vividly, for example, Lord Superior sitting in his living room, softly strumming his guitar as we talked. At first Supie, as he's known to his friends, seemed cool and distant but, as he played examples on guitar to illustrate for me what he was saying, became increasingly

animated and engaged. His performance of Spoiler's classic, "Bed Bug," as we sat together in his living room in Diego Martin remains powerful.

Winsford Devine, writer of songs for Sparrow and many others, is currently in his seventies and a stroke victim. He can no longer play guitar. Yet he has devised a way to use a keyboard and computer to compose. He regularly writes calypsos about the news and then posts them on *The Guardian* website to express his views on the topics of the day.

Surpriser, in his mid-eighties, performed several calypsos for me and assorted friends and family on his daughter's porch. When I asked if he still writes, he said "I get up from bed in the morning, I humming a calypso (Surpriser 2017).

Short Pants told me that when he is working on a calypso he likes to work at night, "I go out, right? And at one o'clock everything just shuts down . . . just the dogs barking, the occasional car, and you sit there. And at five thirty, when the birds start, you've got three stanzas and you say, 'Nice. I can go to bed now'" (Short Pants Mac Intosh 2017).

SpiceY recounted to me the story behind one of her best-known songs, "D' Advice." She laughed as she remembered sitting in a bar and overhearing a comment that became the song's title. Leaving immediately, she wrote two verses and a chorus on the way home, then had to deflect the attention of her young daughter long enough to finish the song (SpiceY 2017).

Sharlan Bailey will often write a song in fifteen minutes, when the idea as he says, "just come" (Bailey 2017).

I can still visualize Shirlane Henderickson seated at my dining room table, illustrating how she composes by singing and tapping on the table. She then described to me the

unorthodox way she communicates her ideas in the studio. Musicians are regularly amazed by her musical sophistication despite a lack of formal music training (Hendrickson 2017).

One of my favorite interviews was with Kenneth Nathaniel, also known as Hindu Prince. I conducted our interview in a converted railway station where Prince, the son of the station master, had lived as a child. The station in the sleepy rural community in central Trinidad is still there, but the rail line has long since been abandoned.

And there was Gypsy, former government minister and former Calypso Monarch, who surprised me with his spot-on version of Merle Haggard's "Mama Tried," then shared with me how his mother's love of country music led to his, evident in his calypsos. Like the rest, Gypsy continues to write and record (Gypsy 2017).

Finally, G. B. Ballantyne described to me, as if it were yesterday, how he wrote what he considers his best song, "Calypso Rising." "Walking home from work, just short of my home, I heard (G. B. begins singing), 'Rising out of the ghetto of third world stagnation.' (Speaks.) That's all. So, I run home, throw my briefcase in the car, told my wife, 'I think there is some kind of spirit in the road. I just heard something . . . and I just started to build the song from there: 'Rising out of the ghetto of third world stagnation/Reaching out for tomorrow with a world vibration'" (Ballantyne 2017). The song has been recorded by G. B., David Rudder, and others.

But there's no substitute for hearing these wonderful artists talk about their work and sing their songs. I hope you seek out their music. I also encourage you to visit the website created by Vanderbilt University where recordings and transcripts of these interviews, and information about the composers is posted: <https://calypsointerviews.omeka.net>.

I will end with the chorus of a song by Lord Superior, “Long Live Calypso,” a fitting description of the passion these artists conveyed to me with their words and songs, and their optimism for its future.

This same calypso has outlived rock and roll

And calypso will outlive soul

Furthermore, fads will come but when they are gone

This same calypso will be carrying on.

(“Long Live Calypso” by Lord Superior)

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