

Saving Calypso with Toronto's Kaiso Street Society¹

Gloria Blizzard

“Calypso is the most important music in the world,”

says musician Jesse Ryan of the music originating in the twin island nation of Trinidad and Tobago. We talk via screens as I interview him for this article. We are both in Toronto, and share common origins and ideas. We agree that calypso shares an ancestral musical and cultural thread with all diasporic cultures that originated in Africa and spread throughout the world – to Cuba, to the French- and English-speaking Caribbean and to Brazil – via the chattel slavery system. We both recognize that calypso as a form, speaks to and about power, culture, social dynamics and the evolution of a people. Ryan surprises me however when he says, “Because of its sheer popularity between the 40s and the 70s, it deeply influenced other forms; in the U.S. in the 50s and 60s, it rivalled rock ‘n’ roll. Every club had regular calypso-themed events.”

*I said calypso sweeping the place like if she come outta space
My, my calypso sweeping the place like if she come outta space
I can remember rock and roll had the whole place under control
Since calypso leave Trinidad rock and roll really suffering bad
— The Mighty Sparrow, No More Rocking and Rolling (1958)*

Origins

“It is an important political music and culture of music because it came out of a people who did not have one identity ... it became the expression of the collective identity for people of Trin-Tobago,” Ryan says. Between the 1400s and 1800s the two islands changed hands many times as different industries caught Western Europe’s attention. Initially, the Indigenous Taino population were forced to dive for pearls and then dig for gold. When European interest turned toward the more lucrative sugar, the Dutch brought enslaved Africans to the island and built six sugar factories. The French soon followed with both free and enslaved people and then the Spanish arrived. Eventually the British took over. At certain points there were Indigenous Taino (formerly referred to as Carib), a few Dutch and a French-speaking majority, all living under Spanish law. The islands were eventually taken over by the British.

“Calypso comes out of all that. The tyranny of chattel slavery of Africans kidnapped and brought to the islands to manpower the industry and colonial rule. That’s the environment that led to the formation of calypso. In addition, there’s other history that comes later on with the arrival of the indentured Indian and Chinese populations. With calypso, there’s also the South American influence that came through Venezuela.”

Calypsonians sing under cover of a sobriquet. In the documentary *Calypso Dreams*, calypsonian and academic, the Mighty Chalkdust explains, “Calypso is a poor man’s newspaper, the people’s spokesman, let de people know what time it is, what going on behind they back.”

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However, “it’s not the singer saying, it is the title. Like a colonial judge in an English wig who give a sentence, makes a proclamation – it is the wig doing it, not the man.” Mighty Sparrow, Atilla the Hun, Lord Blakie, Lord Melody and Sir Lancelot can say what an ordinary person cannot.

Music and Identity

Every Sunday, both in Trinidad and here in Canada, in the family home with my parents and brothers, the house was filled with the sounds of music – all day. My father had primary access to the record or compact disc or cassette player – whatever the thing with the speakers attached at the time. He often played calypso for hours.

I gathered its importance, not just by how much aural space it took up in the home, but by the fact that my otherwise very busy father would, with sheer delight, happily explain the lyrics to me. He would deconstruct the political commentary, the sexual innuendo, the economic and social and cultural histories and the clever turns of phrase. He explained the impact of the American military base on the island in the lyrics of *Rum* and *Coca Cola* by Lord Invader (with melody by Venezuelan composer Lionel Belasco). He explained what happened when they left in Sparrow’s song *Jean and Dinah*.

He was always amazed and so proud and would delight at the cleverness and truths nestled within “Dan is the man in the van,” as Sparrow sings on the uselessness of colonial education that taught people on the island nothing of their own history. “It make me a stupid,” he sang. My father would grin gleefully at Lord Blakie’s raucous laugh, following a particularly scandalous insight. He showed me what calypsonian David Rudder said in the documentary *Calypso Dreams*, “the laugh fools people, under the laugh is a blade.” My father’s greatest legacy to me, is the love and appreciation for this art form.

Women calypsonians joined in later on in this predominantly male-originated field. Calypso Rose and others eventually gave some clever, funny, joyful, insights on politics and culture, as well as some discerning licks back to the men. Traditional calypso has often been a way through suffering, sometimes cutting, sometimes light, ironic and gleeful. And yes, sometimes, it’s all fun and games.

“Fire fire in she wire wire, ay yai yai, oi oi oi” sang my little brother, still a toddler, joyfully one Sunday morning in church. The family was busy sitting and standing, chanting and then singing as is common in the Catholic mass. That moment we all stood and at this new opportunity to sing, he joined in in full voice with this familiar refrain. “Fire fire in she wire wire,” from the Queen of Calypso herself.

Global dialogues

Britain positioned itself as the mother country for colonial subjects and then was somewhat surprised when said subjects showed up on her shores, looking for new life opportunities.

“London is the place for me,” sang Lord Kitchener smiling for the reporters and cameras who were there to meet him as he disembarked *SS Empire* in 1948.

London would go on to become a centre for the form. Traditional calypso as Ryan prefers to call it, (or ole time calypso, a Trini might say), contains embedded social commentary, clever turns of phrase and, amongst the chipping and the intoxicating sing-along melodies and rhythms, sophisticated solos and arrangements. In London, Lord Kitchener and others, made recordings with some of the best jazz musicians of the day.

However, even while recording and performing, Lord Kitchener became disenchanted by the struggle with racism in Britain and wrote,

*So boys, if you brown they say you can stick around
If you white, well everything's alright
If your skin is dark, no use to try
You got to suffer until you die.*

With this new positioning, “Kitch” as he was affectionately known, was also singing “Africa My Home,” as Caribbean people and people within the pan-African movement dug into histories beyond the imposed colonial ones.

I want to come back home, gyal I tired roam

The Mighty Dollar

Some of the best-known calypso artists are not the originators of calypso at all. Gloria written by the Mighty Bomber, Ryan’s grandfather, was on the American musician Harry Belafonte’s first album, which sold a million copies. The Mighty Bomber and many other calypsonians felt unrecognized or improperly compensated for their compositions.

When infuriated originators went to New York to get some recourse, despite the commercial worth and cultural influence of their work they were rarely successful. It was a complex scenario in that they also had to listen as their sound, commentary and turns of phrase were turned into something lighter – “brandy mixed with water,” sang Chalkdust in *Misconceptions*, referring to North American versions of calypso. The sordid boon is that the form became well-known far beyond the borders of the tiny twin island nation due to these recordings. Still, there are many absent narratives around calypso, many disappeared artists, composers, many lost or barely remembered works.

Toronto and the Kaiso Street Society

Toronto became another calypso hub, when in the 1950s immigration opened up in Canada and people from the Caribbean travelled to Canada. The Caribana annual parade, instituted by Trinidadians in the city, fashioned itself after the festivities in their homeland. The Mighty Bomber was commissioned to write a calypso for Expo 67. Calypso also had a significant presence in Montreal where Lord Caressa worked for a couple years with the CBC as a broadcaster, and where the Carifête celebration soon became established.

Toronto is also the location of the Kaiso Street Society – a group that includes Deborah Maitland, Aurora Banjath, Natasia Morris and Kadijah Simpson. Founded and directed by Jesse Ryan, it has a mandate to investigate, and honour, document, promote and educate around traditional Calypso to ensure it is preserved and holds its place in the global musical lexicon.

“One of the reasons why I’m so passionate about this is that I really think that traditional calypso is one of the most important musics ever created,” says Ryan. The group is ensuring the original art form has its historical place in modern music. The initiative is in part inspired by Ryan’s questioning why he grew up not knowing about calypso’s deep connection to jazz, or why he did not know much about Frankie Francis who recorded several jazz-infused albums including one with the RCA All Stars Orchestra in 1964, or why the great album,

Doctor Kitch recorded by Lord Kitchener in 1963, featuring brilliant horn arrangements and improvised solos, is still not more broadly known.

“I think [it is] actually one of the only forms of music that documents its own history,” says Ryan.

They mean to license we mouth, they don't want we talk
— King Radio, *Sedition Law* (1940)

“At the time, anything the British considered to be lewd or anything that invited people to scrutinize British law were deemed seditious and both were illegal,” says Ryan. This calypso, commenting on the times, was ironically banned. Calypso was a space for thinking, communicating, commenting and reminding people of themselves in environments that would obliterate them.

Rock back

With a focus on the four global hubs of calypso – Trinidad and Tobago, London, New York and Toronto – the Kaiso Street Society documents where the music has thrived, influenced and created cultural evolutions. As the group brings into the light the imagination, memory and spirit of resistance embodied in the music, it reframes calypso as music for social change.

Kaiso aims to research, archive, share and teach the histories, legacies, the deep cross pollination globally that has taken place during the last 200 years, highlighting global connections and impact. In the works are plans to continue research, host workshops, create listening libraries, and a tour, in 2025, of the Kaiso Street Collective, an ensemble, made up of some of Toronto's best improvisers and composers.

Every music has its pop genre, and soca has elements of the traditional form; however it rarely shares traditional calypso's musical gravitas, social and political commentary, or its clever turns of phrase. From early Superblue's joyful *What's the time mister wolf, bacchanal time!* to the infectious 2018, Afrobeats-influenced Year for Love by Voice, to the 2024 winning road march, Mical Teja's DNA - “*han' up in the air, madness everywhere, it in we DNA ... we in de road way, tell dem freedom in we dna*”, soca's fast tempos and simple lyrics are what we will now hear at the annual parade on Toronto's streets. “Soca can take care of itself,” says Ryan. It does not need saving.

Remembering calypso's legacy is part of Kaiso's vision. Within the unique musical contribution of traditional calypso is a powerful living history. And in the spirit of Lord Relator's PSA *Sip and Chat* on responsible drinking – “if you can't do it, don' bother come drink my rum” – as we move close to Toronto Caribbean Carnival and jump up to the sounds of soca, let's remember to look backwards and inwards to the original music. Let's listen to de ole time calypso and remember the great masters and mistresses of the form.

Gloria Blizzard writes on music, dance, culture and is the author of *Black Cake, Turtle Soup, and Other Dilemmas*.