

THE INFLUENCE OF THE WEST AFRICAN SONGS OF DERISION IN THE NEW WORLD

by

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1. ANALOGIES TO JAZZ.

Jazz has an ancient and honourable tradition. Some of its elements, especially rhythm, may probably be traced back directly to West Africa. Actually West African music, in the course of its evolution, has influenced nearly all the music of the New World.

One of the most interesting types of West African music is the Song of Derision, which sometimes were so powerful that an intended victim paid the local troubadours *not* to sing them. Songs of Derision were brought over to the United States and the Caribbean area by the slaves. In this country it became the basis for a good many blues, such as Ma Rainey's *Ice Bag Papa*, Bessie Smith's *Worn Out Papa Blues*, and, more recently, *I'm Gonna Move to the Outskirts of Town*, *Bloodshot Eyes*, and many more. In the West Indies it developed into Calypso. Many people have a completely wrong idea about this musical form, considering it simply a comical way to sing dirty songs with the accent on the wrong syllable. Actually it is a complex and ancient musical form, similar in many respects to jazz, and especially the blues. It has some of the same elements: Spanish and French melodies, some English influences, and of course the West African rhythm.

Songs of Derision were sung in the fields by the slaves, casting satirical aspersions upon their owners, or giving warnings in tribal dialects, mixed with the language of their masters. In this way developed the patois languages of the West Indies: the French Creole (spoken in somewhat different fashion in Haiti, Martinique, Trinidad, and of course New Orleans); the now extinct Dutch Creole of the Virgin Islands and neighbouring areas; the Papiamentu of Curacao; the Talkie-Talkie of Surinam, and others.

Here we see an analogy with the blues, which were often based on field "hollers," and work songs, often satirical with allusions only understood by the initiated. *Even now the Calypso songs, like the blues, often have a double meaning.*

It is also interesting to note that many of the early café piano recordings are in many ways similar to some of the Jelly Roll Morton's Spanish Tinge pieces. On the other hand, they also resemble early blues and boogie woogie numbers. A good example of this are some very rare *Victor* recordings, issued around 1922: *Bulldog Don't Bite Me* (Tobago Paseo), by Walter Merrick, coupled with *Go Way Gal* (Trinidad Calypso) by Johnnie Walker (*Vi* 73060). The last has some singing on it, and the piano has very much of the rolling bass effects of early Yancey Dupree, etc. When one listens carefully this rolling bass effect is evident in nearly all Calypso music.

Walter Merrick also cut two sides on *Victor*: *Amour D' Aimée* (Creole) and *Rosa Caraquena* (*Vi* 73209), which are much more European but still have some of the Jelly flavour.

Instrumental Calypsos are rare. It is mainly a vocal form. One of the reasons may be that in the Caribbean, brass instruments were not as readily available as in New Orleans. Here again we see an analogy with the blues, where the voice is the main medium of expression. On the French Island of Martinique, where instrumental music is played regularly, there is practically no developed Calypso form. In the French tradition, the clarinet is the main instrument here, and the music of this island is close to early New Orleans jazz.

The basic rhythm for most Trinidad Calypsos is the Paseo, a medium fast rumba (actually Cuban *son*). Sometimes on earlier recordings the terms Calypso and Paseo are interchanged.

To investigate the connections and similarities between traditional New Orleans Jazz and Calypso-Paseo rhythms, the Dixieland band of Humphrey Lyttleton recently conducted an interesting experiment in England. Lyttleton combined his trumpet, and the clarinet and trombone of his group, with the clarinet, piano and rhythm section of Freddie Grant's West Indian orchestra, and called the combination the "Lyttleton-Grant Paseo Jazz Orchestra." They played several N.O. "standards." The result is not always too satisfying, but in a few cases the two types of music blend remarkably well. These records are unfortunately rather difficult to get in this country. They are on *English Parlophone*; the best example is *Fat Tuesday* (R3543); others are *Muskrat Ramble* and *Mam'zelle Josephine*—known here as *Sale Dame*—(R3563) and the *Original Jelly Roll Blues* (R3566). They compare somewhat to the Creole Jazz discs on *Circle* (Album 3-13, Albert Nicholas and group).

This same type of experiment, in a different vein, was also conducted by some of the modern bands (Kenton, Gillespie, etc.) when they recorded with Afro-Cuban drummers.

It seems fairly certain that early jazz and early West Indian music were similar but that they must have grown away from each other, making results of such experiments of much musicological interest.

The focal point of Calypso is mainly in Trinidad, like New Orleans for jazz, but just as in that city the sources are not restricted to that one locality. Just as many experts agree that jazz developed out of many divergent sources and localities, spread over a wide area in the Southern and South-Western United States, it would also seem that the origins of Calypso music range from the Bahamas to the mainland of South America.

2. DIFFERENCES IN LOCAL FORMS.

In *Trinidad* the majority of the slaves were imported by the Spaniards in the second half of the 18th Century. The island belonged at that time to Spain, but in 1797 it passed into British hands, and by 1807 slavery was officially abolished. In addition to the Spanish and English colonists, there were many French planters (refugees from the Island of Haiti, which became independent in 1803 and banished all whites). As in most localities in the West Indies, drums and native rituals were strictly forbidden. So, as a sort of compensation the slaves sang their tribal songs, satirizing their masters in the French Creole dialect. Later the English language came into use, but there are still many Creole Calypsos in evidence. The music, however, is strongly Spanish influenced (Trinidad is only a few miles from Venezuela on the South American mainland) and the basic dance rhythm for most Calypsos of that island is the Paseo.

In addition to the Afro-Spanish-French influence there is also a slight admixture of East Indian music. In the early 1900's, large amounts of workers were imported from India. They thrived on the island and soon became an important factor in the social and cultural life. While there is considerable intermarriage between Negroes and Indians, there is still some friction between the groups. Typical derision songs poking fun at the Indians include: *Coolie Man Walk* ("Coolie" is the nickname for Indians), *Hindu Calypso* and others. The other foreign elements of the island—Chinese, Syrian, etc.—had little or no influence on the music.

Jamaica is in much the same position as Trinidad, having also been under Spanish domination, but its music is slightly different. It uses the Mento, faster and more syncopated than the Paseo, and more under influence of American jazz. Jamaican Calypsos are often more folk type and less satirical than the others: e.g., *Linstead Market* ("I did not sell any fruit today; what a shame").

The music of the *Bahamas* is influenced by American jazz and religious songs, while in *Barbados* many Calypso songs are of the English Music Hall type (*Barbados* is the most British of all Caribbean islands, having been under this flag all the time).

In some of the other islands there were other factors. For instance, in a commercial and agricultural centre like St. Thomas, in the *Virgin Islands*, there were secret meetings in the hills (of course the local authorities forbade the use of drums here, too). They were in the form of circle dances with a woman, called "queen," as leader. Local gossip and scandals, and criticism of the masters were aired. This version was called *Bamboula*, and the possibility exists that it was the same as that danced in New Orleans in the early Congo Square days. When slavery was abolished in 1847, the *Bamboula* took to the town and was universally performed.

In some of the other islands, such as *Antigua*, house-moving songs were very popular. This is exactly what the name implies; someone wanted to move his home (walls, roof and all), all the neighbours and friends pitched in, and sang praises or derision of the owner (the latter if he did not feed them). In *Haiti*, the *coumbite* (co-operative work societies) songs are of the same nature, while on this island the *Pinyique* is the local version of the allusion and gossip song.

Puerto Rico has Spanish versions of Calypso songs in its satirical *Plenas* and *Seis Demicas* (which are mostly songs of praise). These are of course strongly influenced by Spanish music, especially the Andalusian flamencos. Even in *Venezuela* the *Joropo*, now a ballroom dance, originally also featured a singer airing local gossip and grievances.

According to the noted folklorist Harold Courlander: "It is in the particular style of delivery that Calypso singing is unique, the use of archaic and synthetic words, the cramming of many syllables into smaller space, the importance of rhyming and the free conception of rhyme, all these are characteristic."—(*Saturday Review*, October 18, 1952).

As the "Gorilla," one of Trinidad's exponents, puts it:

"Calypso is a thing I'm telling you
When you are singing you must learn to be impromptu
Never mind your English but mind your rhymes
When you get the gist of it, you sing it all the time
For veteran Calypsonians are known to be
Men who can sing on anything instantly."
(*Esquire*—1938).

The modern Calypsos have broadened out to include many subjects in addition to their original allusion songs. Current events: "The abdication of King Edward" or The Big Hurricane (*Bahamas*) are important topics described; there are countless political songs, some of a vicious nature; and of course Love, in all forms, shapes and manners; and many other subjects. Especially in Trinidad, the Calypsonian is a person of great importance, particularly during the Carnival season. In the "tents" (makeshift affairs with bamboo poles), the new songs are presented to the public and the composer and singer of the prizewinning song is hailed as the hero of the year. It is well known that the Calypsonians call themselves by exotic names like Houdini, Lord Tiger, The Beginner, The Growler, Duke of Iron, Sir Lancelot, etc. There are "cutting" contests in improving lyrics, often spiced with insults.

Actually the old lyrics were purely improvised, then certain songs were identified with certain Calypsonians, like *Stone Cold Dead in the Market* by Houdini and *Ugly Woman* by Lord Invader, and it was considered extremely bad form to steal each other's songs. Lately, however, the newer Calypso singers borrow freely from each other and some even go so far as to put their name on an old well-known tune. Others have special material written for them. Unfortunately, through tourist influence, many have degenerated lately into party songs.

A few North American entertainers have ventured in the Calypso field. Ella Fitzgerald is actually the only one who can give it a somewhat authentic representation

(*Stone Cold Dead in the Market, Peas and Rice*). Jamaica-educated Harry Belafonte gives forth in true Blue Angel style and recorded *Man Smart*, with sound effects and all, but at least in satisfactory dialect. In general the sophisticated night club approach resulted only in pallid (and squalid) imitations.

Discography: Calypso music hit the general public during the last World War, when *Rum and Coca Cola* swept the country. Of course, there were Calypso records available much earlier than that. Among the earliest found so far are by Jamaica's Sam Manning (who is still going strong), recorded around 1925. He made *Bungo* and *Let Go My Hand* on *Columbia*, Black Label (No. 14110-D, Master 141020/1) with the Cole *Jazz* Orchestra. This is of course a real collector's item. Others are on *Okeh*, from around 1927/28, also extremely rare. A few good examples are:

A Song of Praise Calypso: *Lieutenant Julian* (about the Black Eagle who was supposed to fly the ocean like Lindbergh), with the reverse being a well known Jamaican Song, *Sweetie Charlie* (on *Okeh* 8567, Master 400192). Both have Manning on the vocal with the Jack Celesian Caribbean Serenaders. Recorded about the same time is the typical derision songs, *Go, I Have Somebody Sweeter Than You* and *Keep Your Hands Off That*—on *Okeh* 8302 (no master No.), this time by Sam Manning's Blue Hot Syncopators. On a 1935 *Blue-Bird* there is a Paseo by Sam Manning and his Orchestra called *Belle Merchand* (here again the French Creole influence) and on the reverse the good advice: *Don't Interfere with Man and Wife* (BB B4927). Manning records now for *Decca*.

Lionel Belasco, the old master (now playing with the Carib Singers), recorded several piano rolls, in true cafe style, and a great many Calypsos. Very interesting is an old folk Calypso, *Wash-Pan-Wash*, called a "Paseo" on the label. On the reverse is *Lucille*, a Spanish Waltz (this is also on *Blue-Bird* B4990, recorded around 1935).

A much older number is the *Panama Paseo No. 1* by the *Belasco Trinidad Band*, recorded about 1922 on *Victor*, Black Label 67362A, backed by *Single Tone Calypso* (sic), by J. Resigna.

Most difficult to find are the old Trinidad 'Band' records, actually preceding the present vocalist-small combo setup. Some of these are: Orquesta Tipica de Trinidad, doing *Raftes* and *Lia* on *Blue Columbia* (C3312, Master 82319, circa 1925) and the *Trinidad Paseo* and *Sara* by the Banda Mixta Lovey (*Victor* Black Label 63793, circa 1923).

Calypso recording started in earnest in the '40's. But before that there were several blues *Deccas* (Houdini, the Lion, etc.).

Unfortunately there are not many very good Calypso records available in this country. The *Guild*, *Musicraft* and *Continental* recordings are of very poor quality. *Dial* has some good examples (401 and 405) and there is an excellent recording of the *Mighty Zebra* on the "Festival del Caribe" record (Caribbean E2). *Folkways* has an early LP (FP 8) and more recently also a cut of the *Zebra* (one of the best newer Calypsonianians) on *Folkways* FP 840; Caribbean Dances. Also on *SuperTone* 802 are several satisfactory examples of recent performers. The English *Deccas* and *Parlophones*, as well as the lesser known *Melodiscs* are generally excellent, but very difficult to obtain in this country.

It is very important to keep in mind that there is a common denominator in all West Indian music. There is, and was, constant contact between the islands, and especially lately, through the medium of records, radio, etc., a strong influx of the United States. Each type of music influences the other; there is a constant interchange of ideas. As shown, most islands developed a style of their own, due to local customs and ethnic differences, but elements of each type of music can be found in all the islands.

West Indian music, like jazz, is a vital and dynamic musical form; it has a definite place in our society and influenced the popular music of today to a great degree.

We cannot know what is in the future. Will it merge again with its original Afro-American co-form, or will it develop further along its own lines? Perhaps the *Record Changer* of May, 2054, will have the answer.