

calypso and conscience...



Prize of Trinidad. One year later he represented his country at the CARIFESTA in Barbados. In 1982 the Network Rapso Riddum Band was part of the "Irie Kaiso Movement" which, under the leadership of calypsonians Black Stalin and Brother Valentino, sought to establish an alternative forum for politically radical music (but failed due to financial problems). Resistance also worked in the theater, infusing his rapso poetry into university drama productions while struggling to strengthen his own musical foundation. Since 1981 the Network Rapso Riddum Band has recorded an album virtually every year (the debut record was *Block Fire*) and has enjoyed increasing national renown. Focusing on the central role of the drums (percussion and steel pan), its music was based on the rhythms of calypso but later developed into a characteristic style fusing kaiso, Rastafarian chanting and drumming with reggae (and recently even funk beats: "Life Is So Beautiful" and "How Yuh Like It" on the 1991 lp *Touch de Earth*).

The real breakthrough, however, came in 1985. The album *Rapso Takeover* launched Resistance's solo career. His tune "Ring de Bell," included on *Rapso Takeover* and released as a maxi-single, became an alternative hit in Trinidad and throughout the Caribbean.

The international connection was finally established when, due to the unsatisfactory recording facilities in Trinidad, the group did what most of their calypso/soca colleagues had been doing for some time: They exported their music abroad, recorded it in England and imported it again into their own country. Eventually Resistance set up a permanent base in London and commuted between Britain and Trinidad. This gave him the chance to get involved in the British performing scene. On the New Variety circuit he shared the bill with many a dub poet and his popularity started to grow on both sides of the Atlantic. Resistance became President of the Writers Union of Trinidad/Tobago and several successful records further bolstered his position as the leading rapso poet. Moreover, he started to promote other artists. In 1987 he produced the debut single of Karega Mandela, also a member of the Network Rapso Riddum Band, *Free Up Africa* (followed by *Rapso Power* one year later).

In spite of some successful projects to promote the cause of rapso in its native land (like "National Rapso Day"), it is still difficult for rapso poets to get exposure beyond the alternative scene. It is a problem, for instance, to gain access to the various calypso tents, open every year a couple of months before Carnival, which feature all the popular artists with their new selections. As Resistance says, "It is hard for the cultural establishment to deal with a whole new alternative concept, a radical approach on the road forward to true independence."

Brother Resistance: THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

INTERVIEW BY RON SAKOLSKY

Brother Resistance (Lutalo Makossa Masimba) was a founder of the Trinidadian poetic/musical progression known as rapso. Whether holding court at the Uprising Culture Shop in Port of Spain (where the following interview was recorded at Carnival '92), writing Caribbean literary classics like *Rapso Explosion* (Karia Press-U.K.), or recording with the Network Rapso Riddum Band, Resistance has inspired panyard griots, calypsonians and cultural activists for the past 20 years. He spearheaded the counter-Quincentennial anti-Columbus movement with a 1992 Carnival entry, Columbus Lie, and song, "Big Dirty Lie."

He explains his place in the rapso movement in the liner notes of a recent recording, *For Rapso Lovers de Whole World Over*.

*I come to rock every room in yuh conscience
to beat off de chain dat imprisonment yuh brain
I ride dis riddum from de heart of resistance and who cyar hear well
dey must feel de pain
For de time has come when every heart
go tremble to de riddum of de drum
and every tongue should tell of a new order in de musical arena.
It is de dawning of de age of RAPSO
RAPSO... de rootical redemption of ancient African tradition
in the Caribbean de poetry of kaiso
RAPSO... de voice of ah people in de heart of de struggle for true
liberation and self-determination
RAPSO... de power of de word, de riddum of de word
So run quick and spread de word
let de word be heard dat Rapso takeover and RAPSO TIME IS
NOW! Only fools doubt it.*

Q: Brother Resistance, you were there when rapso began. What did it mean to you when rapso first came together? What was that form about for you?

A: Well, at the time it was in a way simply recreation, because it was something that we used to do in the community, where the drummers and the steel band players and the poets came together just to ease the frustrations of life. So it was just a way to free up yourself.

Q: You've seen it develop over the years. It has a real political edge to it now. How did that come to be part of the music?

A: Well, we have to look at the period in which the rapso expression form came forward. The years 1969-70 were like a watershed in the political history of Trinidad/Tobago because at that time it was the strongest moment of the mass movement. It was a movement for true independence, for cultural liberation and for self-determination. Rapso came out of that general vibration that was taking place in the country at the time. Over the years the rapso artists have remained consistent to that beginning and therefore their works directly seek to take from the people and give back to the people. Rapso has become the voice of the people.

Q: How does the De Network Rapso Riddum Band provide encouragement for people to come in and develop their talents?

A: The band is just like one part of the community. The whole community arises and the music is one part of that whole thing.

Q: How does the Uprising Culture Shop fit in? What's the part that the store has in promoting creativity and community?

A: It's an outlet for cultural books and crafts.

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Q: How do you choose the books that are in the store? There's an incredible selection of books that you don't find in the average bookstore in Port of Spain.

A: Basically we try to sell books that will help people fill up themselves with material that is easily readable so that we can educate ourselves and their families. Much of the music here serves the same purpose.

Q: Earlier I was talking to some people who said that the whole People's Mall is in jeopardy. There is some talk about tearing this very shop down. Do you think that is likely to happen?

A: The People's Mall represents an institution, one of the first real foundations for African people, and for who I call street people, right, people at street level to do effective business. It is the only location right here in the center of the city where we could set up and pull ourselves together on an economic level. In the beginning there were no shops, there were just rows of tables and stores. As we progressed, we built shops. So if anything has to replace what we have here, it will simply be the People's Mall in a stronger and more powerful infrastructure right here in this same location.

Q: It seems that the people I've seen who have come and gone at the store here during this interview are people who view this as a kind of community center. People come here because there's something here that's special. If you had to define what that was that was special, that people gravitate towards here, what would you say that was?

A: I would say that it was a cultural meeting point for all the artists from Trinidad/Tobago. This is a meeting point. So when you want to find somebody, you come here to find them. If somebody come from Africa, you leave a message for these artists; you stop in here first to find out what's happening.

Q: To connect people with one another. I guess that's where you get De Network Rapso Riddim Band and the Riddim Distribution Network names.

A: That's right.

Q: It's different than the radio networks that are 'up there,' broadcasting down. It's the network from the grassroots. Who is part of this network?

A: Besides the practicing rapso artists like Brother Book, we find a number of the mainstream calypso or soca artists being influenced by the rapso in terms of their musical style and in terms of directly doing rapso pieces. People like David Rudder and the [then] reigning monarch Black Stalin, who has been a tremendous source of inspiration for our movement all through the years. He recorded a rapso on his album last year, called "Revolution Time."

Q: What about women rapso and dub poets like Lillian Allen, Miss Lou [Louise Bennett], Jean Binta Breeze and Sister Latifa?

A: A lot of young women are interested and are following in the steps of these established women. I think that it is a very good thing for the movement. Even though you find that the majority of practitioners are men, it's because, as I was mentioning before about the experience of the struggle out of



which it comes forward, the expression of what we are in this part of the world has always been seen as like a man's thing, right? But in recent years we have begun to acknowledge the contribution of the women warriors to the struggle. So when you see a woman coming forward in the rapso movement and the dub poetry, it is very very good. It also paints a picture for a beautiful future for the movement.

Q: I want to talk a little bit about Carnival. I'm originally from Brooklyn. I've been to the Brooklyn Carnival, but I haven't been to Trinidad before. I understand that for the last few years, but particularly this year [1992], there is some controversy that most of the music that's coming out is jam and wine, and not enough truth and rights. What do think about that? Is that an issue for you? What's the right mixture there?

A: It's an issue for me, but from a different perspective. I have no problem with the artists putting forth whatever they put out. It's Carnival and this calls for a certain amount of celebration and a certain amount of revelry and excitement.

From ever since I was small, I look at the music as here to generate this excitement and keep the atmosphere in that happy way. So nothing is wrong with that as far as I am concerned. The problem I see is with the media, the radio stations and the promoters. They concentrate and play

almost exclusively this music of abandon, this music of have a good time, because they have been trying to establish that Carnival is not about a people's reality, that Carnival is not about a celebration of diverse culture, but Carnival is have a good time, Carnival is color, Carnival is just everybody jump up and tumble down and everything, right?

Now what's happening is that this music that they've been promoting, they find out a lot of people object to, but too often people focus their objection on the artist and not on the media that is bringing the music to them. But if you listen to the amount of material we have that deal with serious issues, that examine political situations, that look at the society in different ways; this music has not been aired. It has not been brought to the public. This music has been stifled for a number of years now. So you find that it is a problem that is created by the media itself. People are hearing to a great extent what they hear on the radio and television. A lot of people don't go to the calypso tents, for instance, where they could get this music live and direct.

So, therefore, as far as I'm concerned, the radio has a direct responsibility to play the full spectrum of the music, whether it is jam and wine or political commentary. By hearing the full spectrum, people would then know for themselves exactly what is the full content of the calypso that is present for this particular Carnival.

Q: Where do you see rapso poetry going? What's the direction for the future?

A: First of all, on the international level we need to establish the fact that rapso poetry is an art form coming out of the Caribbean, and is as valid a form as African-American rap or dancehall from Jamaica, because it is one family, right? The other thing is that when we look at the future of rapso,

we look towards the youth. We see a lot of young people becoming interested in the work, trying to get involved in rapso, experimenting and coming to us for advice and that kind of thing. Rapso has become more and more powerful and is able to completely express the sentiments of the people in such a way and with such a force that it would be heard and must be reckoned with. It is a question of getting the facilities and so on to record them and/or to have them published.

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Brother Resistance and the entrance to the Uprising Culture Shop (inset).



PHOTO BY KAREN STARR

I have two major disappointments with the recent Zenglen recording, *Atô N'Alêz* (Louis LR-0012). First, Gary Didier Perez, Zenglen's former singer, has left the group for a solo career and doesn't appear on the album. Second, the group has changed labels and the sound production is not nearly as good as it was with Mini Records. Why change labels each time you make a record? (A common occurrence with Haitian bands.) An artist with a global approach shouldn't switch companies like this. Another problem in Haitian music production is the proliferation of labels in comparison to the number of artists. Why not have one or two labels that could concentrate their resources to make Haitian music better known on the American continent and abroad? Antillean artists do this already with Sonodisc.

The title of the recording, *Atô N'Alêz*, means "We Were Never So Comfortable" and is presumably addressed to the situation after Perez left the band. On first hearing, I found the album to be bad. On a second listen six weeks later, I decided that the new singer, David Charles, is more than acceptable and that Brutus and Martineau have written some beautiful compositions, especially "Sonje Lontan" (Remember Long Ago) and "Move Divs" (Bad Divorce). I think Zenglen can do better and that the best is yet to come.

Next month we'll tackle a slew of new recordings from Florida, especially from the studios of Melodie Makers, and a release from Ronald Smith, guitarist for System Band.

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Q: It's important to make the connections between the African-American experience and what is happening in other parts of the African diaspora. What are the connections for you between rapso and danchall, dub poetry and African-American rap?

A: I see it on two levels. In the first instance, when we talk about the foundation of that oral experience, we need to look at the experience of the African griot. That was the same experience that was transplanted across the oceans to this part of the world. I also look at it from a more recent perspective. I look at it as art form that comes out of the belly of the people, that comes from street level. They look at political, social and economic issues with a street eye, you know, and from that level we can see that the rapso, the dub poetry and the African-American rap are coming from exactly the same corner, really.

Q: Yet it ends up in some cases getting merchandised by the big corporations, at least that's happened with some rap music, but there's always the grassroots level that keeps generating new material. I'm wondering how you get distribution, get the word out, get airplay, get your music in the stores and make people aware of it, without falling into the corporate traps that exist that would make the music less direct? Does

the Riddim Distribution Network have any ideas on how to handle that situation?

A: It's something we've been looking at for a number of years, and to some extent it is a little bit frightening. Things might take a longer time to happen if the commercial viability of the music wouldn't be as great as it is, but we fully believe that if a major corporation is interested, then it would have to take it as it is or they don't take it at all. At the other level I see there will always be worker solidarity, picket lines, strike camps. There will always be that level of mass activity and out of that there will always be rapso man. There will always be that one or two persons or that one or two generations in times to come who don't have anything to do with the recording business. They just have a vibe and they express themselves in a rapso kind of a situation.

Brother Resistance can be contacted through the Riddim Distribution Network, c/o Uprising Culture Shop, The People's Mall, Frederick St., Trinidad, West Indies; (809) 624-1003.

SHEILA CHANDRA

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in. I prefer it to happen that way. Rather than because I look at it like a musicologist and try to tie up traditions."

This interest in weaving musical traditions colored her first live performances—she debuted at WOMAD's festival in Caerces, a medieval town in Spain, in May 1992—and performed throughout the summer season in various festivals. By her London debut that September at the Vivarta festival of contemporary South Asian dance and performance—which also went under the name of "Weaving My Ancestors' Voices"—her core repertoire had consolidated around, she explained, most of the *Weaving* material and songs such as "Roots and Wings (Traditional Mix)," "Lament of McCrimmon," "Mecca" and post-*Weaving* pieces such as "Sajana Sargam" and "La Sajesse" and a cover of "Sailor's Life."

This last song has an unlikely provenance for her, meriting further amplification. It stems from Fairport Convention's 1967 *Unhalf-Bricking* album. "I sang it at Barcelona because I'd just learned all the words on the plane going over—well, you have to have something to do in an airport—and I was sound-checking with it. I don't always like to sing the same songs that I'll actually be performing and it sounded so good that we put it over a drone. That's the nice thing about having these drones: they'll accept anything, anything you'll do over them. It's actually written in a very similar scale to "Ever So Lonely"—it has one extra note—so it's very easy to slip from "Ever So Lonely." ... Despite the fact that we say that this is a pop song written on five notes, because of the way it was initially produced people still associate it with a very Indian sound. So it's still a shock when alongside it I sing a verse of "Sailor's Life" with such an obvious folk sound in the vocal.

They think, 'Yeah, that's almost the same scale, isn't it?' It's a principle that works and it's not simply confined to India."

Matters cannot rest there. "You know," she said, speaking about British traditional or folk music, "you hear it when you're around. You're aware of it, aware of what the basic British folk sound is like. But I didn't seriously sit down and listen to any British folk until about '85 or '86 and that was because Paul James, ex-Blowzabella and now Scarp, who played on the Monsoon album, said, 'Oh, Sheila, if you like vocalists, maybe you should hear some June Tabor, maybe you should hear some Silly Sisters.' So I started listening to some things like that and really, really related well to it.

"Those sorts of song are, in a sense, much easier for me to learn than a traditional Asian song because I wasn't surrounded by Asian music growing up. The verse/chorus, it being all in English, the placing of the ornaments all made sense to me."

She continued, "In a sense it was much easier for me to learn in the folk tradition and then apply them back to Hindustani music than the other way around. Although some of it did happen the other way: that I learned things in the Hindustani tradition which I then applied back to folk in terms of specific ornaments. Then realizing that so much of the music that I was hearing was unaccompanied—a lot of that June Tabor stuff is—and therefore if there is no instrument pointing the way for a change of chord you can assume a drone. That tied it much more closely into the Indian tradition than I had realized before. That brought it a very exciting ring of interest. Suddenly it became not just something I liked to listen to because it was ornate but also because it had a connection with things that I was doing."

For anyone like me who is fascinated by life's little coincidences and holistic connections, such multicultural conjunctions are the frosting on the cake. Where Sheila Chandra's music scores in is the way it blends cultural elements without adulterating them. The deft stylings and shadings of *Weaving My Ancestors' Voices* and her new-found confidence to burst out of the cloistered environment of the studio and take the stage both point to a new chapter. As turning points go, this one is a humdinger.

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Martin Smith, the other member of Monsoon, is presently working with the Euro-Asian group Jalsa. They have just released their debut album, *Working for Love*, on Third Eye Records.

Ken Hunt is an ex-information designer working in English and Welsh. He also writes a bit for Folk Roots, Keyboard, Michel, Pulse!, Q, Record Collector and Sing Out! He is working longer term on a series of portraits of Indian classical musicians and biographies of Martin Carthy and Richard Thompson.