

RAPSO

Riddim Poetry from Trinidad/Tobago

By
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"Chako"
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Dub poetry and rapso—I see it as one family. The roots is the African oral tradition of ancient times, the griot. Rapso is a modern manifestation of this tradition just as dub poetry is. The slight difference, if you may call it that, is in terms of the musical influence. The riddim pattern of the rapso is more steeped in the calypso/soca, the riddim pattern of dub poetry is in reggae. But then again if you look at the musical connection you have one foundation which is drums. So it's the same thing with different accents of the same vibration.

—Brother Resistance

Rapso is the Trinidadian sister of Jamaican dub poetry. Labeled as "riddim poetry," rapso focuses on the same programmatic and aesthetic aspects, the power of the word in performance, the blending of music, speech rhythms and the voice of the people. The techniques are also similar: The rapso poem is composed without any formal restrictions but tends to be structured around a recurring chorus that carries the central message, a slogan or a certain catch line. Like dub poetry, rapso employs the basic features of the African-Caribbean oral tradition, call-and-response patterns, drum rhythms and so forth. The recital, a cappella or accompanied, is marked by a similar rhythmic talking singsong style.

Rapso follows the same formula of musical talkover that gave rise to reggae toasting and rap. The name, coined by Brother Resistance, echoes this connection: It is derived from a Trinidadian street expression, "is how we rappin so" (similar to "how you could dance so" and related expressions) and reformulated into a catchy term that simultaneously evokes its style of recital (rap/rhythmic talkover) and the source of its musical accompaniment (calypso). Yet in the same way as the dub poets, rapso artists make a clear distinction between the talkover style of the dancehall dj who delivers the lyrics to a prefabricated musical rhythm ("putting poetry to music") and their own creative process of blending the words with original musical rhythms ("developing a music out of de poetry").

The riddim is where the distinction between rapso and dub poetry comes in. While the Jamaican dub style employs mostly the home-grown reggae format, rapso focuses on its own indigenous musical heritage using calypso/

kaiso rhythms, soca beats or steel-pan melodies. The resulting riddim corresponds with the speech patterns of Trinidadian creole and has a distinctive Trinidadian flavor.

Rapso is a modern manifestation of the African-Caribbean oral tradition in the same way as dub poetry, but it also evidences the indigenous cultural development of Trinidad/Tobago. It is Shango, calypso, pan, and highlights the original spirit of Carnival—resistance and cultural identity.

Rapso developed toward the end of the 1970s, around the same time as dub poetry. Fueled by the period of social unrest and political activism, rapso became the mouthpiece of the underprivileged masses of Trinidad/Tobago. Its birthplace is the shanty town of East Dry River, which for decades was the breeding ground for militant political actions and an explosive cultural creativity. Here the first canbous were sung and the drum dances, the bamboula, the bel-air, the stick fights, the kalindas, took place, and from here the canboulay marches started. The steel pan was invented in the backyards of Laventille and East Dry River. Just like Trenchtown, Jamaica, celebrated as the birthplace of reggae,

the ghetto of East Dry River has become famous as the cultural heartland of Trinidad/Tobago.

In 1970 a group of youths from East Dry River (among them Brother Resistance) founded the "Network Community Organization" which was to become the hotbed for the development of rapso. Apart from seeking to provide basic social services such as health care and education on a grassroots level, the main concern of this group was to promote people's culture. The "Network Rapso Riddim Band" was formed, focusing at first on the musical sounds of traditional African drums and the steel pan.

Even though the term rapso had been coined to spearhead a new artistic expression, the basic idea still had to be developed into a concrete art form. Lasana Kweisi and Abdul Malik ("Pan Run"), both of whom employed their native East Caribbean vernacular and infused their radical poetry with musical rhythms, were influential, as were the jazz poems of the Last Poets. The "talk-songs" by Trinidadian musician Lancelot Layne, who had considerable success in the early '70s ("No Way"), were also crucial in the development of the art form. Although Layne did not call his style rapso, he is regarded today as the

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first rapso poet to record. After these rough beginnings the art form crystallized in the late '70s when Resistance and his Network Rapso Riddim Band became the leading protagonists and the masterminds behind the consistent popularization of the term.

Born 1954 in East Dry River, Resistance experienced both the ghetto life of his vicinity and the

contrasting academic world at the St. Augustine campus of the University of the West Indies, where he graduated in history and economics. Today he still resides in East Dry River, and as the secretary of the Network Community Organization he has formed an alternative infrastructure independent of any established institutions. The Uprising Culture Shop in the People's Mall in downtown Port of Spain functions as a meeting point for the radical music scene of Trinidad and helps to finance the organization.

Resistance's popularity as a poet grew steadily. In 1980 he won the National Poetry



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-Quintennial 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 imprison 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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Brother Resistance