



TRINIDAD / TOBAGO

CALYPSO AND CONSCIENCE

MAS • BACCHANAL • CULTURE

CARNIVAL TIME!



PHOTO BY GENE SCARAMUZZO



Unlike reggae music, which is recorded and released throughout the year in Jamaica, the musical output of Trinidad/Tobago is usually scheduled to coincide with the annual Carnival celebration preceding Ash Wednesday. It is during the period roughly between Christmas and mid-February that the new records come out and that the venues for live performance—the calypso tents and the outdoor fetes—are in operation. Old music will not be accepted during Carnival: Trinbagonians expect a brand new crop of music each year.

Carnival time is also when the steel bands, from the small groups who carry their steel drums (or pans) around their necks to the large 100-member conventional orchestras, select, arrange and rehearse one current tune to play in the steel band competition called Panorama.

The music of T&T Carnival has long been called calypso (or *kaiso*) by Trinbagonians whether it was a slow social commentary or an uptempo tune designed for "jumping up" in the streets. The calypsonians of T&T have traditionally been the voice of the people, powerful enough to sway politicians and to rule the fetes, although their power rarely extended far enough to allow them to make a decent living from their skill.

In the late '70s, at the hands of a few innovators like Lord Shorty (who now calls himself Ras Shorty I) and the late Maestro, the jump-up calypsos received an injection of funk and soul and came to be known as soca (from *soul calypso*). Since then, many things about the music have changed, and as we look at Carnival today we hear less about the great calypsos of the year than we hear about the jump-up music that is now going by the name "jam & wine."

The Beat is excited and proud to present this long overdue special report on the T&T Carnival. A carnival tradition as old and complex as that of T&T is certainly difficult to communicate in a few pages, but we'll feel satisfied if we convey these three important ideas (or in the words of T&T calypsonian Black Stalin, "there's one little thing that we want you always remember"):

T&T CARNIVAL IS MAS ... both Trinis and visitors alike jump up to the sounds of pan and the hot new songs for the road and fetes.

T&T CARNIVAL IS BACCHANAL ... the controversies and scandals of the year are as much a part of the fun (and debate) as the music.

T&T CARNIVAL IS CULTURE ... from calypso, steel bands and incredible costumes to the language, food and dancing, Carnival draws from a remarkably rich T&T heritage encompassing African, European and East Indian traditions.

In the following pages we'll get a taste of it all. Stephen Seftel's enthusiastic account of his adventures in Port of Spain, Trinidad, during this year's Carnival season will make you feel like you were there too, jumping up in a mas band, pushing pan onto the savannah stage for Panorama and wining in a fete.

Also included is my annual Carnival report which will, as usual, clue you into the great music of '93 as well as give an overview of some of the social dynamics of the year, the competitions, controversies and scandals.

On the cultural side, David Rudder offers his views on the state of calypso and more in an interview with Jan Zahler Lebow spanning the '92 and '93 Carnivals. Since his rise to stardom in 1986 David Rudder has managed to capture the spirit of the people of T&T each year and his international success has undoubtedly interested more foreigners in T&T than any other calypsonian since Kitch and Sparrow. Ironically, he is still considered by some Trinbagonians to be something other than a true calypsonian because he came from a brass band (originally a co-lead singer for Charlie's Roots) and because he experiments with outside musical influences.

Finally, a facet of T&T culture that may be new to many readers is a poetical movement called rapso that is in a direct line with calypso's grand tradition of verbal dexterity and social commentary. Christian Habekost delivers an in-depth look at rapso as an art form, while Ron Sakolsky speaks with rapso's main advocate and artist, Brother Resistance.

Read on—and I'm willing to bet we'll see you in Port of Spain in '94.

—Gene Scaramuzzo

The Saturday just before Carnival was the national finals, and the Renegades came on third, between Exodus and Tropical Angel Harps, out of 12 bands. Even though all the challengers had been busy rearranging, tightening and tuning, no one could outplay them that night. I'd never heard them tighter, and when the competition ended at 4 a.m., the judges gave them the win by only one and a half points out of a possible 500. Barely in



PHOTO BY STEVEN SEFTTEL

second place was Phase II. Third place was tied, 11 points behind the winner, between Exodus and the Trinidad All Stars, who both performed contrasting arrangements of "Dus' in Deh Face." The Desperadoes took fourth place—only one half point behind the tie for third. Surprisingly, Pamberi came in last. In the preliminaries they took third out of 24 bands, but somehow lost the magic as the weeks progressed and the finals arrived.

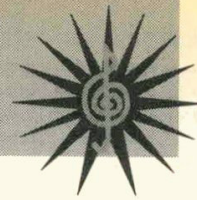
FROM DIMANCHE GRAS TO BACCHANAL

Following Panorama was Dimanche Gras, the final evening before the streets of Port of Spain erupt into a two-day party of mud and music, drink and dance, costume and color, which can only be called Carnival.

Most eyes were focused on the national stadium, where the Dimanche Gras show was broadcast live on radio and tv. The event opened with David Rudder singing the national anthem and included the king and queen of Carnival competitions for the most elaborate costume. Also at the show was the calypso monarch competition and everyone was anxious to see if Sparrow would get dethroned. In the second round, Chalkdust unleashed a new composition called "Misconception," which fans and judges agreed was the winner. So Sparrow got dethroned and Chalkdust drove away in his new car!

Most of my friends and I, however, headed over to Westmall, where David Rudder and Charlie's Roots, Kassav', Second Imij and Superblue were performing. After years of spinning Kassav' records, I'd never seen them perform, so I took my chance when they flew in from Martinique for this one show. I enjoyed it thoroughly and so did most others right in front of the band, but afterwards the prevailing sentiment seemed to be that zouk wasn't appropriate for Carnival. If it were another time

T&T carnival 93 report...



of the year they would have liked it more, but in February they want to hear calypso and only calypso.

From there I headed straight to downtown Port of Spain, since J'ouvert morning officially starts at 2 a.m. Downtown J'ouvert is the wildest time of Carnival. Some people cover themselves with mud, some with old rags, and they all head downtown to dance to steel bands, iron bands and trucks with sound systems on the back. Since this is the uncorking of Carnival, people go crazy—some make it home by dawn, others not until the following midnight.

Monday and Tuesday found me playing mas with Minshall's Donkey Derby band, with mobile music supplied by Charlie's Roots and dj Chinese Laundry. Mondays are informal, with people just

wearing small pieces of their costumes, saving Tuesday for the full color, because most judging takes place on Tuesday.

Monday afternoon brought the biggest rainstorm anyone had seen during Carnival since one year in the '70s when the whole event was held in May because of a polio outbreak. Lots of folks danced right through and those who sought shelter eventually gave up and joined the sound trucks again, taking a two-hour shower. For the rest of the afternoon, instead of singing "Dus' in Deh Face," David Rudder sang "Rain in Yuh Face." When we crossed the Savannah stage, it was so muddy the lyrics soon became "mud on yuh feet."

Tuesday's weather was a perfect blend of sun and clouds, and our mas band came out with about 1300 people. We had plenty of room to jam all day long except in Independence Square, where it was so crowded you

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Chalkdust IN YUH FACE

BY GENE SCARAMUZZO

To quote one of this year's calypso tent jokes by MC Sprangalang, "nobody has the ability like Trinidadians to know something was going to happen before it happens *after* it happens." Although I'm not a Trini, let me say that I knew Carnival '93 in T&T would be a year to remember, but I'll admit I would never have guessed that it would be one in which good calypso and soca would barely be heard, buried under an avalanche of "jam & wine."

After last year's heated outcry against the inane lyrics of jam & wine, culminating in Ras Shorty I's castigating "That Eh Enough," I expected this year's lyrics to be more thoughtful even if in defense of the style. But in the end the recorded output certainly seemed to support David Rudder's contention that the purveyors of jam & wine took Shorty's lecture as a call-to-arms to come on even heavier this year. And even more defiantly, they blended in a heavy dose of Jamaican dancehall, a real slap in the face to those Trinis who feel there is already too much Jamaican dancehall in T&T.

Of course in this report I've listed all the great songs for the road because, ironically, there were many outstanding ones. But keep in mind that the shelf life of these songs is short

indeed, sure to be forgotten by next year. Long to be remembered about Carnival '93, aside from minor elements like the unseasonal rains and the now-legendary "donkey dance," will be the brilliant performances by conventional steel orchestras in this year's Panorama, the affirmation of all that is good about the traditional Trinidad calypso in the selection of Chalkdust as calypso monarch and a handful of hard-hitting social commentaries like David Rudder's "Dus' in Deh Face," Chalkdust's "Kaiso in Hospital," Shadow's "Survival Road," Kurt Allen's "The Last Call" and Watchman's "If Yuh Black Yuh Black."

Unfortunately, Carnival '93 will also be remembered as a year of great confusion and uncertainty. Hard economic times, the hardest that T&T has ever experienced, seemed to dampen the bright spirit of hope and unlimited possibility that always made Trinbagonians feel blessed as a nation.

Fear of the future has caused confusion in the present, creating an atmosphere in which calypsonians attack each other in vicious, mean-spirited calypsos, in which the economic rewards of jam & wine music pose a

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CHALKDUST IN YUH FACE

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serious threat to both traditional calypso and well-crafted soca, and in which the whole nature of Carnival as a national celebration is sure to nature of Carnival as a national celebration is sure to change.

In the weakness of the times the National Carnival Commission (NCC) found little resistance to its ongoing plans to market Carnival worldwide, a move that will have resounding affects on most aspects of Carnival. Five years ago when the NCC attempted to sell this idea to the country there was a massive outcry against it by calypsonians and laymen alike. In '93 nary a letter of disapproval followed the announcement in the newspapers that a major Carnival event, the Dimanche Gras show (part of which is the calypso monarchy finals), would be moved to a new location to accommodate a worldwide satellite broadcast. Word on the street was a tentative nod of approval that the seats would be more comfortable and that "it may be a good thing."

Almost immediately, the whole outlook on the calypso monarchy competition changed as it moved from a local event to one which the eyes of the world would be watching. First, the Mighty Sparrow decided he would defend his monarchy crown won last year with his bit of sexual braggadocio, "Both Ah Dem" (read the interview with David Rudder in this issue for an interesting perspective on Sparrow's controversial '92 win). This was followed soon afterward by Shadow's announcement that he would throw his hat back in the ring after an 18-year absence from monarchy competition, unashamedly admitting he was re-entering

because of the international exposure, the prize money and car.

Just days later, the legendary Ras Shorty I announced his intentions as well, stirring up hopes of a great *picong* (insult) battle with Sparrow. During last year's Carnival, both in print and in an unrecorded calypso entitled "That Eh Enough," Shorty attacked jam & wine music and chided Sparrow for being too old to be thinking about taking on two girls at the same time.

Obviously smarting from the experience, Sparrow came back this year with "The More the Merrier," a clever, fairly nasty response to Shorty's finger-wagging which mocked Shorty's self-righteousness and reminded one and all of the extreme sexual nature of Shorty's mid-'70s output: *It have people out there very shocked when they hear/You givin' me lecture/Who make "Ah Lick She," "For Tim" and "A Man for Kim"?*

This masterful display of *picong* had nearly everyone believing Sparrow would take the crown again this year, especially when in the last week leading up to Carnival he began enhancing his stage performance with five pretty girls wining and wagging fingers at Shorty with "Love Man, you actin' so strange/My, my, how times have changed."

The monarchy race took a turn for the worse, however, at the semifinals when the judges' selection of semifinalists brought on a profound sense of disillusionment. Shorty, who had written a response to Sparrow, wasn't even among the 28 semifinalists and reserves, putting a sad, rather embarrassing finish to the re-emergence of one of

T&T's soca innovators. Even more controversial, though, was the selection of the 10 finalists that would challenge Sparrow. Excluded were several calypsonians, notably Watchman, Bianca Hull and this year's Young King Kurt Allen, whose songs were considered by nearly everyone to be of the highest order.

To quote the grandmaster of calypso, Lord Kitchener: "You must have bacchanal if you want a good Carnival." Controversies over who is and is not selected each year is the basis

for heated debate for the rest of the year; rumors of conspiracy abound every year, and few people ever know the real story. This year, with the worldwide broadcast of the monarchy finals, many saw Allen and company's exclusion from the finals as a setup for Sparrow to win in front of the eyes of the world.

The growing disgust with the "selling of Carnival" was evidenced by the number of people who refused to attend

the monarchy finals. Ironically, this situation drew thousands to a fete held the same night featuring Kassav', making it the hottest event of Carnival Sunday.

But back at the monarchy finals, a much-deserved upset took place. Sparrow was quoted as saying Cro Cro was his only competition, but it turned out to be Chalkdust who packed the hidden dynamite. And there was no one who needed the car more than Chalkie.

One of the great stories of Carnival '93 is that Chalkdust's car broke down on the morning of the semifinals and he almost missed his spot in the lineup, which would have automatically disqualified him. By the time he got on the road to San Fernando (the site of the semifinals) in the car of a relative, he was due to go onstage in 45 minutes yet he was still an hour's drive away. Miraculously, a power failure during the first performance ground the proceedings to a halt, delaying the show long enough for Chalkie to arrive in time, sing his songs and qualify as one of the 10 finalists.

His first song was "The Acid Test," a humorous but serious acknowledgement of the mercilessly critical crowd that gathers every year in Skinner Park to decide for themselves (the judges be damned) who *really* has the top songs for the year. His magnificent second entry, "Kaiso in the Hospital," was one of the only entries to address the state of the calypso art form relative to the changing nature of Carnival, a hard-hitting diagnosis that named offenders and drew battle lines. Based on his vast knowledge of world history and T&T history in particular (at the University of Michigan this spring he will be defending his doctoral thesis on the history of the T&T Carnival), Chalkdust has very definite opinions of what is and is not calypso, as well as a keen sense of the historical importance of the

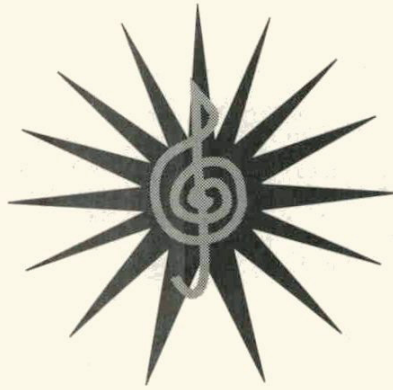


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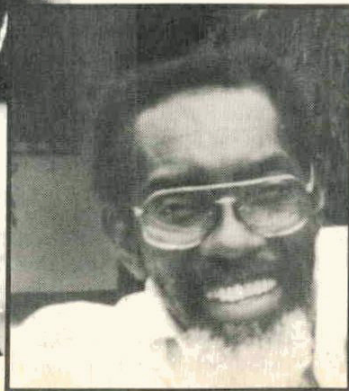


PHOTO BY GENE SCARAMUZZO



Above, Jit Samaroo, arranger for the Renegades. Far left, Drupatee sings "He Lick Down Mih Nani." Calypso Monarch Chalkdust (inset).

current trends in T&T music.

In the finals last year Chalkdust sang a new composition ("Song for the Savannah") in which he declared that finalists should prove their skills as calypsonians by composing a new tune for finals night. As a testament to Chalkdust's influence, four of this year's finalists, Sparrow, Cro Cro, Shadow and Sugar Aloes, took his advice and sang new songs. Yet just six days before the finals Chalkdust himself expressed no intention of heeding his own declaration. He was extremely confident he would take the crown on Sunday with his two songs, his only concern being Sparrow, who, he laughed, "could sing nonsense and make it sound good." As fate would have it, however, a bout with the flu in the last few days put him in bed with time to think.

On finals night he sang "Kaiso in the Hospital" for his first entry, and audience reaction was stronger than for any other save Sparrow's "Try Again." When Sparrow brought on nine (!) winner girls to back up his presentation of "The More the Merrier," tension was high for those who favored anyone else. But moments later Chalkie brought down the house with a brand new composition written in the last hours before the finals that went miles beyond anything else presented.

Entitled "Misconception," Chalkie directed his verses to the satellite audience listening and watching on the outside, to seriously and humorously clear up misconceptions they might have about T&T. The audience was on his side by the end of the first verse and they laughed and yelled their approval throughout the remainder. His final verse left the audience screaming with delight for nearly a full minute after he left the stage:

*Michael Jackson please come down here
There is a misconception you is fair
Come down play mas with we and get back
your color.
There's another misconception, you know,*

*That nobody can beat Sparrow,
But tonight he will be destroyed by me and
Cro Cro.*

The awarding of the calypso monarch crown to Chalkdust raised hopes that, despite the international audience, good calypso will still win out in the end.

Despite all the controversies surrounding the '93 Carnival, Panorama provided some of the most exciting moments of the season. Those who love pan were treated to an extremely fiery competition in the conventional steel orchestra category that ended with Renegades taking the Panorama victory over Phase II Pan Groove. Renegades were still smarting from last year's unexpected loss to Exodus, and their determination to win this year could be seen in their performances as early as the preliminary (zonal) competitions. Beating Kitch's wonderful tune, "Mystery Band," masterfully arranged by Jit Samaroo, the Renegades performed with great dynamics and fluid style, pulling a surprise in the Panorama finals by simulating the sound of rain (the theme of "Mystery Band") with a collection of wooden percussion instruments brought back from the Reunion Islands.

Exciting performances were turned in by quite a few other bands, notably the Neal & Massy All Stars, Solo Harmonites and the defenders, Exodus, but it was Len "Boogsie" Sharpe's Phase II Pan Groove that provided the most serious competition to Renegades. Boogsie's aggressive, jazzy arrangement of "Birthday Party" was in direct contrast to Jit Samaroo's flowing, classical arrangement of "Mystery Band," and although both performances were brilliant, the judges placed Phase II second to Renegades.

"Dus' in Deh Face," the song written by Pelham Goddard and David Rudder this year for Exodus, will go down as one of the classics from Carnival '93. In "Dus'..." (a reference to the amount of dust that gets kicked up in the Savannah as the bands rehearse and inch their way to the stage), Rudder tells the story of the bacchanal surrounding last year's victory by Exodus, but on a deeper level uses the image of the steel band rivalry as a metaphor for this era of rage and violence in T&T caused by the economic crisis.

In addition to "Dus'," there is a fine selection of recorded calypso and soca written by calypsonians for steel band this year, as well as a number of excellent original compositions by steel band arrangers, an exciting trend that has been growing rapidly since the mid-'80s. These records are especially enjoyable because most feature a pan version of the title tune in which most of the

vocals have been dropped out and replaced by sweet pan dancing all over the melody.

Last but not least, I'll repeat that songs for the road and the fetes were dominated by jam & wine again this year, and although some were very catchy and fun to jump up to, they had a stultifying effect that was very discouraging. Jam & wine didn't just overpower the soca songs, it completely replaced them. By midweek leading up to Carnival weekend, gone were the well-crafted soca songs like Sparrow's "The More the Merrier," Bally's "Jam and Wine," Drupatee's "He Lick Down Mih Nani (Careless Driver)" and Shadow's "Swing de Ting." By Kiddie Carnival on

Great Albums of the Year:

Bally, Honey (JW)
Chalkdust, Visions (Straker's)
Crazy, Let's Go Crazy (JW)
Kitch, Longevity (JW)
David Rudder, Ministry of Rhythm (Lypsoland)
Shadow, Many Moods of the Shadow (Kisskiddee)
Sugar Aloes, Different Moods (JW)
Superblue, Bacchanal Time (Ice)
Sparrow, Dancing Shoes (Ice)

Major Songs for the Road and Fetes:

Ajala, "Jump Up and Get On Bad"
Atlantik, "Jump & Kick/Poom Poom Shorts"
Crazy, "Jump Up and Wait"
Drupatee, "He Lick Down Mih Nani"
Front Page, "Strike Up the Band"
Rikky Jai, "Wine On a Bumsie"
Byron Lee, "Dancehall Soca"
Massive Chandelier, "The Donkey Dance"
David Rudder, "Dus' in Deh Face"
Sound Revolution, "Hands on Yuh Head"
Spice & Company, "Take Yuh Clothes Off"
Superblue, "Bacchanal Time"
United Sisters, "Donkey"
Wayne T, "Doye Doye"

Great Pan Songs:

Boogsie & Superblue, "Birthday Party"
Carl & Carol Jacobs, "Street Party"
DeFosto, "Pan in Yuh Pan"
Johnny Douglas, "Raisin' Dust"
Kitch, "Mystery Band"
Ken "Professor" Philmore, "Allnight"
Rudder, "Dus' in Deh Face"
Shadow, "Play the Pan"

Carnival Saturday we were basically hearing less than a dozen songs and on J'ouvert morning I think I heard a total of four different songs: Superblue's eventual road march winner, "Bacchanal Time," Ajala's "Jump Up and Get On Bad," Rikky Jai's "Wine on a Bumsie" and the only non-jam & wine to survive, Rudder's "Dus' in Deh Face." ★