

"Most of us in the Caribbean have strong African roots. In a lot of the islands some of the old traditions are still alive."

David Rudder's Roots

By Gary Stewart

As reggae has gone through a period of relative stagnation struggling to replace fallen leaders, new rhythms from old places have danced to the forefront. Strutting smartly among these sibilant creations of Africa and the Caribbean is soca, the "high-octane" calypso of Trinidad and Tobago.

David Rudder has been leading the soca charge ever since he captured the calypso monarch's crown with "The Hammer" and "Bahia Girl" at Trinidad's 1986 carnival. He followed up with a second-place finish in 1987, and although he refused to enter the competition in 1988, his "Bacchanal Lady" and "Panama" were among Carnival 88's most popular songs.

Rudder writes party songs with the best of them, but it is his skillful use of metaphor and sly double entendre that sets him apart from the ordinary, heavy-handed pop star. Whether scatting through "Bahia Girl" or crying through "Haiti," Rudder has crafted songs of conscience and wit seldom heard since — dare I say it? — the days of Bob Marley.

He is a member of the band Charlie's Roots along with Chris "Tambu" Herbert (1988's Road March champion), a fine lead singer in his own right, keyboard player Pelham Goddard, the group's musical director, and many of Trinidad's best sidemen. For the past three years the combination has worked to perfection, projecting the music far beyond the Caribbean.

The Beat caught up with the 35-year-old Rudder following a recent performance in Washington, DC, to talk about his career and "that crazy island music that turned the slaves into a master."

Q: Tell me about Charlie's Roots. Where does the name come from and when did the group get started?

A: The group got started around 1976, '77. It was a band that was created to play specifically this new music called soca, this new form of calypso. A lot of Trinidad bands at the time were variety bands. They would play some calypso, some rhythm & blues, some of this, some of that. And Roots was formed to play specifically soca, the roots music of the

country, so the band was called Roots because of that. Actually the name was Sensational Roots but at the same time someone, a record producer from Brooklyn called Rawlston Charles, he felt that the band should come out 'cause it was just a, basically, a studio band. It was like Sly and Robbie, that sort of thing. This guy Charles decided well, why don't you guys come out and play live. You've been backing so many calypsonians in the studio, you should come out and be a live band.

He bought the first set of equipment for the guys to come out live. So someone said as a token of appreciation for that, instead of saying Sensational Roots, why not say Charlie's Roots. And that's how the name got there.

Q: The terms soca and calypso seem to be used interchangeably. Is there really a difference in the music or is it really just the same thing?

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DAVID RUDDER*Continued from page 23*

A: It's basically the same thing, it's just the rhythm of soca is more accessible to more people because it's simpler. But the calypso tradition, the things that are being said and everything, is still happening on top of the music.

Q: When composing, do you write things down or do you just go in with something in your head and maybe hum it for the rest of the group?

A: I used to write things down, put things down on cassette and so on. Now I find the biggest songs for me are the spontaneous songs. So what I try to do now is I keep ideas. I keep ideas and when I have 10 new songs, I'm actually saying I have 10 new ideas, and then when we sit down and say OK, let's start, this is what I have. And we start to put it down. I would write on the spot. Even in the studio when we put the music down, I have no idea what I'm going to say yet. Actually, sometimes I say things maybe 5, 10 minutes before I go into the studio to record my voice. So that instant energy comes out.

Q: Some people are calling you Trinidad's Bob Marley, are saying you're the new Bob Marley for the world. How do you feel when you hear those kinds of comments?

A: Well I feel good and I feel, I won't say I feel bad, I feel good and I feel uncomfortable at the same time. Because Bob Marley is Bob Marley, you know? You see the Caribbean man is the sort of man that people take for granted. People look at him in one way, happy-go-lucky, you know, sunshine, rum, that sort of thing. And when a man like Bob Marley comes out with those strong messages, sings stronger things than nearly everyone else around, the people not only know Jamaica, and they not only know reggae, but they know the Caribbean. And they know a different life, a different thing in the Caribbean, a serious thing! Life is serious too! So in that sense, if it is that they recognize, they see the things I say in that light, I feel proud about that. . . . I'm trying to continue the tradition in another Caribbean musical form, that's all.

Q: Charlie's Roots is a little bit unusual in that there are two lead singers, you and Tambu. I'm wondering does that create any kind of tension within the band? I see you're rooming with him on the road so there must not be very much.

A: Well, not that I know of. I don't pay much attention to these things. My quest and my vision for the music, for the country, and the Caribbean and everything, I'm so tunneled into that that I don't have time to deal with that. Of course, I feel way down if you're in a group and one man is successful and the other one is like just in the shadows, there would be some sort of feeling, I mean, it's human nature, right? But he has emerged in his own right and that's cool.

Q: You just achieved something of a breakthrough this year, I guess early last year, when Sire Records, which is affiliated with Warner Brothers, decided to sign you to a

contract. They released *This is Soca Music* and then *Haiti*. Can you tell me how that all came about?

A: Well, actually I'm signed with London Records, which is a company in England. It's a branch of Phonogram. And the head of London Records is a Trinidadian, a guy called Roger Ames. I think this is why all this sort of comparison with Bob, because Chris Blackwell is a Jamaican and he was the head of Island. And then the other record company that was sort of opposed to Island in England was London. What has happened is that London has subleased the contract to Sire for America. So Sire controls America, but in a sense for London Records.

Q: Have you done more for London or are those the only two records so far?

A: I've done *The Hammer* (which) is also on London.

Q: But Sire didn't pick that one up?

A: No, the Sire thing came in the following year. And *The Hammer* was put out more as a single with "Bahia Girl" and so on, and a compilation with different soca songs as opposed to a David Rudder album or a Charlie's Roots album.

Q: Will your new album also be released on London and Sire?

A: Yeah, because after the first year they came back and they signed me for six albums.

Q: So you have three more to go after the new one?

A: I've got three more to do, yeah.

Q: In "The Hammer" you make references to going down to Laventille, and you talk about the dragon. Will you tell me what those references are about?

A: Yeah, well Laventille is an area in Trinidad that's like, let me put it this way: If Trinidad were New York, Laventille would be Harlem. And, in a sense, this man Rudolph Charles (inventor of the steel drum), he was the leader of a steel band there. And the steel band was like the community band, and he being the leader of a steel band became like a leader of the community in a de facto sense. The song was a tribute to him when he died. And the hammer that he used to walk around with to tune the drums actually did disappear. I decided instead of writing about the man Rudolph Charles, I'm going to use the hammer as a metaphor to describe the man, his life, and how the people felt about him in his community and even beyond that. Because even Ralph MacDonald did a tribute to him. There were about six songs that were a tribute to Rudolph Charles. So even Americans did a song in his honor because he was such a respected man.

Q: Where are you from in Trinidad?

A: I'm from Belmont, which in a sense again is like Brooklyn.

Q: I understand you just had a new baby.

A: Yeah, another boy. I have two boys. So I need about three more. I have a drummer and a bass player, so I have to get a keyboard. [Laughs]

Q: Who were some of the people when you were growing up that you used to listen to that maybe are influencing your music now?

A: All right, well Kitchener, Sparrow, Lord Melody, and also Sly and the Family Stone,

Stevie Wonder. I used to listen to a lot of Motown especially, but I think if two people stand out I would say Sly and Stevie Wonder.

Q: Does a lot of American music get played in Trinidad?

A: Yeah, definitely. Too much some people say. I say if people want to listen, they will listen. I think you can't really harness the music like that. Music is not to be harnessed. Right now what people like is quality. Because our music has become very good in that area you find that more of the youths are dealing with it. So it's like it's up to us to really rise. And a lot of American music, especially now, to me has become so very repetitive, so that some people are falling away from it because they find that it's like the same old thing. And this music (calypso) is rising and growing. What is happening to calypso is like the '60s in America, that time, that period. You know, it's like a sort of energy is running through the whole society, all the societies. Like you know something is about to happen. And you can actually feel it inside the music.

Q: Who do you listen to now that you think stands out, that you really enjoy listening to?

A: What I'm doing right now is I'm listening to a lot of African artists like Youssou N'Dour, Salif Keita, Mory Kante. You know? I listen to Alpha Blondy. I'm more leaning towards the Third World. Gilberto Gil and these guys.

Q: It seems like when you talk to reggae artists they really feel a strong link with Africa, and I'm wondering if you and other Trinidadians feel that same strong link with Africa?

A: Definitely, because most of us in the Caribbean have strong African roots. In a lot of the islands some of the old traditions are still alive. Especially like in Trinidad there was a time when the old Yoruba traditions were strong. You can hear words today people use while they speak English, and it's straight out of Africa. You know? The food, you go off the Caribbean and you go through Africa and you eat some of it. I know this food! It just take on different names at certain times, but a lot of the old things are still there, the old pockets of energy as I like to say. Still there. It's like a navel string, it's like that umbilical cord is still linked although it's been several years.

Q: One of the labels that's put on you a lot is that of an innovator. Do you feel like an innovator? Do you consciously set out to change the music a little bit or to push it farther and farther?

A: No, I won't say I consciously set out to change the music. What I do is because of my experiences growing up and working with the calypsonians before. I would say, hey, this is a great song this guy is doing, but if I were doing it I would do this. So it's what I would do and it's actually coming out (spontaneously) as opposed to sit down and say well OK, let's see if we can cross over now.... But what happens is that people say well hey, I find your music has a lot of blues in it. I can hear a lot of jazz. I hear a little reggae, I hear a little samba. What they are actually saying is that they're hearing Africa. Different areas of the diaspora inside the music. Because these are the traditions I grew up on, so they are actually hearing different

pockets of Africa. The different pockets of energy coming together. And if we can really get it together one day, if we can actually capture all the pockets of energy in one ball, can you imagine how powerful that ball will be?

Q: Hearing you talk about this brings to my mind the song "Haiti"; it's a sad song yet it's such a beautiful song. I'm wondering what was running through your mind when you wrote that.

A: I wrote that song two years ago in New York City. This is one of the things about the Caribbean people, we tend to be so divided. So you find that the Haitians have come to America, and they're doing pretty well, but because they know so much pain, what might seem like pain to someone over here might be heaven to them. They've really risen, and they're very fierce in how they do things, and it rubs some people the wrong way. And you hear people always saying (scornfully), "Dem Haitians, dem Haitians!" and ting.

So one day (in New York) I was coming home and I took a lift with one of those pirate taxis. A Haitian guy was driving. And usually we pay about three dollars or something like that for the trip, and the guy says, "Hey, that's four," or something like that. The guy with me says, "You guys (Haitians) always try to go for something extra." So I said, "Well what's the problem, leave it alone." And the guy says, "Dem Haitians! Dem Haitians!" Dis and dat and "dem Haitians!" We get home so I say well, "You know anything about Haiti?" He say, "No, I don't want to know either." I say, "Well that's the problem with us, we don't want to know about each other..."

We stood there and then that sort of triggered me. I said, "Well maybe I should write a song, tell people about the history of this place, the glorious past of Haiti." Glory within pain again. It's always within pain. So many people died. The glories, a slave, a black man became the ruler *in* the days of slavery. That never happened before, might never happen again. I mean if you look at it, people say well Jesse Jackson for president, and we say well, he gave it a good run, but in the back of your mind you say he'll never be president. You know? And then you could look back into the days of slavery and a (black) man became president, leader of Haiti, in the days of slavery. You could imagine! Then you begin to understand the awesome achievement that is. The glory of that. The mighty Haiti, the glory of Haiti. And now it's like the other way, it's gone the other way. So I talk "restore their glory."

It's like not just the glory of Haiti but the Caribbean man finding, within his own little space, energy that can make him stand out in the world. You know because Bob (Marley) showed that we have the energy. And Toussaint (L'Ouverture) showed that we have the energy. And every man get little pockets of energy. Let's say the energy comes (together) in a whole. You don't know where we can go with that energy. On the other hand, it's also saying Haiti is our future if we fool around. Haiti is our future, so which way you want to go?

Q: The big thing in Trinidad each year is the carnival, and people are busy preparing their music in September, October, November to be released and then enter in the carnival competition. Can you tell me how that works and why you didn't enter carnival this year?

A: The year when I won, like my own vision was to take the music all over. I wanted to always feel whatever music I ever play I feel is good as anyone else's own, so I wanted to take the music out. And then the competition in Trinidad was like the correct vehicle. Although I've been singing in Trinidad for over 20 years, few people knew, just the who's who people were around and were hip to what's happening in the town would know David Rudder. But the country as a whole, the Caribbean as a whole, didn't know anything 'bout David Rudder until that time. So when I won the competition, it's like everybody, whop! Everything just sort of exploded. And I just wanted to do the competition thing once again, one more time, to show there was a continuity, because people say well, that's just a fluke, that's freak thing that happen. So people must recognize that David Rudder is not just a come today and gone tomorrow kinda guy. So I went back there to show them well hey, this wasn't that. And now it's another level now, to try to take the music out to the world. This is the next step. So the competition was like one step. I don't see it as a continuing thing to me. I continue with tomorrow to try to get as much people to understand and deal with the music. You know?

Q: So you're going beyond carnival.

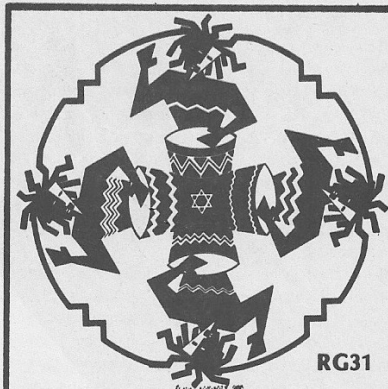
A: That's right, beyond the boundaries that we set for us.

Q: In some of your songs there are references to Jah and dread it sounds like when you leave the lyric and make exclamations. I'm wondering are you into Rastafarianism at all?

A: No. I'm not into Rastafarianism in that sense, in a direct sense. What I would say is that Rastafari is part of the experience of the Caribbean man. I deal with the experience of the Caribbean man so I must embrace that. It's not something that I'm consciously embracing, it's happening because I'm embracing a whole general thing. It's part of it.

Q: What are you working on now? Do you have a new album in preparation?

A: Yeah, I have an album. It may be called *Trinidad Boys, Tobago Boys* or *The Power and the Glory*. I haven't made up my mind yet. It's a journey through the islands. It's like taking someone who has never heard the music or might want to come on a vacation, even in that sense. And coming into the islands. Well now, this journey is not just about come and have a good time on the beach. It's about you come and you feel the people, you feel the joy, you feel the pain. You feel life. The real life, not the life that the tourist brochure will want you to believe. People tend to sort of touch the surfaces. They just know a beach, and maybe a night club and that's it. And they never really get a real feel of the people's soul. So this album is about touchin' the people's soul and truth. Journey through the music. ★



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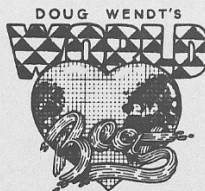
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