

## **From Trinidad and Tobago to the World: Determining the role of Calypso in a new Era**

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Calypso is a popular Caribbean musical genre that originated in the island nation of Trinidad and Tobago. The genre was developed primarily by enslaved West Africans brought to the region via the transatlantic slave trade during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although West-African Kaiso music was a major influence, the genre has also been shaped by other African genres, and by Indian, British, French, and Spanish musical cultures. Emerging in the early twentieth century, Calypso became a tool of resistance by Afro-Caribbean working-class Trinbagonians. Calypso flourished in Trinidad due to a combination of factors—namely, the migration of Afro-Caribbean people from across the region in search of upward social mobility. These people sought to expose the injustices perpetrated by a foreign European and a domestic elite against labourers in industries such as petroleum extraction. The genre is heavily anti-colonial, anti-imperial, and anti-elitist, and it advocated for regional integration. Although this did not occur immediately, Calypsonians sought to establish unity across the region regardless of race, nationality, and class through their songwriting and performing. Today, Calypso remains a unifying force and an important part of Caribbean culture. Considering Calypso's history and purpose, as well as its ever-changing creators and audiences, this essay will demonstrate that the goal of regional integration is not possible without cultural sovereignty.

To begin, Calypso seeks to shed light on major social, economic, and political issues affecting people across the region, providing them with an alternative to narratives produced by the state and the elite. In the early twentieth century, the colony of Trinidad and Tobago was one of many British colonies in the Caribbean, collectively forming the British West Indies. Because of the colony's proximity to oil fields, Trinidad became one of the British Empire's oil hubs from 1909 until independence was achieved in 1962 (Holton 193). While Indian indentured workers were relegated to sugarcane plantations, Africans made up the majority of the labour force in the oil industry. It is in this context that Calypso emerged as a means for disenfranchised Afro-Caribbean labourers to protest the oppression they endured in the industry. The lyrics frequently make reference to segregation, racism, and exploitative working conditions. While the political Calypsonians of the Caribbean were critical of the foreign elite for exploiting local labour and natural resources; they were equally critical of local elite who pursued self-interest over collective progress.

Clear commonalities between Calypsonians included critiquing the elite and arguing for regional integration. Politicians across the region believed that independence for their individual islands would better satisfy people's needs while meeting their own interests. Regional integration across the British West Indies, albeit short-lived as the West Indies Federation (1958-1962), or WIF, showed Caribbean people that unity was possible. An early example of both was Atilla's "Expedite Federation" (1933), which makes a clear case for regional integration: "United we stand, divided we fall / We must succeed, yes, one and all" (Rohlehr 266). However, once Federation was achieved, the union was plagued by many issues such as finding a site for the capital city or local political unease regarding benefits for each colony. Lord Laro's

“Referendum” (1961/1962) exemplifies Jamaican perception of the project, “If Jamaica join the Federation, / All the small islanders will come and flock up the land,” which led to the island’s referendum and decision to exit the union (Rohlehr 277). All member states were required to surrender some of their formal sovereignty in order to gain effective sovereignty. For various reasons, state leaders eventually rejected such a compromise; consequently, they achieved independence in name, but lacked control over economic decision-making.

Since then, persistent issues have plagued the region, but solutions thus far have not been substantial enough to truly benefit local people. The exclusion of local working-class people from positions of power by the elite, whether foreign or domestic, has contributed to stagnation. David Rudder’s “One Caribbean” (1994) imagines a reformed region, one in which Caribbean nations have set aside their differences in favour of establishing unity: “One Caribbean, One Caribbean / One love, one heart, one soul / Reaching for a common goal” (Rohlehr 304). Despite a lack of meaningful action, Calypsonians remain hopeful that change is near.

Calypso's transition to including people of all backgrounds from across the Caribbean has helped the genre to become a regional genre. As was previously mentioned, it was originally developed by working-class Afro-Trinidadians. Indo-Trinidadians were accepted within the genre in the 1970s (Holton 195). Indian migrants began arriving in the area as indentured labourers around the time of the abolition of slavery; large-scale immigration persisted until the late nineteenth century (Heuman 357). Indo-Trinidadian were classified above Afro-Trinidadians in the colony’s racial hierarchy, leading to conflict between the two groups. Lamming cites a Calypso written sometime between 1946 and the early 1960s that exemplifies Indo-Trinidadian exclusion at the time: “What’s wrong with these Indian people / As though their intention is for trouble” (40). In the mid-twentieth century, the Afro-Trinidadian elite had nearly gained control of the government. They believed that they had minimal shared attributes with Indo-Trinidadians.

Sir Lancelot Pinard, an Indo-Trinidadian calypso artist active from the 1930s to the 1960s who helped popularize the genre around the world, was an unlikely icon (Funk 271). Early in his career as an American entertainer, his lyrics were not especially political. Later on, with the advent of McCarthyism, his left-leaning political affiliations resulted in his being banned from the US (Funk 282). Both in Trinidad and Tobago and across the rest of the Caribbean, it took time for other groups to be welcomed in the genre.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the genre expanded beyond the borders of Trinidad and Tobago, eventually reaching communities throughout the region. Like reggae, the popularization of Calypso across the Caribbean has helped to further regional unity. The prevalence of Calypsonians originating from other islands, but who settled in Trinidad, is an important part of this history. Trinidad’s rise in status through profits from the petroleum industry encouraged people from across the region to migrate in hopes of realizing upward social mobility. A rather shameful case of Trinidadian xenophobia was when Grenadian migrants to Trinidad faced police brutality in the 1950s (Rohlehr 289). Foreign artists were drawn to the island because many of the most prominent Calypso tents were located in Trinidad. Some notable non-Trinidadian Calypsonians include Louise Bennett of Jamaica and Brother Valentino of Grenada.

Although there have been several prominent female Calypsonians, the genre has traditionally been dominated by men. Black Stalin's "Caribbean Unity" (1979) urges the Caribbean man to strive "For a better life in the region / For we woman / For we children / Dat must be the ambition of the Caribbean Man / De Caribbean Man, De Caribbean Man;" it mentions Caribbean women and children, but not independent of a patriarchal figure (Rohlehr 291). Black Stalin's paternalism demonstrates an erasure of women's agency in the collective struggle of working-class Caribbean people against an exploitative elite. Rohlehr's article, which has substantiated much of my research, includes only one major female Calypsonian: Louise Bennett. Despite historical exclusions and present-day inclusivity, Calypsonians sought to eliminate oppression, gain cultural sovereignty, and strive for regional integration.

Finally, Calypsonian engagement with the Caribbean diaspora offers a new field of possibilities in terms of starting an intergenerational conversation between artists and audiences of different eras. Using Calypso to continue discussions of regional integration and cultural sovereignty is a necessary conversation. In terms of the Caribbean diaspora, its population relative to the population of the region makes it one of the most notable groups of its kind in the world (Patterson 500). Caribbean migration out of the region has resulted in the creation of large overseas communities in cities around the Atlantic such as London, Toronto, and New York City (504). In the present-day, it is not longer possible to discuss Caribbean culture without mentioning the role played by diasporic communities.

Consider the famous Trinidadian singer Machel Montano, whose music is more generally classified as Soca rather than Calypso. Whether his audience is 25,000 attendees of Trinidadian Carnival or Madison Square Gardens, Montano's reach is transnational (Spotify). Although his Soca hit "Famalay," featuring Bunji Garlin and Skinny Fabulous, is heavily rooted in party culture, lyrics such as "We doh see skin / We doh see colour / We see strength / We see power" demonstrate his belief that judging people based on their bodily features is unproductive (Genius). This song features two Trinidadian artists and one Vincentian artist. Perhaps a seemingly apolitical decision, this collaboration demonstrates mutual admiration and reminds Caribbean people that their differences are not significant. In the region where race and capitalism as we know them were arguably created, works such as this are not without value. Colonial power structures are present in all aspects of society; their universal deconstruction is paramount.

Furthermore, like many of the Calypsonians who came before him, Montano believes that Caribbean people should put their differences aside and strive for unity. He had the opportunity to work with one of the most famous Calypsonians, Trinidadian singer Calypso Rose. In the Calypso-Soca genre-crossing track "Leave Me Alone Remix," featuring Montano and Manu Chao, the lyrics "If yuh 15 or 25 / If yuh 50 or 75 / Once yuh breathing and you alive / So we whining all day!" are rooted in party culture; nevertheless, they unify the fanbases of the "traditional" Calypso Rose and the "modern" Machel Montano (MetroLyrics). The lyrics seek to involve people from all age brackets in the festivities. Applying the teachings of the lyrics to wider society demonstrates the need for Caribbean youth to be involved in our rapidly changing world. Despite the multitude of changes since the early twentieth century, there are many

persisting issues such as corrupt elites, lack of educational and employment opportunities, lack of unity in the region, and a continued reliance on colonial institutions. As older generations have done before them, the youth needs to proactively mobilize against the present-day status quo. Historical exploitation of the region's people and its resources ensures that this will not be a simple task. However, putting differences aside and working together will ultimately benefit the region as a whole.

The rise and development of Calypso has greatly contributed to the ongoing conversations of Caribbean regional integration and cultural sovereignty. The world, and the Caribbean more specifically, has undergone dramatic changes since the dawn of the twentieth century. Many of the issues plaguing the region have not changed much since then. The Caribbean environment and climate change are topics that have not historically received much attention from Calypsonians. Over the past few decades, it has become evident that climate change poses one of the greatest threats to humanity and our current way of life. While the Caribbean has been on the receiving end of many harmful policies and frameworks such as Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and neoliberalism, the region is highly susceptible to changing weather patterns (Girvan 35). In recent years, the Caribbean has faced the onslaught of numerous devastating natural disasters, most notably tropical storms. This is particularly noticeable in two of the region's largest industries: tourism and agriculture (Edmonds). Girvan's assessment that "SIDS will cease to exist," referring to Small Islands and Low-Lying Coastal Developing States, is increasingly resembling reality (23); the example of Dominica quickly comes to mind as the island was forced to totally evacuate during September 2017 (Elie). In the face of such an issue, Calypsonians would argue for regional cooperation and unity.

While the region may have endured these past few decades without meaningful regional solidarity, climate change is a relatively new issue for modern society. This global phenomenon has alarmed people irrespective of social group. The Caribbean and its people are highly susceptible to rising sea levels and changing weather patterns. Without the ability to control their politics and economies, Caribbean people and the islands themselves may not survive the coming storm.

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