

## Calypso Music

### By Charlie Higgins

Calypso is an influential genre of music that originated in the Caribbean islands of Trinidad and Tobago. It joins infectious tropical rhythms with call and response lyrics that often speak of politics and social injustice. With roots in West African protest songs and French troubadour ballads, Calypso became its own unique style due to the particular social climate in which it developed. Over the past century, Calypso has greatly influenced dozens of other genres including jazz, reggae and soca.

Calypso developed amidst the harsh conditions of colonial slavery in the 19th century. Forbidden to communicate with each other during grueling hours of plantation labor, slaves played music together to achieve solidarity and mock their strict European masters, mostly French and Spanish immigrants. Various musical traditions contributed to the development of their particular style of slave song, including West African kaiso and qesh, a long forgotten style of French Christmas music. Calypso songs were often sung in the French-Creole dialect "patois" and were popular during Carnival time.

While traditional Calypso is considered dance and party music, the focus is really on the song and its lyrics. Calypso is sung in a call and response pattern that features a solo singer called a "calypsonian" engaging the group. One of Calypso's defining attributes, the call and response comes directly out of African musical traditions. Typical instruments include guitar, banjo, steel drum and various percussion instruments, all in keeping with Calypso's folk music heritage.

Calypso lyrics generally have a sharp satirical tone that stems from Calypso's original role as the music slaves would use to get even with their cruel masters. Naturally, the criticisms found in these lyrics were veiled in irony and humor, a tradition that continues in Calypso music today. Calypso lyrics are often political in nature and feature some kind of social commentary. One classic Calypso song, Lord Invader's "Rum and Coca Cola" addresses the unseemly culture of prostitution that developed around the American military bases in Trinidad during the 1940s.

While it never reached the status of worldwide craze, Calypso did witness a surge in popularity during the first half of the 20th century. Key figures in the movement include Lord Invader, Attila the Hun and Roaring Lion, who was also the most important Calypso historian. In 1956, Calypso became a brief international obsession with Harry Belafonte's "Banana Boat Song" ("Day-O"). It became the first and only album to sell over a million copies in the entire history of Calypso. Mighty Sparrow carried on the tradition of Calypso well into late 1970s, at which point Calypso rapidly declined and branched off into other styles.

The 1970s witnessed the development of soca, an uptempo and less socially conscious variation on Calypso that has become its own separate genre. Soca has essentially replaced Calypso as the popular music of the Caribbean. Reggae also borrows heavily from Calypso as do chutney, rapso and ringbang.