

To Professor Phelps
 Dear Dr Bentley
 The Mighty Sparrow
 1971



Slinger Francisco (The Mighty Sparrow)

Mr. Chancellor,

The art of the minstrel as practised in Trinidad and Tobago, which we know as the calypso, has its roots in the turbulent history of the underprivileged of these islands. Its modern expression remains true to this tradition, unashamedly, independently in the West Indian idiom. That it survives and has won international recognition is all the more remarkable when seen against a background of suppression and indifference in official circles. Even today, while it may have become more fashionable to embrace it at all social levels a certain residue of ambivalence persists, as its exponents plea for greater exposure of their output. In their struggle for survival, calypsonians have been well served by leaders of their own kind who have demonstrated remarkable qualities of artistry, resilience and resourcefulness, none more so than the person whom we are about to honour.

I present Slinger Francisco, also known as the Mighty Sparrow, calypsonian par excellence, entertainer, composer and lyricist, entrepreneur, a star who exploded on the Trinidad scene over thirty years ago and has remained ever since at the highest point of the entertainment firmament.

Slinger Francisco was born in humble circumstances in Grenada in 1935 but was brought to Trinidad by his parents while still an infant, at a time when another Grenadian, Butler, was in the forefront of the ferment of the labour movement. His family settled west of Port-of-Spain where he attended primary school, first at Mucurapo and later at Newtown. His passion for music and singing surfaced at a very early age, and it was soon evident that that passion was matched by an extraordinarily fine musical ear and a talent for singing, so much so that, with the encouragement of his parents, he was much in demand at parties while still a child. The songs he sang to his audiences were American ballads but within the closer circle of his friends, even in those pre-teen years, he had begun to explore the art of the calypso - the songs of Spoiler and Melody and of Invader which he learned and practised.

School concerts were encouraged at Newtown Boys and the young Francisco, being a recognised singer and member of the church choir, performed on such occasions. He remembers with fond amusement that his headmaster Mr. Carl Jadoonauth, tiring of his continued rendition of the rather irrelevant American country song 'Red River Valley', urged him to try something else. He sang a calypso. The response was electrifying. It was the first time he had done so before an audience and they had reacted in a way that was entirely unexpected. Although a good student and finding a job after leaving school, he resolved to follow a career as a musical entertainer. Like Belloc, he clearly subscribed to the view that:

*It is the best of all trades to make songs
and the second best to sing them*

He began following calypsonians in the tents at Carnival time. Guitar in hand, he frequented the city's nightclubs, the beaches and just about anywhere that calypsonians were to be found. His particular inspiration came from the songs of Spoiler and Melody and so he gravitated to the Young Brigade Tent where Melody, the more sympathetic of

of the two, was the principal performer. He acquired a professional name. 'Sparrow' was a sobriquet conferred in good spirit by his admirers in response to the lively manner of his performing style, but the embellishment 'Mighty', true to the tradition of 'Robber Talk' which is intrinsic to the make-up of the calypsonian, is his. So was born the Mighty Sparrow. Persistence was rewarded. Together and in competition with some of his companions, he won a contract with the Young Brigade and was immediately accepted by the audience of the day. This was in 1954. Calypso singing in Trinidad and Tobago in the early 1950's was mostly confined to the pre-Carnival season. The middle and upper income groups, holding tenaciously to the absurd attitudes of the 19th century, still affected the posture that it was sacrilegious to listen to or sing calypsoes, whatever their theme, in the season of Lent. The environment of the tent and the modes of dress of the performers were hardly inspiring. Singers stood on a make-shift stage supplemented by a handrail, so that, as Hill has observed, they 'looked like so many puppets visible from the waist up'. They emphasised lyrics rather than melody and were yet to explore the power of animation. Their rewards, with few exceptions, were miserable. Such was the lot of calypsonians when Sparrow entered their ranks.

When Princes Margaret visited the islands in 1955, Sparrow composed a song in her honour and was awarded \$100.00. Later that year he toured Guyana where, besides projecting his calypsoes, he proceeded to perfect his art in a gruelling month-long tour throughout the country. Audiences everywhere acclaimed him so that by the season of 1956 he was well prepared for entry to the Calypso King competition. On this occasion he sang his now celebrated calypso 'Jean and Dinah', winning both the Calypso and the Road March competitions. For these splendid efforts he received the princely sum of \$40.00 and the Angostura Cup. The song itself is an incisive comment, both on the corrupting influence of money and the attitudes of the ordinary people to the imposition of the American military at Chaguaramas. Newly crowned, he travelled overseas to St. Thomas, Virgin Islands where he started a Tent and repeated his feat in that country of winning both the Calypso and Road March competitions.

Within two years, while still only 21, he had emerged as the leading calypsonian in the Caribbean, possessing all the attributes of an entertainer of the highest rank: intelligence, social awareness, a wondrous sense of music and lyrics, a voice of commanding quality and an infectious sense of humour. Presently his leadership qualities came to the fore. Whereas the older, more mature, calypsonians had felt themselves powerless to fight a system which condemned them to miserable rewards for their efforts as entertainers, Sparrow took up the challenge. It struck him as being entirely unjust that winners of the Carnival Queen Competition, such as it then was, should be showered with valuable prizes whilst the calypsonians received next to nothing. His answer was to boycott the Carnival competition of 1957, setting up a rival competition at the Globe Cinema, which incidentally he won with his 'Carnival Boycott'. We note this incident because it had the most profound effect on the development of Calypsonians and Carnival. The Government, newly installed in power and riding the crest of a wave of popularity, suddenly found itself on the defensive openly criticised in his calypso 'Mango Wood'. Voicing the feelings of the public that Government has unjustifiably raised the taxi fares he proceeds fearlessly to admonish the new leader with 'No Doctor No'. The denouement establishes his feelings about taxi fares but also makes it clear that he is prepared to oppose anything he perceives as not being in the public interest.

*"So you better come good
Because I have a big piece 'o' Mango Wood"*

The ploy was successful, leading directly to Government's intervention and the establishment of the Carnival Development Committee which thereafter dominated the organisation of Carnival and the annual calypso competition. By 1960, such was his impact that the celebrated author CLR James was moved to write:

"Sparrow's use of the language over and over again makes memorable lines of ordinary Trinidad speech. He represents, makes known, what the people really think, what they really are and how they speak. Through him the ordinary West Indian speech is given its place

. . . . As soon as I saw and heard him in person, felt his enormous vitality and gathered some facts about him, I recognised that here was a man who comes once in fifty years".

In the years that ensued, he established a pattern or movement and activity which has endured to this day: a clutch of calypsoes for the Carnival season followed by tours of the Caribbean and Latin America, of Canada and the United States, sometimes of Europe and Africa, always gaining in stature, in versatility and innovation. The variety of his calypso themes is astonishing, reflecting an exceptional sensitivity to all aspects of life around him: politics, education, morals, international affairs, sex, public scandal, fantasy. The list is endless. So too are his musical creativity and range of prosody. He speaks both for and to the ordinary people, mastering all forms of the calypso including the

modern version of the calinda which he uses with such telling effect in his masterpiece: *'Ten to one is Murder'*. First to challenge so fearlessly the status quo, he has infused confidence in his fellow performers and increased opportunity for greater financial reward; first to introduce costuming and animation he has brought glamour and style to their performances. His supreme artistry has given calypso respectability, taken it from the shadows and delivered it to the brightest spotlights of the world of entertainment. To confound even his greatest admirers his venture into the realm of popular songs in Europe in 1978 saw his Hit-single *'Only a Fool Breaks His Own Heart'* running 26 weeks on a European Hit Parade, nine more than his closest rival - The Beatles. There is yet more to this remarkable man. Sparrow, the entrepreneur is the founder of Sparrow Enterprises of which Sparrow's Hideway is a subsidiary. This sprawling and thriving entertainment centre conceived as a Calypso Theatre and constructed with no assistance from Government, is home to his own tent - Sparrow's Young Brigade. Ever the protagonist of the calypsonian he has recently launched his latest project at the Hideway: a Calypso Hall of Fame.

His contributions as an entertainer have received the widest acclaim and recognition in the Caribbean and shores beyond. In 1969 he received Trinidad and Tobago's Humming Bird Medal for loyal and devoted service in the sphere of calypso. He has been honoured in London by the BBC, in the Bahamas, Barbados and the Virgin Islands, by the United Nations, in Toronto and New York, where May 18, 1984 was proclaimed "The Mighty Sparrow Day". He is an honorary citizen of Austin in Texas, has received the keys of the city of Detroit and is Honorary Chief Omowale of Lagos. Typical is the citation from Hunter College of the City University of New York which reads:

... He continues to capture the aspirations, hopes and dreams of the people through the sheer power of his music and verse, rhyming caution to politicians and government alike ... he is the quintessential West Indian artist ...

Superlative heaped upon superlative. What drives his genius?... What sustains him in feats of courage and physical endurance? What Muses inspire his artistry? The answer must be, as Walcott tells us, because he has explored his origins, his feelings are his own, and their roots lie in his own earth. His Muses are the people. Somewhere along his glorious path of success a facetious remark addressed to his public, curiously, has been adopted and reflected back to him. It says everything. It is the ultimate accolade:

'If Sparrow say is so, is so'.

Mr. Chancellor, I request you, by the authority of Senate and Council, to admit Slinger Francisco, The Mighty Sparrow, The Calypso King of Kings to the degree of Doctor of Letters, honoris causa.