

WHITHER CALYPSO, WHITHER PAN?

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LAST YEAR Kitchener predicted the demise of the Calypso. He gave as the reason for his gloomy forecast, the fact that everybody was now singing political calypsoes. The people did not want to hear them. They went to the tents to be entertained, not to be preached at.

Kitchener was only partly right. Because, although the political calypsoes were in fact turning people off, it was not because they were political calypsoes, but because they were dreary and dull.

The political calypso has always been an important part of the tent scene, and has an honourable tradition. Nearly all the old masters, Attila, Radio, Lion, Tiger were fine exponents of the art of political calypso.

But there has sprung up within recent years a school of thought which believes that a serious political calypso needs to be tuneless, dreary, and devoid of wit or humour. Any wit or humour, tune or rhythm that it may have, is looked upon as a rather patronising concession to the conventional calypso.

This is the sort of calypso that is turning away patrons from the tents. Not only that, but because of the yearning for some rhythm and melody, a number of calypsoes whose lyrics are worthless and whose music is not very good are being accepted by the public merely because of their rhythm and simple melodies.

Look at the charts and you will see. In the old days many of these calypsoes now making the charts would have been booed off the stage. Ask Lion or Tiger.

Happily this year Sparrow his "Steel Beam" has shown, in his masterful way, that a political calypso can sparkle with wit, humour, rhythm and melody, and still say what it has to say better than the songs of the sad-faced purveyors of the calypso sermon.

But there are other influences at work which may cause Kitchener's pessimistic forecast to come true.

And the "soca-ization" of the calypso, as many people seem to think, is not one of these. In fact, calypso has always been in a state of continuous change, and soca is merely another one of the changes which take place in calypso music from time to time.

However, basically whatever change has taken place, has been well within the musical traditions of our society. If we listen carefully enough to the soca rhythm, it is fairly easy to detect the sound of the bamboo-bamboo. In a sense, soca is a return to our traditional sources.

Perhaps before going on to suggest what is the second real danger to the calypso, I should recall a calypso a few years ago in which an eminent calypsonian of the somewhat younger generation suggests that Trinidad and Tobago should develop a beat of its own like the Jamaican reggae.

It was extremely ironical that while singing in precisely our own form, our own thing, developed over more than a century, this eminent calypsonian should be calling upon us to develop a form of our own.

What he really meant, of course, was that we should develop a beat which would make the "calypso" acceptable in the outside world, as the reggae had become. Whether this was merely because he thought we had something to offer the world musically, or he thought we should seek more lucrative markets for our music was not clear.

And therein lies the rub. Or the dilemma. Our calypsonians speak quite loudly about the need to develop our own culture, and to get the people of this country to appreciate it, though I sometimes feel that some of the examples put forward as representative of "we culture" are nothing short of appalling.

On the other hand, perhaps because of the neglect by their fellow citizens (though I doubt that this plays a very important part), they are now seeking, in the jargon word, to write and sing "cross-over" music, which simply means music that would be sold in the larger and more lucrative markets abroad, especially in the United States. The success of Bob Marley and Peter Tosh has given a big fillip to this trend.

But what does "cross-over" mean? Does it mean preserving the innate vitality, rhythm and wit of the calypso, while incorporating certain foreign elements of rhythm and speech, and toning down a bit the purely Trinidadian and Tobagonian elements, so that the people out there can understand and appreciate the words and the music?

Or does it mean the wholesale abandonment of the essential quality of the calypso, leaving it merely a pale reflection of what it now is...an art reduced to gimmickry. There are dangers. The trend has started.

There have been "cross-overs" before, but at the hands of American artists. "Rum and Coca Cola," as sung by the Andrew Sisters, is one example. The thing was a big joke to us in Trinidad and Tobago, and I am sure that no self-respecting citizen of our country ever bought that recording, except perhaps as a matter of historical record.

Belafonte, too, has had his share of "cross-overs", which were looked upon in the West Indies as mere musical curiosities for the most part.

No one is against calypsonian for wanting to break into the international market. But he has to make up his mind what he really wants to do. To get back to Sparrow's "Steel Beam", it is a masterpiece of a calypso, lyric-wise, melody-wise and rhythm-wise, but totally foreign to U.S. ears in all three dimensions.

It remains however, extremely popular with his fellow citizens who consider it one of his best ever. To "cross it over" would mean a wholesale interference with its lyrics, tune and rhythm as to destroy it completely in the process.

What then is the calypsonian to do? Does he try to popularize the authentic calypso in the lucrative markets of the world, or does he water it down so that it becomes an Andrews Sisters Rum and Coca Cola sort of thing.

He may, and probably quite rightly, tell you that it is impossible to market the calypso outside in its pure Trinidad and Tobago dress. But how far does he go to dress it up in foreign clothing so that it will make him some "bread"?

Will he have to use so much foreign clothing that makes it a cosquel parody of itself, which his fellow-citizens will not appreciate, and will not pay to hear either in the tents, or on the records.

Calypsonians may "cross over" if they will, but they must recognise the danger of losing the very essence of the "culture" which they call on their fellow citizens to support.

I am of the view that any real cross-over music will not be very popular with Trinidadians and Tobagonians, however popular in the U.S. But it may well be worthwhile for the calypsonian to give up the local market for the much more lucrative markets abroad.

Perhaps the answer lies, as hinted in the Calypsonian's remarks on T.V., in producing two types of "calypso" the cross-over calypso

for the markets abroad, and the "authentic" calypso for the local and West Indian markets.

But a danger lurks here too; a calypsonian trying to do both might find himself producing songs for the local and foreign markets which meet the demands of neither. They may be neither fish nor fowl nor good red herring.

I do not pretend to know the answers. I merely state the problems which certainly have to be looked at carefully for the sake of the future of the calypso.

The Steelband movement, also, is faced with a problem, similar in some ways, though not precisely of the same kind. The steelband is undoubtedly the most outstanding musical phenomenon that has taken place in the world for centuries. Its originality, growth and development are almost completely incredible.

Yet we hear complaints that the steelband, "pan", is not fully appreciated in Trinidad and Tobago. The bands are not employed for playing music on the road at Carnival or for fetes at Carnival, or indeed any other time of the year. Brassbands and DJ's get all the jobs.

On the other hand, the Steelband festival, at which mostly classical music is played, is highly appreciated by huge crowds, and Panorama has never failed to draw vastly enthusiastic crowds to hear calypso music on steel.

My own view is that the Steel Bands have not yet realized that they have to play for different audiences (although they may be for the most part the same people), in different circumstances, and each audience and circumstance demands a different style.

The festival is for listening to the virtuosity of the steelband playing classical music mostly. But it is for listening, and listening only.

Panorama is largely for listening, but it has a sizeable element of the "jump-up" in it, albeit somewhat discreet. The "own-tune" arrangers, I think, have missed the point that Panorama is not only for listening. Hence, while the crowds appreciate the technical proficiency of the bands, they are always left feeling that something was missing, no matter how high the judges place the performances.

Pan on the road demands a type of arrangement and playing that fairly pushes the masqueraders forward. Something of the "bamboo-bamboo" beat.

Certainly the whole range of drums and sets moving very slowly along does not help in this direction. Perhaps the answer is smaller or more mobile bands for "pan-on-the-road" or bands split into two or three Silver Stars arrangement of "Happy Wanderer" (not a calypso) is perhaps the best example of an arrangement to keep mas' on the move. Pan on the road is for moving.

Pan in fetes is for dancing. Not merely jumping-up either as in Panorama or on the road, even when it is a Carnival fete.

To put it shortly, you cannot play Festival Music for Panorama, the road, or for fetes, and when I say music I don't mean the tunes but the style. You cannot play Panorama music for the road, for Festival or for fetes.

You cannot play road music, for festival, panorama or fetes, and you cannot play fete music for Festival, Panorama or the road.

I am not sure the steelband specializing in the different styles, I understand there is already one steelband (small) that specializes in fete-music and is never at a loss for work. But I doubt whether the situation in Trinidad and Tobago will allow for such wholesale specialization.

The steelbands must learn to adjust their styles to the circumstances in which they play.

