

BACCHANAL!

THE CARNIVAL CULTURE OF TRINIDAD

PETER MASON

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Introduction

The pictures don't tell the whole story, not by a long chalk. Trinidad carnival is one of the most photographed festivals in the world, yet not even glorious Technicolor can convey the orgy of excitement, the smells, the heat, the confusion, the heart pounding noise, the sexual energy, the pepper sauce wit, the aching limbs and the sense of mental release. No photograph can reveal just how much this festival is woven into the fabric of one of the most vibrant, obstinate and engaging nations in the world. Many countries have a carnival, but carnival is Trinidad – and Trinidad is carnival.

It is hard to think of anywhere else where a festival is invested with so much year-round importance, preparation and anticipation, where any event takes a nation over so completely or so neatly brings together so many aspects of its culture, of its strengths and weaknesses. Carnival is not just a two-day event for the average Trinidadian: it is an all-year-round statement of identity. It is Trinidad which gives carnival its most distinctive, most artistic, most innovative and most passionate clothing, and it is Trinidad carnival which is most imitated throughout the world. Brazil may boast larger attendances but Trinidad is its true spiritual home. It has hosted the celebrations for longer, and in a far more expressive, individualistic form. It keeps the ancient spirit of carnival closest to its heart.

In 1498, when Christopher Columbus first sailed to the island which the Amerindians called Iere ('the land of the hummingbird'), he re-named it 'La Trinidad' or 'Trinity', either after the three hills he saw as he approached land, or perhaps, as a God-fearing Catholic, in honour of the holy trinity itself. These days the island moves to the rhythm of a different trinity, every bit as inspirational: to the three essential elements of Trinidad carnival – steelband, calypso and masquerade.

Masquerade, or 'mas' for short, is what most of the photographers concentrate on; the huge elaborate costumes of the kings and queens

masquerading as birds, spiders, butterflies or folk-figures, with a supporting cast of hundreds of others picking out a theme in less elaborate, but equally colourful, costumes.

The dramatic effect of a mas band of a thousand or more people 'jumping up' in the street can be breathtaking, an incredible shock of colour and life which becomes far more than the sum of its parts. It is a moving, shimmering Trinidadian animal that hums and shines with the energy of all those who make it. When it comes together with scores of other mas bands and spectators, all vying for attention and space in the hot sun and dust, the energy can be overwhelming.

'Playing mas' is the way that many Trinidadians (up to 100,000 of them, or almost ten per cent of the population) actively participate in carnival. Thousands take to the streets on the two main days of carnival, dancing in costumes which may have taken several months to prepare yet which, once the revelry is over, are often thrown into the gutter or given away to watching children. People either design and make their own costumes – an increasing rarity – or they sign up in advance with mas bands which provide the costumes from a temporary base known as a 'mas camp'.

Led by their kings and queens along a pre-ordained route through the streets of their town (for carnival is a mainly urban phenomenon) they dance for two days on carnival Monday and Tuesday, many without sleep, each band moving behind the huge speakers of a large truck which blare out the latest carnival tunes over and over again. National television will be covering their every move with hours of live programming, and at points along the route the masqueraders will be judged in the quest to find the best bands of the year. The judging will take into account their vitality, energy, inventiveness and, of course, their costumes.

These are not the costumes of, say, a carnival parade in seaside Britain, with floats sponsored by local companies and bank managers dressed in parrot suits holding out buckets for charity collections. These are costumes on elaborate themes developed by a team of designers and craftspeople, dreamt up as long ago as the end of the previous carnival, and some of them will have been invested with hundreds, if not thousands, of hours of work. This is street theatre. Trinidad's themes are fantasy themes: of outer space, ancient cultures, the insect world, the folkloric world of shapeshifters, bloodsuckers and ghosts. Some will choose themes and characters which have remained strong throughout the history of carnival and which now have their own place in the hearts of the Trinidadian people.

But mas is not just about beautiful costumes and daytime revelry. It has another, darker side which acts as the precursor to the two days of 'pretty mas'. It is 'J'Ouvert' (from the French 'day opens') a chaotic, anarchic 'dirty mas' of rough, home-made costumes and drunkenness which begins spontaneously in the early minutes of carnival Monday, hours before the sequinned masqueraders claim the streets as their own. J'Ouvert is about abandon, physicality and fear, a deliberately hellish counterpoint to pretty mas's heavenly themes.

Pitchfork devils charge around the streets with bent wire tails, smearing each other with oil and nastiness, breathing fire. Men dance around with giant phalluses attached to their trousers, or in grotesque drag. Women patrol the streets in screaming gangs. Both sexes roll in the gutter, covered in grease and paint. Some puke from excess.

Many of the people who celebrate J'Ouvert will be in the pretty mas bands a few hours later, sleep-deprived and moving on adrenaline and rum, sometimes dancing right through until the 'last lap' when carnival officially comes to a stop after dark on Tuesday.

But for now they spill onto the darkened streets, revelling in the spontaneity, charging in all directions and splattering each other with mud. Big trucks blare out deafening soca music as huge crowds follow them in and out of side streets. Sound systems create crushes on street corners as 'iron bands' banging car hubs and biscuit tins gouge their way through the throng and steelbands take their followers on a drunken tour round town. All this until the break of day and often beyond; a kind of 'mob art', drawn by collective madness and the creative energy of the crowd.

The framework for mas is Trinidad's national song, calypso, and its updated modern counterpart, soca. This is not the Hawaiian-shirted calypso of Harry Belafonte, but the acerbic social commentary and splenetic release of Black Stalin and Gypsy and Cro Cro; musicians who are in touch with the soul of Trinidad and who capture the public's imagination. Calypso can be party music taken to its limits and it can be biting social satire, or anything in between, but it is born and bred in Trinidad, and the people love it for that. It is as powerful a social force in their island as reggae is in Jamaica or the blues in the deep south of America.

Calypso lives and breathes carnival, and until recently it barely survived outside its confines. Calypsonians write their songs specifically for the carnival period, and from Christmas onwards they begin a non-stop series of public appearances designed to showcase the one or two compositions

they hope will define carnival for that year. They will perform almost anywhere, from private parties to huge outdoor events in front of 40,000 people, but their main outlet takes the form of calypso 'tents', the clubs or music venues where up to 20 calypsonians will make nightly appearances as part of a regular bill of artists assembled by a local entrepreneur.

Calypso's carnival counterpart is the sound of the steel pan, a modern invention with percussion roots which goes as far back as mas and calypso, and which, despite its relative youth, holds a firm place in the hearts of the people as the third member of carnival's holy trinity.

The focus of steel pan at carnival is the pan yards, empty plots of land in which bands practise in the open air, night after night, to ready themselves for the national Panorama competition in Port of Spain, where the best steelband of the year is proclaimed. These are not the quaint steelbands you may see at racecourses or summer fairs, tinkling their instruments as a pleasant tropical island background to other events. These are huge gangs up to 130 strong, mainly young and usually street-wise, grouping together under names like Desperadoes and Renegades which suggest a dark and violent steelband past. They inspire fierce local loyalties as strong as any football or baseball team and produce a deafening, heart pounding noise that is the essence of Trinidad's rhythm, a music so powerful, yet so sweet, that it can bring tears to your eyes.

They take to the streets on metal platforms, wheeled through the crowds by dedicated supporters, the pannists bouncing perilously on the steel frames as the rhythm takes hold and the noise builds to a crescendo. On carnival Monday and Tuesday they might provide music for the masqueraders, weaving around the streets as hundreds follow their sound. But on carnival Saturday, if they are among the best, they will have been on the Panorama stage at the Queen's Park Savannah, competing for the national title.

The tie that binds the carnival trinity of calypso, mas, and steel pan, and which gives Trinidad carnival one of its most distinctive flavours, is the element of competition. Each part of the trinity has its own important title to vie for in carnival season: band of the year for mas, Calypso Monarch for calypso and Panorama for steel pan, but there are many smaller and just as fiercely contested subsidiary competitions besides. In calypso there is the Calypso Queen title, the Soca Monarch crown, Junior Calypso Monarch and any number of other local titles on offer. In mas there are the kings and queens of the year, the small bands title, and the

junior event. In steel pan there are old-time pan contests and a plethora of local titles.

All come together to give some focus, shape and timetable to carnival beyond the certain knowledge that everyone will be on the streets on carnival Monday and Tuesday. They give carnival a sequence and a build-up that every Trinidadian is familiar with, and they create a carnival 'season', which builds in intensity from Christmas to Ash Wednesday. Each person will have their favourite mas band, steelband or calypsonian, and most will argue about their merits year after year, for Trinidad is an intensely competitive place in an enjoyable sort of way. Competition requires weeks of build-up as calypsonians release songs, masqueraders sew their costumes and steelbands practise in the yards. When there is time to spare, hundreds of high intensity Trinidadian 'fetes' (from the French for party) fill in the gaps. Fetes are a thing to behold; high energy, stamina-sapping events with live bands, DJs, and PAs by calypsonians, set to an orgiastic backdrop of whistling, flag-waving, prodigious food consumption and the ubiquitous dance of carnival, the sexual, hip-yrating 'wine'. Fetes are to Trinidad what the dancehall is to Jamaica, and as carnival time arrives they come in a never-ending stream, untrammelled by competition dates or pre-arranged programmes.

Carnival takes place almost everywhere in Trinidad, but inevitably its focal point is on the streets of the noisy, chaotic capital, Port of Spain, and more specifically on the Queen's Park Savannah stage. Every town and village has a savannah or its equivalent – an open piece of common ground where the local kids play cricket and football – not quite a park but something like it, where the carnival celebrations will always gravitate. But as Port of Spain is the centre of greatest revelry and the Queen's Park Savannah is the greatest of all Trinidad's savannahs, this is where all eyes turn.

Although carnival is subtly different each year, its core timetable of events has become reassuringly settled. The main events of carnival weekend kick off during the daylight hours of Saturday with kiddies carnival, and on Saturday night with the Panorama final at the Queen's Park Savannah. On Sunday night there is the Dimanche Gras show at the same venue, which until 1998, traditionally combined the Calypso Monarch competition with the judging of the kings and queens of the bands, and spills over into the Monday morning excesses of J'Ouvert. Some will stay on for the emergence of 'pretty mas' later that day, which takes control

of the streets right up to midnight on Tuesday, when (by tradition at least) carnival is meant to stop abruptly.

Theoretically then, carnival only encompasses the two days of masquerade, but it covers more like four, from Saturday to Tuesday night. Carnival in Trinidad is, in any case, a moveable feast which shifts according to a Christian calendar with pagan roots. Apart from 1972, when it was moved to May because of an outbreak of polio, it has always been on Shrove (or pancake) Tuesday, traditionally the last day of excess before the period of self restraint ushered in by Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of the 40-day fasting season of Lent leading up to Easter. But because the date of Easter varies every year, so too does the date of carnival Tuesday. It can be as early as the second week of February or as late as the second week of March, but, bizarrely, has never been a public holiday. Trinidad's government offices, banks and schools are all theoretically open on carnival Tuesday, yet most workplaces exist on a skeleton staff and no disciplinary action is ever taken against absentees.

Calculating the exact dates of carnival is a complicated business which involves working back 40 days (excluding Sundays) from Easter Sunday, which in turn is calculated from lunar and solar cycles around the spring equinox. Fortunately for ordinary mortals, the dates of carnival are mapped out well in advance, but the calculations give some clue to carnival's pagan beginnings.

Nobody is sure how long carnival has been celebrated, but it dates back to well before Christianity, when it was a festival of many forms in many places around the world, often celebrating the end of winter and the arrival of spring. Many cultures and societies have a long-established time of year when people indulge in celebration for celebration's sake, often accompanied by the wearing of costumes or disguises. In Roman times, carnival took the wild form of Saturnalia, when slaves were freed for seven days of drunkenness and allowed, theoretically at least, to exchange roles and clothes with their masters. But as the organised Roman Catholic Church began to take over, new rituals were painted on top of the pagan rites, much as they were on other pre-Christian festivals such as Yuletide.

Initial Church disapproval of the ribaldry and sensuous dancing of carnival did little to stop people indulging in what the church saw as devilish excess, so religious leaders had little choice but to give old rituals new meanings rather than to try to ban them altogether. So it was that carnival at large became a slightly more restrained festival in which

Christians were allowed a last chance to eat, drink and be merry, to indulge in the old pagan ways, before the strictures of Lent, when they would be required to give up meat and the sins of the flesh. Carnival is a 'farewell to the flesh' in more ways than one: the word Carnival comes from the Latin words *Carne* for meat and *Vale* for farewell.

The Catholic Church's adoption of carnival was, then, merely a pragmatic decision, but the festival soon came to be associated with the Church itself, which ironically managed to preserve the festival when it was dying elsewhere. Carnival was celebrated for many centuries in parts of Catholic Europe, and in modern times has been strongest in areas, such as Trinidad, Brazil and New Orleans in the United States, with a strong Catholic presence. The Protestant establishment has tended to frown on carnival's excesses, but the Catholic Church's more liberal attitude to drink and revelry has also allowed carnival to be celebrated in unbroken form in Italy (particularly Venice), Spain, France and parts of Germany and Belgium.

In Trinidad some claim that the native Amerindians, who arrived from the South American mainland around 5400 BC, might have had their own equivalent of carnival celebrations, which were built upon by the invading Europeans. Certainly the Arawaks and Caribs survived in Trinidad longer than in most other Caribbean islands, long enough perhaps to have had an influence on the European/African culture that supplanted their own. But there is little, if any, evidence to show that they had any significant impact on carnival. In fact carnival does not seem to have attained any importance in Trinidad until the arrival of French Catholic planters in 1783, almost 300 years after the arrival of Columbus. It was the French, many of them fleeing to Spanish-owned Trinidad to escape the effects of the French revolution, the slave revolution in Saint Domingue or British incursions in other parts of the Caribbean, who built the foundations for the modern-day festival.

Their carnival was a sometimes raucous affair, but was staged against a more genteel backdrop of balls and dances with masquerade as the centrepiece. There were street fairs, practical jokes, house to house visiting, promenading in town, firework displays and string instrument music: activities mostly confined to white settlers and Trinidad's substantial number of 'free coloureds', with slaves expressly forbidden to take part. After the 1834-1838 emancipation of slaves in Trinidad, however, the French and free coloureds lost control of carnival and its character changed. Former slaves flocked onto the streets in their thousands,

Africanising the festivities with their drums and flaming torches, stickfighting, sensuous dancing and African songs. The white elite, by now including the British, who had seized the island in 1797, largely withdrew to their exclusive house parties in fear and disgust.

Since then the authorities have tried, often brutally, to subdue carnival, but it has managed to survive and flourish as a mass participation, lower-class Afro-Trinidadian preserve until the last 30 years or so, when it has gained general acceptance among all strands of society in what is a country of great racial diversity.

Unlike, say, Jamaica or Barbados, Trinidad has been a cosmopolitan island for a long while, becoming ever more so as time has progressed. In the early days of colonisation it was a quiet tropical backwater, ignored by its Spanish rulers and often unvisited by any ship for periods of up to ten years. Slavery came late to the island, and by the time the British had officially taken over in 1803, Trinidad had become a racially mixed island of whites, mixed race free coloureds, west African slaves and Amerindians. For 70 years after the abolition of slavery, around 140,000 indentured labourers from India, and to a lesser extent China, joined the melting pot as they left their homelands to work in slave-like conditions in the sugarcane fields. Their arrival, though supposedly temporary, radically altered the make up of the country, for few returned when their work contracts expired and many had the right of free passage back to India withdrawn. Over the years thousands of immigrants have also arrived from mainland South America (especially Venezuela) as well as the smaller Eastern Caribbean islands, such as Grenada and St Vincent, in search of better work opportunities.

Today about 40 per cent of Trinidadians are of African descent and an almost equal number (39.6 per cent) are Indo-Trinidadian.¹ But there has been plenty of inter-racial mixing, and although the official figures claim that around 18 per cent of Trinidadians are of mixed race (or *douglas* as Trinidadians call the mixture of African and Indian), the figure is probably higher. Certainly most Trinidadians can find at least two or three races in their family without going back more than a couple of generations, and many boast Amerindian blood, although there are now no pure Caribs or Arawaks left. In fact there is no 'pure' anything in Trinidad anymore.

English is the official language but some still speak Hindi, and patois is widely spoken. The dominant religions are Christianity (29 per cent of the population is Catholic, 11 per cent Anglican) Hinduism (24 per cent) and Islam (6 per cent), but there are surviving African religions such as Shango.

Although non-African or Indian races remain in small numbers (around one per cent are officially whites of mainly British, French, Portuguese and Spanish descent, and a further half of one per cent are Chinese), their genes have spread wider. Influences from all the different cultures in Trinidad have mingled into one, and although some cultural aspects remain separate, they are gradually becoming lost in a distinctly Trinidadian culture. This is no colour-blind paradise where race is of no consequence, but the island has experienced few of the racial problems that, say, nearby Guyana has encountered. Trinidad is a generally harmonious place and, in recent years at least, carnival has become a manifestation of this cultural tolerance.

In fact it is Trinidad's special mix of peoples and background which helps give carnival and the country their extraordinary spirit and identity. For although Trinidad is deeply Caribbean, it is absolutely unlike anywhere else in the region. It is often a hard, sometimes violent place, but it appears to have been less troubled by its racial mix and its history than other areas of the Caribbean, and, on the surface at least, it has a greater capacity for fun. Its people proudly proclaim that 'no one could fete like Trinis' and are happy, for the most part, to live up to the stereotypes placed upon them: the sharp humour, the love of an argument, the spontaneity. Trinidadians are individualistic, often eccentric, and collectively there is no denying that they like a good time.

Numerous theories have been put forward to explain this apparent hedonism. The island's relative prosperity (since independence from Britain in 1962, oil and gas exports have allowed it to become one of the richest countries in the Caribbean) has enabled its people to avoid some of the more acute extremes of social deprivation. Trinidad's era of slavery was also comparatively short-lived in relation to other islands and arguably left less of a collective trauma than elsewhere. British rule, moreover, came later to Trinidad than most other colonies and was in many ways less harsh than that exercised during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in islands such as Jamaica. The lack of a dominant imperial culture, the liberalising effect of competing French and Spanish influences, the impact of Americans when they used the island as a base in the Second World War and, above all, the cultural exuberance of the Africans and Indians who also made the island their home: all these factors go some way to explaining Trinidad's cosmopolitan and extrovert identity.

There is also something in the physical nature of the island itself. Unlike neighbouring Tobago, which has an entirely separate history and

far less of a love affair with carnival (and is consequently not covered in any detail by this book), Trinidad is not a classic tropical hideaway surrounded by golden sands and calm blue waters. It has spectacular beauty in its hills, rugged beaches, and wildlife in abundance, but it is far more developed, more urbanised, more noisy and more sophisticated than many other Caribbean islands. Although there are wide expanses of untamed land, from the Caroni swamps to the 3,000 feet northern range, it is a crowded island with a population density of 619 people per square mile, squeezed into an area only slightly larger than Hong Kong and sweating in average year round temperatures of 29C (83F).

It is a young island too, with nearly half its population under 16 and a vitality that helps carnival grow and develop each year. How else could a country with a population of just 1.3 million run a carnival of such magnitude and invention? Would it be possible to imagine the same creative energy, year after year, in, say, Birmingham? Would it be possible to imagine up to two-thirds of Birmingham's entire population coming out onto the streets on carnival Monday and Tuesday as they do in Trinidad? Could Birmingham have come up with its own form of music and its own musical instrument just to celebrate such a festival?

Trinidad's internal complexity and diversity have allowed it to produce this creativity. There are many other carnivals around the world but this one, as the Trinidadians are fond of saying, is often imitated but never equalled. Errol Hill, one of the chief chroniclers of carnival, has called it 'the greatest annual theatrical spectacle of all time'. Certainly it is a national treasure. Carnival occupies Trinidad's attention like nothing else: if you are not taking part you are planning to take part, and if you're not talking about taking part then you're talking about what happened last year. Carnival may be boycotted by some, but it is ignored by no one. It is owned and run by the people.

In other countries carnival is a diversion from the troubles of life; in Trinidad it sometimes seems as if life is a diversion from carnival. It is a large, noisy and confusing party decorated by scandal and excess. Trinidadians have a word to describe it: it is 'bacchanal'.

1

Kaiso!

It's a hot, humid weekday night at the Calypso Revue tent on the waterfront near Port of Spain harbour. About 1,500 people are packed into the SWWTU Hall, a union drinking and social club that is neither indoors nor outdoors. There is a 'galvanise' corrugated iron roof above the audience which makes a deafening racket if it rains, but for the most part the hall is open to the evening heat and has the feeling of a marquee, echoing the days when calypso tents really were tents, erected to give the patrons some shelter from tropical downpours.

The latest carnival music blares from a sound system by the stage as an Indian man, already the worse for drink and with a bottle of Carib beer in his hand, wines up with a couple of women by the speaker boxes. The rest of the people in the hall are in animated conversation; greeting friends, fussing over drinks or seating arrangements, wiping sweat from their brows, telling jokes or sucking their teeth at what is already going to be a long delay before the calypsonians take the stage.

The crowd is a mixed one: young, middle-aged and old (although more of the middle-aged) and socially varied. Most people are perched on the edge of free-standing metal chairs which have numbers spray-stencilled on the back, packed in rows with little leg room, as if for a school play. Those who have not arrived early are crowding in to the standing area at the back, jostling for a place with a view. Outside the entrance, where street vendors sell the carnival staples of bubbling corn soup, chicken foot and pigs tail from huge metal pots, there is a scene of pure Trinidadian

'comess', or argumentative confusion, as outraged late-arriving punters realise that the tent managers have oversold the venue, leaving dozens of people with tickets but little chance of getting in. Already the place is dangerously overcrowded.

Inside, the bars are doing a swift trade, the staff wincing with pain as their arms search for beers and soft drinks in plastic dustbins full of ice. A surge of excitement breaks out as a musician wanders onto the stage, checks his instrument, then wanders off again. Although the tents are among the better organised parts of the build up to carnival, delays such as this are far from unusual; in fact they are the norm. Even Trinidadians talk about 'Trini time'. Punctuality is not an especially prized attribute in these parts.

When the house band of horns, drums, bass guitar, rhythm guitar and percussion finally assembles, the entire hall stands up, for almost any public gathering in Trinidad begins with the national anthem. Trinidad's national song, which was specially written for the country's independence in 1962, is a beautiful one, as you would expect in a land where musical creativity is to the fore. The brass section plays it with a faint calypso lilt.

The band will accompany all of the twenty or so artists on the bill, its members priding themselves on their versatility, stamina and powers of recall. Four female backing singers provide sweet harmonies, which, because everything in Trinidad seems to have a competition at its heart, might even bring them the title of best chorus group of the carnival season.

There is a roar as another essential ingredient of any calypso tent, the master of ceremonies or 'emcee', moves onto the stage. In this case it is the much-loved comedian, Sprangalang, a wild-haired Afro-Trinidadian who is famed for his masterly put-downs of hecklers ('Oh God! look inside she mout' – you could pave a highway wid she tongue, boy'). Good emcees keep the wheels moving, for it is they who control the comings and goings of the calypsonians, bringing them back for encores if the crowd looks that way inclined, or slipping them away with dignity if they bomb. In many ways they are calypsonians without song, trading in the same staples of insult, wry commentary and innuendo. Often, in fact, they have recorded their own tunes for carnival, as Sprangalang has done in the past, or are calypsonians in their own right, such as Protector.

But it is the singers that most people have come to see, and the place builds up to a crescendo of excitement as the first of them appears on stage. The tent audience is a demanding one that does not readily hand

out plaudits, but for those calypsonians who please the crowd the rewards are high. When a calypsonian delivers the first good punch line, the place erupts in appreciation, the serried ranks breaking up in disorder as people scream with laughter, waving their arms, stamping and shouting encouragement. Even if you missed the words you can't help but laugh, for when Trinidadians appreciate a joke the feeling is infectious. This is why people come to a calypso tent; not for the dancing, for there is little of that in such cramped conditions, but for communal appreciation of a musical treasure. The show will carry on like this for up to five hours as each calypsonian sings two songs, one before the half-way break and one after, with the big names generally saved until last.

The people do not come just to hear the jokes, however, for many of the calypsonians have a serious social or political message behind their songs. Throughout the night, singer after singer returns to the recurring calypso tent themes of national unity, of the country going to the dogs, of rising crime, poor social services, vagrants on the streets, bankrupt hospitals and political corruption.

They point their fingers, furrow their brows and punch the air in anger. But as most of the artists on the bill demonstrate, a good calypsonian delivers a hard-hitting message without descending into gloom and despondency, criticises those who need to be criticised but always with a tinge of wit and humour, and always, ultimately, ends on a positive note, appealing to the people of Trinidad to live together and raise themselves up. Similarly, if calypsonians deal with lighter matters, then they must be risqué without stepping over the line into vulgarity, poke fun at their targets without humiliating them. Anyone who can ally those talents with a memorable tune, and do it year after year, will become a household name in Trinidad. Many calypsonians manage to find the all important formula just once or twice in their careers.

These days most successful calypsonians are all-rounders, musicians who can come up with a catchy melody but are also able to write pertinent lyrics covering a huge range of topics. They must tackle their chosen topics with witty assurance, be serious and frivolous often in the same song, and compose angry diatribes as well as party time contenders for the Road March title. A great calypso, said Errol Hill, 'should have memorable impact in its first season and should retain its power to stir us years after it is no longer topical.'¹

There are a number of staple topics of the calypsonian: the ineptitude of government, the problems of male-female relationships, West Indian

unity, calypso itself, the beauties and trials of everyday Trinidad and, of course, the joys of carnival. But a calypsonian must be keen to tackle anything and everything, from the state of the roads to the national lottery, to the latest trends in haircuts.

Many lesser calypsonians copy the most successful calypso formula of the previous year's carnival, but the best are those who can come up with something fresh each year, who can manage to be original even if they are tackling essentially the same subjects as everyone else, who can capture a mood or a new phenomenon in a phrase that may enter the popular vocabulary for all time. Their job is to address the concerns and interests of everyday people, spicing up their observations with double entendre, satire and the hard edge of criticism. At the same time they will massage their own egos, puffing up their prowess and putting down others who profess to be as good.

Approaches may differ (and calypsonians certainly pride themselves on their individuality and eccentricity) but there is a fair degree of unanimity in the way they see themselves. They are the 'peoples newspaper' (according to Black Stalin) 'instruments for change in society' (Mighty Duke), 'a mirror of society and articulator of feelings of the people (Penguin) or 'poets, prophets, and social commentators' (Short Pants).²

Whether they choose a tabloid or broadsheet approach, calypsonians are almost always on the people's side, defending the weak and attacking the powerful, acting as the nation's conscience even if they may occasionally criticise public attitudes. Calypso, as the best calypsonian of them all, Mighty Sparrow, has said: 'acts pretty much like a mirror, and sometimes you look in the mirror and you don't like what you see'. Calypsonians must be prepared to face up to that, to stick their necks out when others may prefer to keep quiet. There is something of the warrior in them; they must look the nation straight in the eye and must steer towards, rather than away from, controversy.

Roots of Calypso

No one can really pinpoint the precise origins of this tradition, mainly because calypso has so many different roots. Although the core of its basic character undoubtedly comes from the praise and derision songs of west Africa (where modern-day high life music bears some similarities to calypso) it has influences in many other directions, from the native songs