



Feature Address

By Her Honour Mrs. Deborah Thomas-Felix

President of the Industrial Court of Trinidad and Tobago

at Trinbagonian Unified Calypsonians Organisation – Calypso History Month 2017

GALA & AWARDS CEREMONY

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I am deeply honoured to be the Patron of tonight's 15th Annual Celebration of Calypso History Month Gala and Awards Ceremony. I sincerely thank the Trinbagonian Unified Calypsonians Organisation for having me and as an avid supporter of the Arts and someone who has always felt that our unique cultural gifts represent the very best of us, I must say that the theme of Calypso History Month, ***“By Calypso Our Stories Are Told”*** is very fitting and captures the very essence of what is calypso.

The history of calypso in Trinidad and Tobago is intertwined with our history of slavery and has its genesis in the African drums, the music of slaves and the rich oral story-telling tradition which we have inherited from our forefathers.

As part of the oral tradition in Trinidad and Tobago, we tell our stories about what is taking place in society as we sing, chant and narrate these stories through various media such as parang and calypso. Calypso, which has given birth to Soca and its various derivatives ragga soca, chutney soca and

rapso, has evolved into this rich cultural record of events and stories of life. In so doing, the artform has elevated and promoted the growth and continued development of our oral tradition of story-telling.

When we listen to the calypsos of yesteryear we get snapshots of what was taking place in the 40's and 50's during and after World War II; in the pre-Independence era and post-colonialism period in the 60's; from the Black Power revolution to Republicanism in the 70's, indeed in many ways calypso has kept the oral tradition and our history alive and has created from the fabric of our lives, a stunning tapestry that evokes our past, mirrors our present and foretells our future.

Calypso then has shaped the lives of our people in Trinidad and Tobago in more ways than one. It is the platform of our commentary and it provides insights into our unique humour, social struggles, politics and spiritual reflection. As we sit day after day musing on issues such as the economy, education, infidelity, domestic violence, the state of our environment and the future of our young people, we can find a record of each topic in calypso and we know that our lives will be rendered that less remarkable without this artform.

Although born from struggle and slavery, calypso over the decades has successfully encapsulated and mirrored the diversity and multiculturalism of our people. We all know of the Mighty Chalkdust, Rex West, Mighty Trini, Sundar Popo, Ricky Jai, Denise Plummer, Drupatee, Calypso Rose, who in 1978 became the first female Calypso Monarch, Mighty Sparrow and Lord

Kitchener, who, among many others, capture the diversity of a true Trinbagonian.

Calypso has kept this diverse blend of citizens united on issues on social significance, politics and life in general, and of course with sweet Kaiso we fete together or as the Ultimate Rejects would put it, “We Jammin Still”!

This capacity for Calypso to provide an accurate soundtrack to our lives through various eras – economic hardship, social challenges, political issues and the like – is a central feature of the role the artform has played.

A glimpse into Calypso as social commentary on the economy provides context as we remember *The Mighty Sparrow*, the acclaimed Calypso King of the World, and some of the views expressed in *Capitalism Gone Mad* when he says:

*“You got to be a millionaire or some kind of petit-bourgeoisie
Any time you living here in this country
You got to be in skullduggery, making your money illicitly
To live like somebody in this country
It's outrageous and insane, them crazy prices in Port of Spain.

And like the merchants going out dey brain
And the working man, like he only toiling in vain.
To provide for your family today on your present salary
Is an impossibility in this country.”*

Johnny King was convinced that destruction of the weak is *Nature's Plan*, lamenting that:

*“There's nothing for the poor, horrors evermore
Life in a lion's den.
Hungry man shall aspire to keep the high man on top
To take him higher and higher,
The poor one must struggle til he drop.”*

Of course, we cannot forget Black Stalin's caution that:

“black man doh get nothing easy”

Although these calypsos were written years ago we can get a historical mosaic of what was the thinking at that time. The hot button issues of poverty, class and economics in Trinidad and Tobago have not changed even in 2017.

On education, who can forget the timeless, wise and very sound advice we received from the Mighty Sparrow in his classic, *Education Is Essential*, where he advises:

*“Education, education this is the foundation.
Our rising population needs sound education
To be recognised anywhere you go,
You gotta have your certificate to show
To enjoy any kind of happiness,
Knowledge is the key to success.
Children go to school and learn well
Otherwise later on in life you go catch real hell”*

My brother Gypsy urged the *“Little Black Boy”*:

*“Go to school and learn
Little black boy, show some concern
Little black boy, Education is the key
To get you off the street and off poverty”*

Beyond the boundaries of our twin-island republic, Calypso has transcended our shores and has taken flight throughout the world. Recently, in September, I was in Greece sitting at the dinner table and a German Judge was sitting next to me told me that all he knows about Trinidad and Tobago is a calypso, and I said “really?” You would not believe what this calypso is. He just sat at the table and sang loudly,

*“that boy is yuh brother but yuh mammy don’t know,
woo ,woo, woo, woo is me, shame and scandal in the family”,*

As you can imagine, we laughed, the other persons at the dinner table did not understand what he was saying so we both spent a few minutes explaining the culture and what the calypso meant, and he sang the calypso again, which as you know is a masterpiece.

Locally, Calypso also keeps us current with political issues across the globe. Explainer in *The Table Turning*, mused about the situation in Iran at that time, he says:

*“Today you rule a kingdom, tomorrow you in the opposite position
The Shah control Iran with everything at his command
Ayatollah took his position, now the Shah leave Iran and run.*

The table turning, sah [Round and round]

All dem oppressor [Falling down]

The table turning, sah [Round and round]

Now the oppressor is the oppressed one.”

In another key and unique way, we are replete with examples of Calypso functioning as the primary medium through which political narratives unfold and are shared, witness Gypsy’s own memorable take on Politics in Trinidad and Tobago, when, acting as a sage of sorts, he foretold the gathering political storm, warning that:

“Captain this ship is sinking

Captain these seas are rough, oh yes

We gas tank almost empty

No electricity, we oil pressure reading low

Shall we abandon ship

Or shall we stay on it and perish slow

We doh know, we doh know

Captain you tell we what to do”

In accurately capturing the mood of the moment and doing so in a way that was easily understood by all and accessible to all, this calypso has stood in the annals of history as one that was a main catalyst for the downfall of the administration of the day.

We have a lot of relationship advice from our calypso bards and central to the advice is the issue of infidelity, or as you may refer to it, “horn”. Sparrow warns us against marrying the one we love, but the one who love you, take her straight down the aisle. Lord Kitchener, *In My Wife Gone*, reflected on World War II, what was happening in its aftermath and its impact on relationship issues when he said:

*“My wife left me in November
To go with a Yankee soldier”*

Mighty Sparrow then quips:

“Only a fool breaks his own heart”

Lord Kitchener was concerned that there was:

*“A man in the wardrobe Vio
Why the hell it shaking up so
A man in the wardrobe Vio
This two foot rat I would like to know”*

My deceased friend from Mayaro Zandolee pleaded:

*“Millicent like you take meh for Mickey Mouse,
The way you bringing man in meh house
Before I reach in the crazy house or the hangman cemetery
Ah want you to write all yuh family name on ah piece ah paper for
me”*

Penguin however maintains that:

“Ah deputy essential to keep yuh living vital”

But the Mighty Sparrow captured what I think is on everyone’s mind:

“You can’t make love without money

You can’t make love on hungry belly”

A theme that Shadow refashioned more recently when he warned a young man who was apparently *“Looking For Horn”*:

“Why you want to marry?

You doh have no money

You eh working no way

You doh have a pay day You think is so the thing does work

You think is so

I wish you luck

Without money, to buy honey

You headed for misery

She want hair do and callaloo

And you eh have nutten

Somebody will horn you

Yuh better believe it”

Adesh Samaroo provides another perspective in “*Drunk Man Doh Lie*”

He tell meh that yuh horn meh

So why yuh want to cry

Call meh rum til I die

They say drunk man doh lie.

They tell meh about the birthmark you have on yuh thigh

Rum till I die, drunk man doh lie’

Of course, Calypso has also been a stellar medium for empowerment and advocacy for social change and the ongoing local and global challenges. Singing Francine was an early champion for female empowerment, bringing to light what is still an unfortunate reality for too many today in “*Runaway*”, when she reminded women everywhere that,

“Dog does run away!

Fowl does run away!

Lady cat does run away when yuh treating dem bad!

Hog does run away!

Cow does run away!

What happen to you!

Woman you could run away too!”

Then there is King Austin in his inimitable Winsford Devine classic, lamenting environmental destruction, pleading,

“When will it end? When will it end?”

It is plain to see

Universally this land is not bountiful as it was

Simply because in his quest for success

Nothing stands in man’s way

All rivers run dry

Soon the birds won’t fly

The mountains will be no longer high”

At this juncture, it would be remiss of me to not recognize the sterling contribution of Dr. Winsford “Joker” Devine, lyricist extraordinaire and one of our country’s most gifted composers who was recently recognized by The University of the West Indies. Dr. Devine, thank you for the music and thank you for telling our stories so well and for so long. We salute you!

As you can see, the witticism and sheer brilliance of the calypsonian as he or she crafts a song, is second to none and we are mesmerized and delighted to hear what each calypso has to offer. One of the key ways Calypso functions as social commentary is to proffer an understanding of why things are the way they are, I must confess that I am quite pleased that Lord Commander has provided me with the reason why I am paid as a judge when he observed in *“No Crime No Law”*:

“If somebody don’t buss somebody face

How the policeman going to make a case?

And if somebody don’t dig out somebody eye

The Magistrate will have nobody to try

*And if somebody don't kill somebody dead
All the judges going to beg their bread
So when somebody cut off somebody head
Instead of hanging they should pay them money instead"*

And who can forget the masterful crafting of lyrics by the Mighty Chalkdust, in what can be considered as an ode to our Nobel Laureate, when he said:

*"Mister Chairman, I thank thee for this grand Nobel prize
I am Sir Vidia Naipaul and I think you chose wise*

*You think I want the world to know that I'm from Trinidad,
Where Ali Baba and his gang working in my backyard?
You think I want the world take me for thieves in Petrotrin?
Dem men there so boldface, dey tiefin' wind.
You think I want the world link me with them airport contracts
Where all them contractors and them get nice juicy kickbacks?
So before all you embarrass me, leave me as I am
Lord Vidia Naipaul, the Count of Birmingham."*

The artform has also provided us with spiritual succor as Ras Shorty I reminded those of us who are religious that:

*"Who God bless, no man curse.
He shall never hunger or thirst
Who God bless, no man shall ever curse
He shall be first, he shall be first.*

Lord Pretender waxes philosophical and advises:

*“Never ever worry, don't mind how you suffering bad
Never ever worry, what I'm saying is true
Always remember somebody suffering more than you”*

Of course the history of the development of Calypso reminds us of the era of the Old Brigade and the post-World War II stories. We are also reminded of the era that conjures images of the might, power and nobility of the calypsonian, with names such as the Roaring Lion, Atilla the Hun, Mighty Cypher, Mighty Prowler, Mighty Power, Mighty Protector, Mighty Spoiler, Mighty Terror, Mighty Duke and Lord Nelson, Lord Shorty, Lordy Melody, Lord Superior, Lord Invader, Lord Kitchener, Lord Blakie and Lord Executor, they told their stories.

Most notably, one of the most impactful ways Calypso reflects our realities and tells our story is that it has always functioned as a repository of our love of country. The history of the artform is one brimming with stirring tributes to Mother Trinidad and Tobago, with calypsos that tell the story of patriotism and love for this country.

Wiltshire's *Trini to the Bone*, captured the patriotism and the spirit of what is a Trinbagonian, echoing Denyse Plummer who mused that:

They say meh country so stressful, so tense
With race hate, young jail bait, too much violence

Girl pack up and go, this sweet Trinbago
I tell dem no way (no way)

Indeed, as we face one of the most trying periods in our recent history with the downturn in the economy and the short, medium and possible long-term repercussions, it is to the Arts, to the music, to our celebrated multi-faceted culture we will turn as we seek to prevail over what Black Stalin called our country's "*darkest hour*", knowing indisputably that, "*...we can make it if we try just a little harder*"

So I pose the question to you, what is Calypso? How important is the music to us? Is the art of calypso something that naturally regenerates and reinvents itself or is it something we need to diligently work at, to nurture, to preserve? Is it just the music we hear at Carnival in the tents? Or is it also the legacy of Ed Watson and Singing Diane's music reimagined through Benjai's "Trini"?

I submit to you and I'm certain you'll agree, it is all of these things: both robust and persistent but also vulnerable if we do not protect its legacy; both the spirit of Maestro, and also Machel; the legacy of Calypso Rose moving to the beat of Fay Ann, with the lyrics of Lord Superior layered with the wit of Sundar Popo.

Perhaps then, as we remember the Mighty Sniper who gifted us with the gold standard for the patriotic calypso, proudly reminding that "*Trinidad is my land and of it I am proud and glad*", the refrain of Rudder connecting them both, across time and space, is unmistakable as he asks us,

*“Can you hear a distant drum
Bouncing on the laughter of a melody (yea, yea)
And does the rhythm tell you, come, come, come
Does your spirit do a dance to this symphony
Does it tell you that your heart is afire
Does it tell you that your pain is a liar
Does it wash away all your unlovely
And are you ready for a brand new discovery”*

This then is Calypso Music. This is the music of Trinidad and Tobago. This is the soundtrack to all our lives, from Mayaro to Macqueripe, from Caroni to Point Fortin and from Scarborough to San Fernando. Calypso is us.

I extend warmest congratulations to all awardees and to the TUCO for continuing to blaze the trail for the artform and for culture as a whole. May you move from strength to strength and may you enjoy every success.

I thank you.
