

CALYPSO

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A CERTAIN similarity informs all primitive speech, religion, art and music. For this reason, perhaps, Calypso seemed less strange to me than to those unfamiliar with African and North American Indian songs and dances. The likeness apparent to me, I might add, was neither visual nor audible. It was more like the echo of some forgotten memory.

Indeed, it is an echo—of ancient African tribal rites; a combination of music, song and dance. It is an emotional outlet for hundreds of natives of Trinidad, whose ancestors brought Calypso to the western world when they were torn from their jungle homes, deprived of their freedom and compelled to work on colonial estates as slaves.

The music is less haunting than that of the rumba or the tango, despite its thudding rhythm. It lacks the spirited character of the jitterbug, and many people consider it unmelodious. In fact, the first time I heard it, I was reminded of a Bach lover who after listening to a programme of typical Spanish music, complained: "But it is so monotonous! It has only one tune!" This criticism always brings indignant protests from Calypso enthusiasts. "What nonsense!" they cry "It may be that the insistent drum-beat tricks and dulls an already insensitive ear, but to call Calypso monotonous shows a lack in musical appreciation; and we have hundreds of different tunes!"

The dance has no set steps. No fixed pattern. It is a shuffling of the feet with a peculiar dipping of the body, reminiscent of the motions of both North and South American Indians . . . down on the one-two beat, and up on the three. As for the song . . . Even the kindest critics could find little poetry in the words. They are usually graphic, however, dealing with every subject under the sun; current events, personalities, politics. Cookery often figures in Calypsos; for example, "I don't like no callaloo" (*callaloo* being a native soup); and love and crime and pure fantasy. The tone of the verses may be serious, gay, comic or muddily lewd. Calypso has aptly been called the "news in song." Seemingly, in Calypso, one can get away with anything.

The best Calypso singers are not necessarily those with the best voices, although a good voice is certainly an important qualification. The most popular singers, let us say, are those

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who in addition to a pleasing voice, show a pronounced ability for improvisation. Like the Spanish *copla* singers, they must be able at a moment's notice, to record some passing event in song. A newsboy calls an arresting headline. The Calypso artist in his "tent" should pick it up immediately and serve it with his own interpretation. Failing a news item, he may select a pretty girl for his extemporaneous attention. Or a pair of lovers, believing that in the dimness their caresses are secure from observation. Not so! Suddenly, the glare of Calypso falls upon them. Every eye in the "tent" is turned in their direction, and quivering with embarrassment, they rush away to the roars of a delighted audience. While waiting for a victim, the singer can do a neat job by telling of his quarrel with a sweetheart, or his wife's failure with their dinner, or the race in which his horse was cheated out of a triumph. He can retail a juicy bit of scandal or hold some public figure up to ridicule.

Because of its impromptu nature, Calypso has been slow in gaining wide recognition; which is to say that, loosely speaking, one has to be in Trinidad or adjacent islands to become acquainted with it. Until a few years ago, no words were printed; no music recorded. Then, a young Trinidadian—a negro—gave a series of Calypso recitals in New York, following which several songs were published and a number of recordings taken. Looking back at that period, however, I should say that enthusiasm over Calypso was limited. It gained its greatest publicity not through artistic appreciation, but because of a law suit. Two men claimed the authorship of a song called *Rum and Coca Cola*. The resultant litigation involved some half a million dollars!

Following is a verse and chorus from *Turn Them Down*, by a singer calling himself Attila. Like his colleagues, he has taken a fancy name. The spelling is his.

I've found out a new philosophy,
 How to live with man happily.
 What Leno and Pluto and Socrates dint know,
 I'll relate to you in Calypso.

Chorus

Every now and then, cuffem down,
 They love you long and they love you strong.
 Black up the eye and bruise the knee
 And then they love you eternally.

This is not a particularly good Calypso, but even a good one loses much by being printed and recorded. It needs the personality of the artist to give it life.

The derivation of *Calypso* has not, so far as I know, been definitely determined. Certainly, no African ever called it that, and most students agree that the word has undergone many changes since it was brought to this side of the world. Some write it *Qui-so*; some, *Caiyso* (meaning *brava!*); others *carrisseau*. One guess is as good as another. However, it must have meant the African equivalent of our modern sing-song, for in the old days, when the heat and toil were behind them for a few hours, the slaves gathered round a bonfire and tried to sing away their troubles—home-sickness, weariness, bodily pain from an overseer's lash, spiritual pain suffered under the yoke of slavery. Originally, they never sang in English; always in their native tongue, mixed as the years passed with a French patois.

Gradually, the character of Calypso changed, as well as its name and idiom. It became less of a confessional, a forum, perhaps an escape, and more of a spectacle. It became organized. The singers established a permanent place where they could be heard. The box-office appeal developed. "Tents" at first were primitive shelters. They have grown in convenience and comfort according to the drawing qualities of the artists concerned.

Some tents are quite elaborate with a stage, scenery, lighting effects and all. They, like the singers, bear fanciful names: Victory, Atlantic, Paradise . . . Visiting Trinidad during the season, one goes to a tent as one would go to a movie.

A good singer is regarded as a leader, a king, a Chantrel. He gathers an orchestra and a chorus about him, thus forming a "band"—not in its musical connotation, but meaning a group of people. A simple, not-so-successful singer accompanies himself on a guitar, assisted possibly by a drummer, whose instrument has been made from a tree trunk or a gasoline tin. As popularity increases, the artist may add to his numbers until he has formed an elaborate band: trumpet, violin, clarinet, flute, bass and two or three drums, and even a guiro or a notched gourd. When the tent is not in use for performances, it is the meeting place for the band. There, they rehearse and discuss arrangements for the annual Carnival.

The Trinidad Carnival held, like the New Orleans Mardi Gras, on the two days preceding Ash Wednesday, is distinctly

worth seeing, even though the spectator reminds himself that it has been irrevocably commercialized. The bands dress gorgeously and with amazing accuracy to detail. French courtiers of the Middle Ages would have envied their dusky imitators. Persians gleam and glow in silken, jewelled elegance. Naked African Ju-jus terrify even themselves as they shout, flourish spears and shuffle to Calypso music. In spite, however, of commercializing and modernizing, more than a little of savage Africa remains.

No matter what its origin in the heart of African races; no matter what its modification in another land, among another people; no matter how casually it may be treated in the tourist literature of to-day, Calypso retains something of its ancient meaning. To the sensitive, it is a moving spectacle, and as an integral part of island life, it produces a more vivid impression than many of the physical features the stranger has journeyed so far to enjoy.