

WRITING SAMPLE - Excerpt

The International Soca Monarch Competition and its Effects on the Development of Soca Music

Professional travel writer Nell McShane Wulfhart of The New York Times describes Trinidad as a tiny melting pot that shares nationhood with Tobago and has a rich Indian-Creole-African-Chinese-British heritage (2017). This mix, however, is by no means exhaustive when assessing the number of influences that have contributed to the unique characteristics of this nation. One striking feature of the island is that of its Carnival. One may come to the assumption that in today's world, Carnival in Trinidad, in particular, is nothing special due to other Carnivals that take place throughout the Caribbean diaspora including, Jamaica, Barbados, Grenada, St. Vincent and Miami just to name a few. However, the origins of the Trinidad Carnival are what make it distinctive from others. Author and researcher Keith Nurse reiterates that Trinidad Carnival was born out of the struggle of marginalized peoples to shape a cultural identity through resistance, liberation and catharsis (qtd. in Riggio 254). According to Richard Allsopp and Jeannette Allsopp, "Carnival is a massive, nationally organized festival of competitive, costumed street dancing, calypso singing" (137).

The roots of Trinidad's Carnival are diverse with contributions from a number of peoples who settled there throughout history, including Europeans and Africans. These migrants had to adapt to a new environment and held on to their traditions in an effort to survive. Veteran calypsonian and author Dr. Hollis Liverpool, in his work *Rituals of Power and Rebellion: The Carnival Tradition in Trinidad and Tobago* states, "Out of this intermixture of cultures; out of the

social conflicts that naturally occurred; out of the need to display their hidden transcripts, the Carnival in Trinidad arose” (91). Writer Stephen Stuempfle also states that integral to the development of traditions in Trinidad were intercultural exchanges and conflicts between efforts to maintain a colonial social and cultural order and the rise of local social groupings and cultural practices (14).

During the period of African enslavement according to Stuempfle, Trinidad fell under the rule of three distinctive colonial powers; the French, Spanish, and the British. This saw the development of a plantation society, which Stuempfle notes was structured by hegemonic, European-derived, cultural traditions and alternative African-derived ones (14). Despite Trinidad changing rulers on more than one occasion, what remained constant was the suffering and oppression that plagued the livelihood of the Africans. This subjugation stemmed from slavery, which saw Africans being classed at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Jeff Henry notes, “from the inception of slavery, the character and persona of the Trinidadian of African descent was always perceived and defined by the white elite as inferior with a subservient function and role in society” (1).

In 1833, British Parliamentarian Thomas Buxton introduced the Emancipation Bill to the British Parliament. The bill was passed and came into effect on August 1st 1834 (Trinidad Newsday, 2012). However, the colonial office in Britain added an apprenticeship period of four years. The term apprenticeship was applied to the stage between slavery and freedom. The idea was that the slaves were learning how to adjust to freedom, while still working for their former owners with a small portion of their time allotted to work for others.

Despite this, Europeanism became the blueprint for societal standards and the Africans were judged, accordingly. After apprenticeship, the dynamic of master and servant had changed and the upper class filtered into different neighborhoods apart from Port of Spain. Henry posits that this physical separation began to establish what became known as the *jamette* class. This term was used to describe the lower African class in the community whose behavior was below a certain level of respectability, which was now defined geographically by area (5).

As a consequence of all this hardship, the Africans found solace in using their talents and cultural practices in Carnival as a cathartic outlet. This was their only avenue to express themselves about the hardships that they faced. The historical evidence showed that a huge part of their Carnival festivities were associated with *Canboulay*. Whenever fires broke out on the estates the slaves were sent to extinguish them, which they did in a ritualistic manner. Thus, this became known as Canboulay, or burning of the canes, and the re-enactment of this ritual became part and parcel of the Africans celebration of Carnival. Liverpool quotes historian L.M. Fraser as saying that Canboulay is the origin of the Africans' Kalinda and Carnival (161). Some of the central activities involved in Canboulay were stick fighting, dancing and singing. The songs, in particular, usually boasted of the stick-fighter's abilities, or challenged other fighters, and were led by a *chantwell* or lead singer.

Consequently, these songs funneled into *calypso* and contributed to its defiant nature (Liverpool: 164). As time went by the celebration of Carnival evolved. According to Liverpool, from 1834 the Africans applied all their traditions and rituals of Carnival to their victory celebrations (127). At the helm of Carnival activities were usually the stick-fighters and the

chantwells. The latter, through its evolution, played a vital role to calypso and the calypsonian (singer of calypso). Calypso can be defined as, “a popular satirical song in rhymed verse, now mostly associated with Trinidad, commenting on any recognized figure(s) or aspect(s) of Caribbean social life, and more often performed by a male singer” (R. Allsopp and J. Allsopp 131). Notably, over the years there has been a radical growth in terms of female presence, this definition serves as a blueprint for the genre.

Generally, calypso is one of the musics associated and produced in and around Carnival; it found its home in what is known as the *calypso tent*. Researchers Gwendoline Williams and Claudia Harvey were able to encapsulate the definition of a calypso tent as, “A cultural venue used mainly on a seasonal basis for the presentation of a wide range of new calypsos to patrons in a given year” (qtd. in Ottley: 1). Some notable calypsonians are Lord Kitchener, The Mighty Sparrow, Blakie, Chalkdust and Calypso Rose.

In his study *Calypso Reinventing Itself*, Gordon Rohlehr states that, “The Trinidad Carnival and the calypso are both theatres in and metaphors through which the drama of Trinidad’s social history is encoded and enacted” (qtd. in Milla Riggio: 213). Rohlehr further notes that within Trinidadian society, there has always been a culture that is open to change, however, there are questions about the nature of tradition, and sporadic alarm at the loss of traditional customs (213-214). This is evident in the eventual birthing of what is now known as *soca*, which has direct lineage to that of calypso.

In its early stages soca was known as *sokah*; (Soca) the soul of calypso. Renowned playwright and author Zeno Constance credits Ras Shorty I (Garfield Blackman), formerly Lord Shorty, as the inventor and innovator of soca. Notably, a number of artistes have laid claim to the creation of the genre, including Lord Nelson and Viper giving the honour to Lord Beginner (63). The basis of this claim seems shoddy as the genre only began evolving in the 1970s. Constance went on to quote Shorty in an interview with Roy Boyke in the Trinidad Carnival magazine saying:

Calypso was dying a natural death ... I felt it needed something brand new to hit everybody like a thunderbolt. I knew what I was doing incorporating soul with calypso, but I didn't want to say soul calypso or calypsoul. So I came up with the name soca. I invented soca. And I never spelt it s-o-c-a. It was S-O-K-A-H to reflect the East Indian influence in the music (63-64).

Liverpool in his book *From The Horse's Mouth* quotes Shorty as saying, "I am adding the 'So' of Soul to the 'Ca' of Calypso to give the thing some soul, some spirit...some life" (204). Moreover, in her article entitled, *The Politics of Labelling Popular Musics in English Caribbean*, ethnomusicologist and popular music scholar, Jocelyne Guilbault points out that sokah was changed to soca by a journalist, who wrote the headline, "Shorty is doing Soca". As a result, the new spelling took hold, and since then the genre was known as such. Markedly, Shorty's *Indrani* (1973) is considered the first soca song (Guilbault, 2009).

Trinidadian folklorist Selwyn Ahyoung in his study *Soca Fever! Change in the Calypso*

Music Tradition of Trinidad and Tobago 1970-1980 notes that soca uses a more syncopated bass line than calypso (qtd. in Dudley, 1996). Associate Professor in ethnomusicology Shannon Dudley states soca bass rhythms repeat in a cycle of four four beats, implying a 4/4 measure much more clearly than the traditional calypso bass. Figure 1 shows two examples of soca bass lines contrasted with the typical bass rhythm of calypso.



Figure 1: Bass Lines: Dudley, Shannon. "Judging "By the Beat": Calypso versus Soca."

Ethnomusicology Spring/Summer (1996): 269-298.

The popularity of this new sound spread across the country like a wild fire, and the change in musicality showed in other artistes; Shadow's *Bass Man*, Maestro's *Savage*, Lord Kitchener's *Sugar Bum Bum*. Furthermore, Guilbault notes that, "According to Ras Shorty I, from that time on, soca became synonymous with party music and moved back to a less sophisticated rhythm section and lyrics" (Guilbault, 2009).

Incidentally, what Shorty did was create a door that enabled more experimentation to take place on soca making way for a new breed of artiste. Dr. Kela Francis notes that:

Whether sokah or SoCa, the key transformation came from experimenting with calypso. Thus, we can also consider that soca grew out of the leggo/road march/party song. This speaks more to the function of soca than a specific sound. Soca is supposed to be a celebratory, and elicit the same physical response as a leggo calypso (Francis, 2018).

Author John Cowley states that 1911 was the first year in which a Carnival song competition was held in Port of Spain. However, it was not until 1956 shortly after Eric Williams' electoral victory, as the first Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, he proceeded to nationalize Carnival. As a result, the government nationalized the calypso competitions held during Carnival (Guilbault, 2005: 50). The Calypso King which eventually became the Calypso Monarch competition in 1976 remains the most lauded calypso competition. Guilbault points out that "after over half a century of monopoly, the state-sponsored competition saw in 1993 the emergence of another competition, the *[International] Soca Monarch* competition" (56).

Held on Carnival Friday, Gregory Fernandez, former adviser to executive chairman of Caribbean Prestige Foundation states that the Soca Monarch competition is one of the most anticipated events on the Carnival calendar (Dixon, 2011). The competition is the biggest local musical platform for any given soca artiste. It was an idea to bring together the best in soca on one stage performing one party song that would move the audience in a spectacular manner.

There was a vision that artistes should receive big paydays for their performances in the competition, which were expected to be of an, exceedingly, high standard. Businessman William Munro is credited with creating and hosting the competition for the first time at the Spectrum in Port of Spain on February 11, 1993 which was won by the incomparable Austin *Superblue* Lyons (Blood, 2013). According to the International Soca Monarch website, Munro approached Gregory Fernandez, who eagerly invested into the idea (internationalsocamonarch.com).

Current Chairman of the National Carnival Commission (NCC) of Trinidad and Tobago, Winston Peters explains that soca was in its embryonic stage and Munro thought there should be an avenue for it as it was not looked at seriously in the Calypso Monarch Competition (Peters, 2018). The Trinbago Unified Calypsonians Association (TUCO) gave the Soca Monarch Competition its first endorsement (internationalsocamonarch.com). Peters corroborated this stating that, he was President of TUCO at the time and worked together with Munro to help bring the Soca Monarch to fruition (Peters, 2018). In 1996, the inclusion of artistes from the Caribbean islands into the competition led to it being called the International Soca Monarch (Guilbault, 2009). Accordingly, the winners of each island's Soca Monarch competition are selected to be a part of the event.

Author Trevor Grant notes that, "soca is the music of choice for the Carnivalist and without it, Carnival would be tame and ordinary" (61). Without a doubt, music is the driving force behind Carnival, and it helps to create the spectacle and mystique associated with the festivities. Thus, a platform where this music is lauded is one of significant importance.



Figure 2. 1993 Soca Monarch Ad: “National Soca Monarch Competition.” Trinidad Express 11 February 1993: 11.

As a child growing up, one tradition I have firmly etched in my memory is gathering around the television on Carnival Friday, and viewing the International Soca Monarch competition; it became our family ritual much like Carnival itself. Needless to say, this stayed with me as I grew into an adult and was able to attend the event on numerous occasions. Today, I feel a strong affinity toward the genre and my general interest in culture and the arts has led me to this juncture. Upon my many observations, it is my belief that it is imperative that research be done to evaluate if this platform has helped to propel the genre in a holistic manner.

Perspectives from participants in the Soca Monarch competition as well as its organizers and stake holders are needed to gain proper insight. Additionally, public opinion on the issue is paramount as they are the patrons of the event every year. The purpose of this study then is to determine how the International Soca Monarch competition has affected the development of soca as a musical genre. Development within the context of my research would measure the growth of soca music by way of International Soca Monarch competitors being afforded different opportunities inclusive of economic benefits, cultural impact and innovation. On the basis of the results of this research a number of organizations within Trinidad and Tobago can benefit from it. These include but are not limited to, Caribbean Prestige Foundation, The National Carnival Commission (NCC), University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT), Department of Creative and Festival Arts (DCFA) at the University of the West Indies, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Tourism Culture and The Arts, Caribbean Airlines Limited, The Trinidad Hotels Restaurants and Tourism Association (THRTA) and the Alcohol and Beverage sectors.

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