

CHAPTER 3

Calypso in the Tent and on the Road



During the weeks preceding carnival, calypsonians perform in several theaters or auditoriums in Port of Spain, permanent structures that are referred to as calypso “tents.” The term dates from the 1910s, when calypso began to be sung in temporary structures erected for carnival. Performing in a tent before seated audiences, singers tend to focus on storytelling and word play, and it is here that calypso’s verbal tradition has its greatest scope. But some of the songs performed in the tent are also popular for dancing to at fetes and on carnival day. Calypso, therefore, is also dance music, and, despite the diversity of themes in calypso lyrics, its dance function is the basis for a certain consistency in the musical setting. This chapter briefly reviews the performance contexts of calypso, and then discusses aspects of calypso musical style as they relate to its dual functions of storytelling and dance.

THE TENT

Calypso tents open soon after New Year and stage nightly performances all the way up until carnival. The most popular tents in Port of Spain include Spektakula, Calypso Review, and Kaiso House, each of which has exclusive performing contracts with fifteen to twenty calypsonians (calypsonians thus do not perform in more than one tent, although they may still record and perform at fetes and concerts elsewhere). To draw an audience, a tent must have a number of popular veterans in its stable, but tents also recruit new talent—singers who become known through junior calypso competitions or acquire a reputation performing at fetes. An evening’s performance consists of a dozen or more calypsonians singing one at a time. The less well-known artists tend to perform early in the evening, while the big names sing at or near the end so the audience won’t leave early.

Although every tent has its own unique physical layout, each of them features a raised stage from which singers look out toward a seated audience. The calypsonian is alone at the front of the stage with a hand-held microphone, pacing or sometimes dancing to and fro, while a chorus (usually of three female singers, but sometimes including a man) stands to one side, singing intermittently and swaying to the music with elegant coordinated movements. At the rear of the stage sits the house band—typically consisting of electric keyboard, guitar, bass, drumset, percussion, saxophones, and trumpets—which accompanies every singer. A master of ceremonies (who is as important as the calypsonians to a tent's success) introduces each singer and tells jokes between appearances.

Each calypsonian performs two songs during his or her turn on stage. Often one of these songs has a more serious tone, dealing with social issues, political controversies, or national pride, and the other song is more light-hearted and festive. This formula is repeated at the annual Calypso Monarch competition, in which the winning calypsonian is awarded a new car, a substantial cash prize, and a great deal of prestige. The Calypso Monarch competition acknowledges calypso's role as a music of festivity and dancing, which is one reason calypsonians often include one "up-tempo" song in their tent repertoire, but the judges tend to give more weight to more slow-paced narrative "message" calypsoes. Some calypsonians who specialize in particular types of songs, such as humor or political satire, may depart from this formula to exercise their own strengths and preferences.

The audience in the tent enjoys the music, and people may occasionally even stand up and dance, but the atmosphere in the calypso tent is characterized by careful attention to the words and their delivery. Audience members regularly shout their approval at a clever double entendre (a disguised sexual reference), a funny story, a political criticism, or a humorous imitation of another calypsonian or a public figure. A calypsonian whose song is applauded enthusiastically will come back to sing an extra verse. A few singers can improvise these new verses on the spot, while others must compose an extra verse or two for encores. As the season progresses they often compose more verses for a successful song. Calypsonians sometimes respond to and challenge one another in song, and audiences particularly enjoy this kind of picong, although it is rarely done today between two performers sharing the same stage.

Calypsonians singing in the tent cultivate a distinctive stage persona through their choice of a calypso name, the style of songs they sing, and

the way they dress. The Shadow (Winston Bailey) always wears somber black clothing to match the carnival theme of death and mystery that his name conveys (Figure 3.1). Singing Sandra wears elaborate head wraps and gowns that reflect her Spiritual Baptist faith (Figure 2.5). The Mighty Chalkdust wears elegant and colorful shirt jackets that may be seen as modern manifestations of the African heritage he often points to in his songs. Denyse Plummer often sings songs about carnival festivity and spirit, and her costumes reflect the extravagant and dazzling styles of modern carnival masqueraders (Figure 3.2).

THE ROAD

While costumes, gestures, and sometimes even brief skits add flavor to the calypsonian's storytelling on stage, these dramatic embellishments are possible only on the stage of the calypso tent. For the road on car-

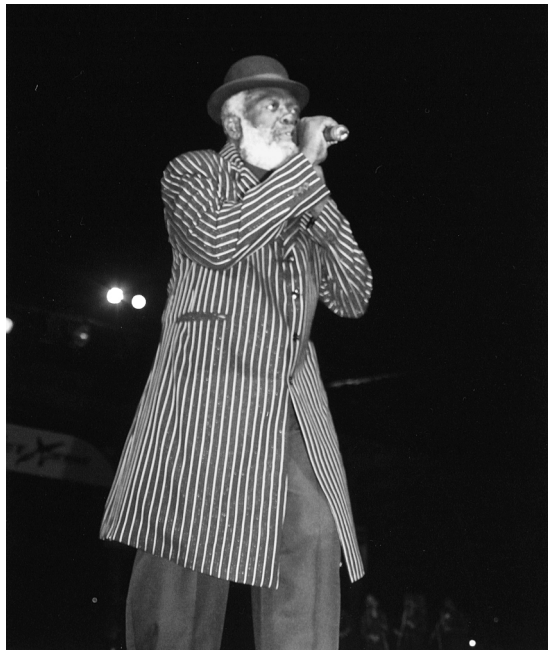


FIGURE 3.1 *The Shadow (Winston Bailey) at the 2000 Calypso Monarch Finals, dressed as usual in black.*



FIGURE 3.2 *Denyse Plummer at the 2000 Calypso Monarch Finals, evoking the spirit of fancy mas' with a glittering costume.*

nival day, the drama is left to the masqueraders. Songs must stand on their own, either in recorded versions or in steelband renditions. The expectations of dancing masqueraders on the road differ in important ways from those of seated audiences in the tents, and this difference in context corresponds to a somewhat different musical style in calypsoes that are intended as “road marches.”

On carnival Monday and Tuesday, the streets of Port of Spain are criss-crossed by masquerade bands. Some are small neighborhood bands with homemade costumes, while others have thousands of members who are grouped in sections, each with matching costumes that form a shifting spectacle of beautiful colors and shapes as they pass. Big or small, every masquerade band has music. Music sets the pace at

which the masqueraders move, gives them the energy to “play mas’” and dance for hours, and regulates their movements and moods, as frenzies of excitement and energy alternate with more relaxing grooves. In Port of Spain today most masquerade bands hire one or more DJ trucks, flatbeds loaded with massive speakers that blare recorded music. Some trucks also carry live bands featuring popular calypsonians and soca singers. In the 1950s and 1960s, steelbands were the music of choice for the road, and calypsonians depended on the steelbands to popularize their songs (in instrumental renditions) on carnival day. Whatever the format—live or recorded, instrumental or vocal—music for the road has always been essential to carnival, and it has been the job of the *chantwell* and the calypsonian to supply it.

Compared to calypsoes for the tent, songs for the road are generally faster in tempo, have catchier and more singable melodies (often featuring call and response at the chorus), have a more energetic rhythm, and use exciting breaks to stimulate the dancers. These differences form part of the distinction between calypso and the more recent genre of soca, which is the favorite music today for the carnival road and at fetes (Chapter 6). But the line between calypso and soca is sometimes blurry, in part because calypso has a long history as dance music. Indeed, the distinction between road march and tent calypso dates at least to the 1910s, when *chantwells* first came off the street to perform in tents.

Each year the Road March title is granted to the singer whose song is played (live or recorded) the most times by masquerade bands as they pass the judging points. On a few rare occasions the same song has won both Road March and Calypso Monarch honors (e.g., Mighty Sparrow’s “Jean and Dinah” in 1956, David Rudder’s “Bahia Girl” in 1986). Many calypsonians, however, have won Road March and Calypso Monarch title in different years, which further underscores the important relationship between music for the road and music for the tent. It is plausible, therefore, to discuss calypso musical style in terms of certain elements that are normative both for the tent and for the road, provided that one is attentive to how these elements vary in different performance contexts and in different historical periods. I have chosen here to discuss instrumentation, form, rhythmic feel, phrasing, and breaks.

INSTRUMENTATION

One of the largest differences between calypso recordings from different eras is the instruments accompanying the singer. Although singers in the tents today are accompanied by a large band with brass and electric instruments, most calypsonians also can sing while accompanying

themselves on guitar, and they occasionally perform this way in intimate contexts. A calypsonian typically crafts a melody and chord progression that will work well with simple guitar accompaniment, so calypsoes tend to be less dependent than some other genres of song (such as reggae, rock and roll, or rap) on a specific instrumentation, arrangement, or studio production.



In CD track 5, “Iron Duke in the Land” sung by Julien Whiterose in 1914, the accompanying instruments are guitar and cuatro (Figure 3.3). The guitar picks out a sort of melodic baseline. The cuatro, a four-string guitar-type instrument from Venezuela, strums the changing chords in a consistent rhythmic pattern. These instruments were popularized in



FIGURE 3.3 *The conventional six-string Spanish guitar (right) and the small four-string Venezuelan cuatro.*

carnival by nineteenth-century Venezuelan-style string bands that also included violins, upright bass, and piano. The cuatro, in particular, became a favorite instrument for calypso because of its piercing sound and driving rhythmic energy. The use of a rhythmic strum has remained fundamental to calypso style, whether played on a cuatro, a guitar, an electric guitar, a steel pan, or an electronic keyboard (see Activity 3.1).


ACTIVITY 3.1: LISTENING—CUATRO VERSUS GUITAR IN “IRON DUKE IN THE LAND” *Try to distinguish the guitar from the cuatro as you listen to “Iron Duke in the Land” CD track 5. The cuatro plays chords (several notes together) in a regular rhythmic strum, while the guitar plucks single, lower-pitched notes that are constantly changing (basically the guitar is playing a bass line).*



From the 1920s through the 1940s many calypso recordings featured a jazz style instrumental accompaniment, sometimes including banjo, upright bass, piano, trumpet, and clarinet or saxophone (many included violin as well, an influence of the Venezuelan string bands). This reflected the international popularity of jazz and also attested to the fact that calypsonians were making recordings that sold not only in Trinidad but in the United States and other countries. In fact, many of the calypso records during this time were made in New York City. The Keskidee Trio, for example, featuring three of the most popular Trinidadian calypsonians of the 1930s—Atilla the Hun, Lord Beginner, and Tiger—recorded “Congo Bara” with an introduction that almost sounds like the contemporary music of Duke Ellington (CD track 11). Because “Congo Bara” is presented as a folk song, the rest of this performance uses an older style of instrumentation, but most recordings by these same calypsonians used jazz instrumentation throughout. To this day, in fact, a brass section of trumpets and saxophones continues to be an integral part of the calypso sound, playing occasional countermelodies or answers to the singer (e.g., in the chorus of “Jean and Dinah”) and often providing an instrumental rendition of the melody as an interlude between the sung verses.



By the 1950s, calypso recordings showed the influence of instrumentation in other styles of popular music, such as rhythm and blues and Cuban *son*. Mighty Sparrow's 1956 recording of "Jean and Dinah," for example, features electric guitar, drumset, and bongos. In later eras percussion instruments became increasingly prominent in calypso recordings, which is indicative not only of changing ideas about instrumentation but also of changing recording technology. The maracas, for example (or *shac shacs*, as they are called in Trinidad), which were commonly used to accompany live calypso performance in the early twentieth century, tended not to be used on records. This may have been partly because of the aesthetic preferences that prevailed in recording studios, but in the early days of electronic recording it was also difficult to record maracas without drowning out the singer. By the 1960s, however, the drumset became common on calypso recordings, and from the 1970s onward the use of cowbells, congas, and synthesized drum sounds proliferated (see Activity 3.2). The same period saw increased use of electronic instruments (bass, guitar, keyboards) and synthesized sounds. The synthesized sounds and studio production effects of some recordings played on the road today cannot be accurately reproduced by live bands in the tents (a change associated especially with soca that will be discussed further in Chapter 6).



ACTIVITY 3.2: INSTRUMENTATION IN "JEAN AND DINAH" AND "HIGH MAS'" Compare the instrumental accompaniment in the Mighty Sparrow's 1956 song, "Jean and Dinah" (CD track 6), with David Rudder's 1998 song, "High Mas'" (CD track 9). Notice the greater variety and prominence of percussion in "High Mas'" that is characteristic of modern calypso recordings.

FORM

The form or structure of a calypso song is related closely to the structure of its text and to its performance context. Carnival songs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were called *lawways*, short refrains sung by a chorus and interspersed with the improvisations of a solo singer. As noted previously, this call-and-response format gave the

chantwell the opportunity to lead the song and display his improvisatory skill, while at the same time encouraging participation from others who sang the chorus or played accompanying rhythms on percussion instruments. Listen, for example, to “Congo Bara,” an old *lavway* that the Keskidee Trio preserved on record (Activity 3.3; CD track 11).



ACTIVITY 3.3: “CONGO BARA” *CD track 11 is a 1935 recording by the Keskidee Trio of a famous nineteenth-century lavway. The words express the laments of prisoners, and the song is named after the prison guard Congo Bara. The singers take turns playing the part of song leader, singing most of their solos in French patois, the language of working-class Trinidadians in the nineteenth century. The chorus is also in patois:*

Prisonniers levé.
Mettez limié bai Congo Bara

[Prisoners arise,
Give Congo Bara some light]

After learning to sing the chorus in patois, try to come up with a chorus in English (or whatever language you like) that is patterned on the melody and rhythm of the “Congo Bara” chorus but relates to an interesting event at your own school, in your family, or concerning some subject that is meaningful to you. Have different people come up with solos (patterned rhythmically and melodically on the solos in the recording) that are thematically related to your chorus.

When you perform your song (accompanied by guitar and maracas if possible) you will be singing in the true calypso tradition of verbal invention and topical commentary.

Old *lavways* are sometimes incorporated into the choruses of modern calypsoes; call and response thus continues to be an important small-scale form within a larger form. The Lord Kitchener’s “Pan in A Minor” (CD track track 12) uses call and response in the chorus, where the words “beat pan” are answered by changing instrumental lines. This kind of



use of call and response goes over especially well on the road, where people enjoy joining in the singing of the chorus.

While calypsoes may incorporate call-and-response form in certain sections, the overall form of calypso songs is always *strophic*, meaning that several different verses or stanzas of text are set to a repeated melody. Most calypsoes also have a chorus, a recurring section of the song in which the same melody *and* text are repeated. This “verse and chorus” form parallels the *lavway*’s alternation of soloist and chorus, but on a much more extended time scale, and usually without improvisation (although a few calypsonians are still expert at improvising in rhyming verse, a practice referred to as “extempo”). Like the *lavway*, the modern calypso chorus is usually written to be catchy and singable and invites the public to participate. Both “Iron Duke in the Land” (CD track 5) and “Jean and Dinah” (CD track 6) have simple verse and chorus structures: the calypsonian sings several verses, each of which has new words, and after each verse a group of singers sings a repeated chorus.

Other calypsoes may only have one line of repeated text in each verse, which we could describe as a “refrain” rather than a chorus. The Mighty Chalkdust’s “Chauffeur Wanted” is an example of this: “The new driver cannot drive” is the refrain that is sung at the end of each verse. The phrase “sans humanité,” heard in “Iron Duke in the Land,” was also a stock refrain used by many calypsonians. The use of a brief refrain at the end of a long verse is a convention that was established in the early 1900s, when calypsonians began singing eight-line “oratorical” calypsoes, and that continued in the narrative “ballad” calypsoes of the 1920s and 1930s that told stories for listening in the tents rather than for dancing and singing along.

Many calypsoes use standard chord progressions that also contribute to our sense of form in the music—the predictability of certain sequences of chords, that is, gives experienced listeners a sense of direction, progress, tension, and resolution. The verse of “Iron Duke in the Land” is an example of the “old minor,” or “sans humanité,” calypso—a standard chord progression along with which the first line of text is usually repeated (although not in this example) and each verse ends with a consistent refrain, often the formulaic “sans humanité” (see Activity 3.4). Because the old minor calypso form was so common in the 1910s through the 1930s, it is often remarked that calypso uses a limited number of stock melodies. This, of course, made text and word play all the more important.

ACTIVITY 3.4: “IRON DUKE IN THE LAND” CHORD PROGRESSION (CD TRACK 5)

A chord is combination of three or more notes that sound together. Each chord is built on a “root” note that is one of the steps of the musical scale, so chords are often described with roman numerals that indicate the root: “I” indicates a chord built on the first step of the scale, “V” indicates a chord built on the fifth step, and so on. A series of chords, called a “chord progression,” functions musically to create harmonic tension, anticipation, and resolution.

In this diagram the text is organized in terms of musical meter. Each “/” represents the beginning of a new measure, a regularly recurring period that measures the musical time. Chord changes occur at the beginning of a measure, following a predictable rhythm. Even if you don’t really know what the roman numeral symbols mean, try to hear the cuatro changing the chords it strums as you listen.

It was a . . .

modern manife- i	/station i	of the V	/elder civili- i	/zation i	Thay my
carnival cele- i	/bration i	of this V	/social organi- I	/zation I	It
called to mind an ab- I7	/stention iv	over VII7	/all the popu- III	/lation I Julian taking the	
social décor, deh who I7	/whey Whiterose Union/ iv	sans humanité V7		i	

The chorus of Mighty Sparrow’s “Jean and Dinah” uses a different chord progression in the major mode that is also common to many calypsoes (see Activity 3.5). (Jazz musicians will recognize the second half of this chord progression as “rhythm changes” named for the George Gershwin song “I Got Rhythm.”)



ACTIVITY 3.5: “JEAN AND DINAH” CHORD PROGRESSION (CD TRACK 6) *See Activity 3.4 for an explanation of this diagram. The strum here is more difficult to hear than in “Iron Duke,” so it may be easier to detect the changing chords by focusing on the bass line.*

Jean and Dinah I	/Rosita and I	/Clementina V	/round the V
corner posing V	/Bet your life is V	/something they sellin I	/And if you I
catch them broken, I	/you can get them I7	/all for nothing IV	/Don’t make no iv
row, the I	/yankees gone, I vi	/Sparrow take over ii V	/now I

Since the 1960s, calypsonians have used increasingly complex verse forms and more diverse chord progressions. This has occurred partly in response to the musical needs of steelbands (Chapter 5). It also reflects the increasing exposure of calypsonians to other popular music traditions through radio and records, as well as new opportunities (exemplified by the success abroad of the Lord Kitchener and later the Mighty Sparrow) to succeed as international entertainers. Despite the increased variety of forms and chord progressions, however, calypso’s basic rhythmic structure, what I will refer to here as “rhythmic feel,” has remained fairly constant.

RHYTHMIC FEEL

Calypso’s rhythmic character derives from its function as dance music for the road and carries over into other contexts. Like many other genres of dance music, calypso has a rhythmic quality that is distinctive and recognizable. If you are Trinidadian, your body will recognize this “rhythmic feel,” and you will likely to respond to it by dancing. I attempt here to describe aspects of calypso’s rhythmic feel in words; but people more commonly express their understanding of this feel by moving, dancing, and singing. Because the rhythmic feel of calypso is fun-

damentally connected to Trinidadian styles of dancing, you must have the experience of dancing to it to really understand calypso!

On the road at carnival time, people travel as they dance, processing down the street in costume or just tagging along behind the band in their street clothes. The main style of dancing in this context entails a simple alternation of the feet—left, right, left, right—in a swaying short-stepped kind of walk referred to as “chipping” (the name comes from the sound of leather shoe soles scraping the pavement in unison—“chip, chip, chip, chip”). Listen to the bass in the Mighty Sparrow’s “Jean and Dinah” (CD track 6), and you will hear that it plays on a steady pulse, matching the pace of a dancer’s evenly spaced footsteps. This regular pulse is enriched by off-the-beat rhythms in the bongos and guitar strum and the varied rhythmic accents of the singer and horns. While the “on-beatness” is unequivocal, the music is also rich and complex because of the interaction of different parts.

Rhythmic feel is the product, then, of interaction between different parts, not fully expressed in what is played by the bass, the guitar, the singer, or any one part. Calypso, like many dance musics of the African diaspora, is *polyrhythmic*, meaning that it features a constant rhythmic feel, or “groove,” that is created by the interaction of repeating and contrasting parts. Diagram (a) in Activity 3.6 depicts the rhythmic interaction between different instrumental parts in David Rudder’s “High Mas’” (see Activity 3.6). These rhythms are fairly typical of calypso generally, and you should spend the time to understand them well (see Activity 3.7). The interaction between the on-beat kick drum and the syncopated (i.e., “between-the-beat”) keyboard strum produces the composite rhythm notated in Figure (b) in Activity 3.6. This bouncy exciting rhythm, produced by contrasting parts, is fundamental to all calypso music. The off-beat high hat is also standard in most calypso, and the pitter patter of the bells contributes to a dense texture that is typical of carnival street music. The patterns in Diagram (a) in Activity 3.6 are repeated throughout the song and can be referred to as “fixed rhythms.”

ACTIVITY 3.6: CALYPSO RHYTHMIC FEEL IN “HIGH MAS’” *Diagram (a) depicts the rhythms of different instruments in your recording of “High Mas’” (CD track 9). All of these are “fixed rhythms,” which means that they repeat throughout the song. Because they also contrast with each other they cre-*

ate an effect called polyrhythm—a consistent background of repeating, interlocking rhythms. The size and shading of the boxes in Diagram (a) indicate the relative “weight” the different instruments have in our perception of the rhythm. You can read these rhythms in relation to the two “main beats” of the kick drum, counting the “in-between” beats as well:

One-ee-and-ah Two-ee-and-ah

The strum then sounds, for example, on “ee,” “ah,” and “and”:









































One-ee-and-ah Two-ee-and-ah

The high hat falls on “and”:

One-ee-and-ah Two-ee-and-ah

Note that the strum notated here is the second half of the keyboard part on the recording of “High Mas’.” The other half is like the high hat, so the full strum as you hear it on the recording is “One-ee-and-ah Two-ee-and-ah, One-ee-and-ah Two-ee-and-ah.”

(a)

	“One- ee- and- ah	Two- ee- and- ah”
bell	   	   
bell	   	   
high hat	   	   
keyboard strum	   	   
kick drum	   	   

The musical notation in Figure (b) represents a rhythm that you may hear emerging as a composite of the polyrhythmic combination in Diagram (a).

(b)



ACTIVITY 3.7: PERFORMING THE RHYTHMIC FEEL *Try to keep the steady pulse of the kick drum in your foot, or better yet “chip” with both your feet, alternating while you clap the strum. Using your mouth, can you also make the sizzling sound of a cymbal (“tss . . . tss”) on the high hat rhythm?*

PHRASING

The calypsonian’s singing also contributes to the rhythmic feel, his variable rhythms constantly interacting with the fixed rhythm of the bass, drums, guitar, and other instruments. One of the most important skills of a calypso singer is his ability to phrase his lyrics in a way that gives punch and flavor to the music. The Mighty Sparrow’s vocal line in “Jean and Dinah,” for example, is full of subtle pushing and pulling of time, as well as crackling rhythmic phrases that drive the song forward (as when he inserts “So when you bounce up” to introduce the chorus). Try to match Sparrow’s phrasing when you sing the song yourself (see Activity 3.8).

ACTIVITY 3.8: “JEAN AND DINAH” PHRASING *Many musicians and musicologists use the word “phrasing” to refer to the way a singer or an instrument creates segments in a melody (where a singer takes breaths, for example) and gives them shape. In Trinidad, however, “phrasing” refers specifically to the way a singer or instrumentalist renders the rhythm of the melody.*

Sing the chorus to “Jean and Dinah” (CD track 6) with careful attention to rhythmic phrasing while you step to a steady beat. Be sure, for example, to master the syncopation at the words “bet you life is something they selling.” When you have learned the phrasing that way, try adding the strum rhythm in Figure (a) in Activity 3.6 with hand claps. When you can do all this at once you will have developed a holistic understanding of the rhythmic feel in this song.



BREAKS

Another variable event in many of these songs occurs at moments when the instruments come to a dramatic and unexpected stop, perhaps punch a rhythm together, and then resume the flow of their fixed rhythms. This is referred to as a “break,” and it is an important device for creating excitement and rhythmic energy. A break is a momentary suspension of a kinetic energy that inexorably returns, and its excitement is most strongly felt in our bodies as an experience of movement and anticipation (see Activity 3.9). As such it is a common device in dance-oriented calypsoes and soca music.

ACTIVITY 3.9: BREAKS *In Super Blue’s “Pump It Up” (CD track 1), an extended break on the repeated words “I wish I could” sets up the dancers to boost their energy to a new level when the fixed rhythm returns with the words, “wine on you!”*

In the chorus of “High Mas” (CD track 9), the music stops and Rudder sings by himself, “and if you know what I mean then scream!” Coming after several repeats of the phrase “if you know what I mean,” this break makes a climactic and dramatic transition into the next section.

In the chorus of “Jean and Dinah” (CD track 6), the voices and all the fixed rhythmic parts stop at the words “don’t make no ROW.” A unison horn line fills the space, and then the voices and fixed rhythm resume.



Calypso has become associated not just with carnival celebrations, where it is heard most often, but also with Trinidadian cultural identity generally. Many Trinidadians will tell you that it is their national music because it has a long association with carnival and communal festivity and because its lyrics contain an accumulated wealth of social and historical commentary. While calypso is the *genre* of music most often associated with Trinidad, however, the national *instrument* of Trinidad and Tobago is the steel pan, the subject of the next chapter.