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## **Calypso music : identity and social influence : the Trinidadian experience**

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## Biographies of Some Major Calypsonians

**Atilla the Hun - Raymond Quevedo** was born in Trinidad on March 24, 1892. He began his singing career in 1911 and was the first calypsonian to hold public office. He was elected to the Port of Spain City Council in 1946, and later in 1950 was elected to represent East St. George County in the Legislative Council. He won the Calypso Crown Competition in 1946 with *Daily Mail Report* and in 1947 with *Million Dollar Jail*. Atilla died on February 22, 1962 in Trinidad and was posthumously awarded the Trinidad & Tobago Public Service Medal of Merit-Gold, for Public Service and Calypso in 1972.

**Calypso Rose - Linda Mc Cartha Monica Sandy-Lewis** was born in Tobago on April 27, 1940. She began writing songs at age 15 and to date has more than 800 to her credit. She originally used the sobriquet Crusoe Kid and turned professional in 1964. She won the Calypso King and Road March competitions in St. Thomas with her first recording, *Cooperation*. Her mega hit *Fire in Me Wire* was the first calypso to be sung during two consecutive carnival seasons (1966 and 1967). She dominated the field by winning the Calypso Queen competition for five consecutive years between 1972 and 1976. In 1977, *Gimme More Tempo* enabled her to become the first female calypsonian to have ever won the Trinidad Road March competition. The following year she repeated the feat with *Come Leh We Jam*. Via calypsos such as *Pudding* and *Palet* which introduced the ‘sexually inadequate male’ image, Rose pioneered the challenge against the ‘phallogentric male’ image perpetrated by male calypsonians. She paved the way for her female counterparts in the male-dominated calypso arena. She has resided in New York since 1983, performs occasionally, and is the most decorated female calypsonian (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calypso\\_Rose](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calypso_Rose).)

**Growling Tiger - Neville Marcano** was born in Trinidad on March 5, 1916. Before becoming a calypsonian in 1934 he was a boxer, and had won the Bantam-weight championship in 1929. His minor key calypsos reflected the African griot singing style. He won the Calypso Crown Competition in 1939 with *The Labour Situation in Trinidad*, becoming the first Calypso Monarch of Trinidad and Tobago. He opened doors to recording opportunities in the US for calypsonians that followed. He died in 1993 during his retirement.

**Lord Executor - Phillip Garcia** was born in Trinidad, of Venezuelan parentage and, as a privileged youth, had received a college education. He first appeared around 1900 and immediately revolutionized calypso by championing the change-over from Patois to English which had been pioneered by Norman Le Blanc and Senior Inventor. He is also accredited with cementing the eight-line minor key calypso which replaced the four-line single tone calypso structure. He was a master of extemporaneous compositions on any topic and his forte was Picong and War. However, he was equally adept at commentary and his relentless and merciless attack on Crown Colony Government paved the way for the political commentators who emerged between the late 1930's and the 1950's.

**Lord Invader - Rupert Westmore Grant** was born in Trinidad in 1916. He began his career in 1930 and left Trinidad in 1941 to record calypsos for Decca records in New York where he was instrumental in popularizing the genre. He is perhaps better remembered for his composition *Rum and Coca Cola*, which was recorded and popularized by the Andrews Sisters. It had been the topic of a famous on-going lawsuit involving copyright infringement, for which he was eventually compensated. He left New York in 1956 to reside in England and while there, he performed in Europe. He died in New York on October 15, 1961.

**Lord Kitchener (Kitch) - Aldwyn Roberts** was born in Arima, Trinidad on April 18, 1922. He started his career in 1937 at age 15 and won the Arima Calypso King competition from 1938 to 1941. In 1948 he migrated to England where he resided for some fifteen years. He has been dubbed 'The Grand Master of Calypso' for the following reasons: He penned all of his compositions, he won ten Road March titles, eighteen of his compositions have enabled Panorama (annual national steelband competition) winners, more than any other calypsonian, his compositions celebrate the steel drum, and their melodic and harmonic structure have been contoured to suit and facilitate steelband interpretation. Additionally, he was one of the main 'People's favorites'. In 1969 he was awarded the Trinidad & Tobago Humming Bird Medal-Silver, for Calypso. Kitch died on February 11, 2000, in Trinidad.

**Lord Relator - Willard C. Harris** was born in Trinidad on January 22, 1948. He won the Junior Calypso Monarch title in 1955, the Buy Local King competition in 1970, and the Calypso Monarch competition (originally the Calypso King competition) in 1980 with *Food*

*Prices* and *Take a Rest*. However, it is his summary of the cricket match between India and the West Indies, *A Lovely Day for Cricket*, for which he may be best remembered. It remains a classic in calypso history. As his sobriquet and renditions indicate, Relator is one of the best narrators of calypso. He can be dubbed ‘The Chameleon of Calypso’, because of his uncanny ability to impersonate any calypsonian. He is also versed in the art of Extempo, and is accomplished on the guitar and Venezuelan cuatro. These attributes along with his charisma, knowledge of the genre, and his ability to engage his audiences, have kept him in international acclaim. He has performed with Andy Narell and the WDR Big Band of Germany thereby taking the art form to new heights.

**Lord Shorty (aka Ras Shorty) - Garfield Blackman** was born in Trinidad in 1941. His career began in the early 1960s and he started to become noticed in 1963 after his release *Cloak and Dagger*. By integrating East Indian percussion instruments and innovating traditional calypso rhythms during the mid-1980s, he created a new beat Soca, which was first heard in his hit *Endless Vibrations*. He was diagnosed with cancer in May 2000 and died two months later on July 12.

**Mighty Chalkdust - Hollis Urban Lester Liverpool** was born in Trinidad on March 5, 1941. He has been the most consistent and prolific of the commentators of political calypsos. He has won the Calypso Crown competition eight times and was a finalist in the Calypso Monarch finals in 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2016. In 1976, he was awarded the Trinidad & Tobago Humming Bird Medal Silver for Contribution to Calypso. Chalkie is an educator and historian as well and has served as Director of Culture of Trinidad and Tobago. Dr. Liverpool holds a Ph.D. in history and ethnomusicology from the University of Michigan (1993). His publications include *Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago* (1977), *Kaiso and Society* (1986), *Calypsonians to Remember* (1987) and *Rituals of Power & Rebellion: The Carnival Tradition in Trinidad & Tobago 1763-1962* (2001).

**Mighty Shadow - Winston Bailey** was born in Trinidad on October 2, 1941 but grew up with his grandparents in Tobago. He is another great story teller, and began singing at an early age. He won two Road March titles, one in 1974 with *Bassman*, and the other in 2001 with *Stranger*. He also won the Calypso Monarch Crown in 2000. Shadow is included in this

list of calypsonians because of his innovation to the harmonic structure of the traditional | I IV V | progression. He replaced it by a Plagal cadence hence | I V IV |, which he utilized in the choruses of some calypsos, such as *Tension* and *Feeling the Feeling*. Shadow is a recipient of the Trinidad & Tobago Humming Bird Medal (Silver) for Music.

**Mighty Sparrow - Slinger Francisco** was born in Grenada on July 9, 1935. He was endowed with one of the most sonorous of voices, attractive stage persona and the art of rendition. By consolidating the techniques of the great calypsonians that preceded him (the Mighty Killer, Lord Kitchener, and the Roaring Lion) he transformed himself from Little Sparrow to the Mighty Sparrow rising to ascendancy in 1954. Birdie is one of the most decorated calypsonians to date. He has won both the Road March Competition and the Calypso Monarch Competition at least seven times, and some of his calypsos have produced Panorama winners. He was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the University of the West Indies and is celebrated as the ‘Calypso King of the World’. Sparrow still continues to record, perform and woo international audiences.

**Roaring Lion - Rafael De Leon (aka Hubert Rafael Charles)** was born in Trinidad on February 23, 1908 and spent his early years in orphanages where he learned to play the clarinet. He made his first appearances as a calypsonian in 1927 at the Railway Douglas tent. During the early 1930s he and Atilla the Hun opened their own tent and were contracted by Eduardo Sa Gomes, a local businessman, to record in New York. During the 1940 he shifted between three of the more popular tents, and in 1951 left to perform in England. Upon his return to Trinidad in 1963 he performed at a few leading calypso tents until the late 1970s. During his retirement he wrote a weekly column for a local newspaper and published a book, *Calypso from France to Trinidad: 800 Years of History*. He has penned many favorites, two of which, *Mary Ann* and *Ugly Woman*, were re-recorded and popularized by Harry Belafonte. In 1981 Lion received the Trinidad & Tobago Humming Bird Medal Silver for Culture, and before his death on July 11, 1999 he re-recorded some of his golden oldies for Ice Records.

**Wilmoth Houdini - Wilmoth Hendricks (aka Edgar Leon Sinclair)** was born in Trinidad. His singing career, during which he penned numerous calypsos of the oratorical strain, extended from the late 1920s until the 1940s. His major contribution to the calypso arena

however was the improvements he made to the calypso tent environment during the early 1920s. His improvements (better lighting and seating accommodations, enforced dress code and performance standards, enhancements among musical instruments, creation of sections separation the stage from the audience, police supervision, and relocation of venue from nefarious neighborhoods to suburban outskirts) helped to generate greater revenue by targeting a more affluent clientele.

