

# SPARROW

## COME BACK HOME

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Carmel Buckley and Mark Harris  
Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts  
Wilmington, Delaware  
March 1, 2014–June 8, 2014

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*A Theoretical Archive As Exhibition* by Maiza Hixson  
*Sparrow Come Back Home: Calypso and Mighty Sparrow's Calypsos* by Mark Harris

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## **A THEORETICAL ARCHIVE AS EXHIBITION**

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Maiza Hixson

For their three-month exhibition entitled *Sparrow Come Back Home*, Carmel Buckley and Mark Harris install a temporary monument to the living Trinidadian legend and Calypso singer Mighty Sparrow, born Slinger Francisco. Suggestive of a record store with 272 ceramic reproductions of Sparrow's albums on shelves, the memorial also stands as a conceptual gesture—toward the commemoration of vintage vinyl and rapidly obsolescent record store. Each standard album-sized ceramic tile sits in chronological order and is emblazoned with a reproduced album cover design appropriated from the front and back of each of Sparrow's LPs made between 1958 and the present. The covers are decals that are vitrified to the ceramic tile, forming a unique fossilized record of silence.

In planning for this theoretical archive as exhibition, which the artists described as “non-cochlear,” curatorial discussions at the DCCA centered around how to translate the power of Sparrow's verse without playing any of his actual songs in the gallery. Would this omission create a barrier for visitors to be able to appreciate his music and the impact of Buckley and Harris's art? Furthermore, what is the ultimate significance of presenting a silent inventory of a singer's life's work? As Buckley and Harris write in a statement about the exhibition, part of the context for the silent monument is the ironic indifference felt towards Mighty Sparrow's voice in the U.S. and in Britain compared to other world music. Growing up in England and raised by a Trinidadian mother, Harris only knew of the singer by virtue of the fact that his mother played Sparrow's albums around the house.

Despite Mighty Sparrow's repertoire and influence in the Caribbean and limited exposure in North America and Britain, the American Harry Belafonte's popularized version in the U.S. eclipsed Sparrow's authentic calypso. It is not difficult to surmise that the Mighty

Sparrow was censored from 1960s radio play, given the politically subversive nature of his musical protest against racial and class discrimination and the sexually charged nature of his lyrics. With the literal silencing of Sparrow's Trinidadian slang and colorful English, it is fitting that Harris and Buckley would in turn stage a silent critique of the indifference shown Sparrow's voice in the West.

As visitors to *Sparrow Come Back Home*, we may also interpret Carmel Buckley and Mark Harris's monumental exhibition as the visualization of a vast void in our own awareness of marginalized cultures—specifically, Calypso music and history. The conspicuous absence of information about Mighty Sparrow in dominant Western culture ultimately becomes the impetus to seek out his and other obscured voices upon exiting the gallery.

Maiza Hixson is the Gretchen Hupfel Curator of Contemporary Art, Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts

opposite page:

*Bang Bang Lulu in New York*, digital decals on ceramic tiles, 2014

Mighty Sparrow with Sparrow's Troubadours, Hilary Records vinyl LP cover, recorded Port of Spain, Trinidad, 1969

*Crown Heights Justice*, digital decals on ceramic tiles, 2014

Mighty Sparrow, Charlie's Records, Brooklyn, vinyl LP cover, recorded Brooklyn, 1991

next page, left:

*Calypso Carnival with The Mighty Sparrow*, digital decals on ceramic tiles, 2014

Mighty Sparrow, Melodisc Records Ltd., London, vinyl LP cover, recorded Port of Spain, Trinidad, 1968

*Carnival Jam*, digital decals on ceramic tiles, 2014

Mighty Sparrow, BLS Records, U.S. Virgin Islands, vinyl LP cover, recorded Brooklyn, 1995

next page, right:

Digital ceramic decals.

Katie Parker and Guy Michael Davis preparing tiles for firing.









NLP 5050 NLP 5050

# CONGO MAN

ANOTHER Sparrow calypso LP is an event in the entertainment world. This one "CONGO MAN" more so, because it is the pride to the 1965 Trinidad Carnival. Actually, it is the first homing bird preasing the new carnival sun.

In the Trinidad pre-carnival season, calypsonians seem to drop like mangoes from every tree. They hang up ditties every night in the tents from New Year's day to Ash Wednesday. After carnival, most of the singers go into year long hibernation till next calypso season. These are the "amateur or makeshift calypsonians".

But not King Sparrow. Our calypso Birdie is a professional. The one and only international calypso king. He is as well known in New York, Montreal and London as in his home town, Port of Spain, the matrix of the calypso. He is riding cock-a-hoop in Kingston, Bridgetown and other Caribbean capitals.

The migrant "Bird" has seen broken through the language barrier of Dutch, French and Spanish speaking countries where they sing and dance to his "May-May" and "Village Band" and "Jean and Dinah" as gaily as any citizen of Port of Spain.

Never the man to rest on his laurels in or out of season, Sparrow is always composing, always surprising his fans with new, luscious tunes and delightfully teasing verses. Yet his wit, satire and joy de vivre never lose their cutting edge.

He is in full light again in this LP with his checker-board "CONGO MAN" with the "dub" and "reggae" SOLOMON AFFAIR and GET TO

BY THE  
OF THE  
CALYPSO  
WORD  
KING

Side One  
CONGO MAN  
PATSY  
A MOTHER'S LOVE

Side Two  
SOLOMON OUT  
NO BACCHANAL  
WELL SPOKEN MOPPERS  
MAN LIKE TO FEEL  
STEERING WHEEL  
ELAINE SEE DE MOON

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HELL OUT OF HERE are stinging satires on a political event in Trinidad so fresh it still rubs the skin of the majority of Trinidadians.

PATSY, ELAINE SEE DE MOON, MAN LIKE TO FEEL and STEERING WHEEL are in the new well known rambly Sparrow genre that began with JEAN AND DINAH. In this saucy style he tackles the prudes and tickles the palates of sophisticates.

In any case, calypso was never meant for young ladies finishing schools nor church bazaars.

It is a heady, boisterous or satirical ballad set to jaysms, pulsating rhythms that twitch mumprederers' feet to jiggling on the streets of Port of Spain for two whole carnival days. It can also set staid Carnegie Hall jumping.

Two numbers in this L. P. NO BACCHANAL and WELL SPOKEN MOPPERS are in the bibulous bacchanalian vein. Just for the uninitiated, "moppers" are fellows who float around cadging free drinks.

MOTHER returns to the age old theme of a mother's love to which Sparrow gives, as he can always do, something new.

Calypso band leader and conductor Bert Imitis is the man who plucks Sparrow's tunes off the guitar and arranges them for his band to give Sparrow the splendid backing heard in these ditties.

Ten terrific tunes from CALYPSO KING SPARROW who set Carnegie Hall of fire with Trinidad rhythm on a summer night in 1964 and stunned those ears who had never heard the true calypso beat.

Side Two  
GET OUTA HERE  
WELL SPOKEN MOPPERS  
MAN LIKE TO FEEL  
STEERING WHEEL  
ELAINE SEE DE MOON

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TRINIDAD HILTON  
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(B) PARTY MUSIC  
(C) GIMME ROOM TO DANCE  
MAN WILL SURVIVE

SIDE B  
LONDON BRIDGE  
SALT FISH  
MOTHER'S LOVE

MUSIC ARRANGED & CONDUCTED BY ERROL INCE

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Alto Sax: Charles Dougherty  
Tenor Sax: Dennis Wilkinson  
Trombone: John Alexander  
Keyboards: Frankie McInnis  
Guitars: George Victory  
Bass: Anthony "Bugs" Nicks  
Drum Program: Errol Ince  
A Percussion: Errol Ince

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Mixed by ABB - Mix Supervised by Sparrow & Errol Ince

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Records

Errol Ince / Cover Design: Errol Ince (TNT)

The background is a dense, overlapping collage of Sparrow magazine covers. The covers feature various illustrations, including a man in a suit, a woman, and abstract designs. Text on the covers includes 'SPARROW', 'THE MIGHTY SPARROW', 'CALYPSO KING OF THE ROAD', 'BANG-BANG LULU IN NEW YORK with SPARROW and the TROUBADOURS', and 'CALYPSO'. The overall color palette is a light, monochromatic teal or cyan.

## SPARROW COME BACK HOME

Mark Harris

...Is carnival, straight Carnival that's all,  
the beat is base, the melody bohboh,  
all Port of Spain is a twelve-thirty show,  
some playing Kojak, some Fidel Castro,  
some Rastamen, but, with or without locks,  
to Spoiler is the same old khaki socks,  
all Frederick Street stinking like a closed drain,  
Hell is a city much like Port of Spain,  
what the rain rots, the sun ripens some more...<sup>1</sup>

## CALYPSO

As Derek Walcott's poem *The Spoiler's Return* mashes English Romantic poetry with Mighty Spoiler's most famous calypso *Bedbug*, from 1953, he reveals the richness of a music form that has tended to be unjustifiably dismissed as musically shallow and anecdotal in content. Walcott reveals the extraordinary richness of lyrics with which calypsonians reinvent the way language engages in social observation while remaining helplessly intertwined with the muddled lives they scrutinize. For Walcott, and for the best calypsonians taking up anti-authoritarian satire, it is imperative that language remain wildly inventive yet precise and that verbal flamboyance and a sharp wit be their defence against censorship. As he has Spoiler declare: "So I sing with Attila, I sing with Commander,/what right in Guyana, right in Uganda./The time could come, it can't be very long,/when they will jail calypso for picong,/for first comes television, then the press,/all in the name of Civic Righteousness;/...until all language stinks, and the truth lies,/a mass for maggots and a fête for flies." Here Walcott points to calypso's most singular quality, a lyrical incisiveness that is itself a rebellion against language, an intentional misuse of words, a prising of meaning away from officially sanctioned usage so that it can

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Spoiler's Return*, <http://fadograph.wordpress.com/2012/08/02/the-spoilers-return-derek-walcott/>.



work for "all those whose anger for the poor on earth,/made them weep with a laughter beyond mirth."

It can be hard to understand why, amongst non-native West Indians, there is such a lack of appreciation for classic calypso and soca. Particularly in the pre-soca 1950s and 60s in Trinidad, calypso was one of the most lyrically inventive English-language music forms, humorously singing of topical, political, or sexual matters and backed with upbeat dance arrangements by the best small orchestras in the Caribbean. During the 1980s, with the burst of commercial interest in world music, how did calypso and soca get overlooked? In the 1960s the dilution of the genre for the cruise ship tourist market, and by Harry Belafonte's versions of mento standards passing as anodyne versions of calypso for US audiences, probably have a lot to do with this neglect, as the best Trinidadian music became eclipsed

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**SPARROW'S GREATEST HITS**  
The Mighty Sparrow sings his own compositions  
accompanied by the Joey Lewis Orchestra

**HE MIGHTY SPARROW**

**SPARROW Ornithology**

Charles Francis's third child was born in Couva, Trinidad, on 20 July, 1932. It was a boy, Wright, 12 pounds. He was christened Sparrow Francis in the Roman Catholic church. His mother, the 19-year-old sister Eileen, and 18-month-old brother, Norman, welcomed the new arrival. Sparrow Francis, like the Mighty Sparrow, has been called the greatest calypsonian of Trinidad and Tobago (the "Trinidad and Tobago" and "the world"). Sparrow and his mother arrived in Trinidad

when he was 1 year and 8 months old. They went to live in Couva. Van Jones, Charles, and his father, Robert Francis, a builder, who had come here five years before. St. James the Where Sparrow was 4, he attended a private school on Beveridge Avenue Road, St. James. He later transferred to St. Patrick (now Sparrow) High School in Couva where he excelled at all manner of work. Sparrow Francis was an impressionist who was encouraged to sing at the house of his mother, Mrs. Patrick, near French Guiana. "Madness" Michael and Harry Wilson, who grew up to be three of Trinidad's oldest writers, Sparrow would sing with them occasionally after school and then to entertain the kids he knew about the set of old-fashioned music he was doing. He sang a number of songs of those early days called calypsoes. When he was 8 years old, he sang a number of songs, and he could be heard singing the way "Charles" popular songs. Then he sang about a road from school caravans which he clearly loved to sing.

At one concert, one of the songs, called "Sparrow" (the name of the bird) with a melody composed by Sparrow himself, was sung. The name he chose was Lord Francis's then.

Charles Francis died in 1947.

Throughout the history of the Young British Trust for the M. Francis.

1. JEAN AND DINAH (1956) 1. TERESA (1958)

2. SIMPSON (1950) 2. JACK PANCE (1956)

3. SAILOR MAN (1951) 3. RUSSIAN SATELLITE (1958)

4. MELODY LIE (1958) 4. GUNSLINGERS (1950)

5. P.A.Y.E. (1958) 5. MR. HERBERT (1959)

**YOU WILL WANT TO OWN AN EXCELLENT RECORD**

1968 Best Music Award  
1968 Best Calypso Award  
1968 Best Calypso Album Award

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by saccharine songs of banal content. Can these kinds of associations have burned out the audiences for calypso for decades after?

One factor is the lack of any comprehensive research and publishing of the back catalog of calypso. Before Ebay, Discogs and Popsike increased access for collectors and provided ad hoc archives of calypso, the music was very difficult to track down and the full extent of it was hard to grasp. The only rereleases of this early material have been by the Smithsonian Museum which inherited Emory Cook's crucial early recordings of Mighty Sparrow, Lord Melody, Killer, Mighty Bomber, and others. However, besides *Calypso Awakening* and *The Mighty Sparrow: First Flight*, the two Smithsonian rereleases that do feature informative sleeve notes (in the second case by calypso scholar Gordon Rohlehr), there has been no attempt by the museum to develop scholarship

previous page:

*Congo Man*, digital decals on ceramic tiles, 2014

Mighty Sparrow, National Records, Trinidad, vinyl LP cover, recorded Port of Spain, Trinidad, 1965

*Party Classics 4 "Survival,"* digital decals on ceramic tiles, 2014

Mighty Sparrow, BLS Records, U.S. Virgin Islands, vinyl LP cover, recorded Brooklyn, 1992

opposite page:

*Sparrow's Greatest Hits*, digital decals on ceramic tiles, 2014

Mighty Sparrow, RCA, United States, vinyl LP cover, recorded Port of Spain, Trinidad, 1960

around this remarkable legacy. Rhino and Rounder Records have concentrated on pre-WWII material. Eddy Grant's ICE records released compilations of Lord Melody, Mighty Sparrow, Lord Kitchener, and Mighty Spoiler which only partially fill the gap. Apart from Rohlehr's *Calypso & Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad*, which is out of print and rare even in university libraries, there hasn't been any comprehensive accounting for the legacy of powerful music from that time in a way that would enable scholarship and general interest to build.

Among the markets for popular music America would have been central to the success of the more challenging calypso in the 1950s. It can't have helped that the best singers like Lord Invader and Mighty Sparrow produced records satirizing the behavior of American servicemen in Trinidad (*Yankee Dollar* and *Jean and Dinah* respectively). Likewise the criticism of colonial rule followed by the celebration of independence that is so prominent in twentieth-century calypso may have limited its appeal to British audiences. Certainly the best singing is raw and direct, the singers' accents untempered and the language rich in Trinidadian slang, making it hard for outsiders to follow the lyrics. And yet where these might be qualities of interest to wider audiences drawn to the authenticity of a musical genre, it hasn't led to the popularization of calypso from this key period. Nor has calypso had the kind of impact that delta blues, ska, or reggae (and some African styles) have had on generations of British and American pop that would secure its status as a foundational music. It's been suggested that the importance of cannabis for reggae helped ensure its popularity outside Jamaica and that reggae's recognizable imagery of rebellion relative to calypso unfairly cast the latter as a harmless music of sexual innuendo and obscure local commentary. Moreover mid-century calypso remained a music of small acoustic combos with brass arrangements, which neither experimented with studio technology like dub nor with electric guitar bands like West African highlife. It remained loyal to an earlier studio production model of single-track recordings that sought some of the immediacy of live performances.

**COOK**

1126

# SPARROW IN HI-FI

## MIGHTY SPARROW SINGS GUNSLINGER

### SIDE A

The Gun Slinger (Calypso)  
Carlton Peeping At Me (Calypso)  
Mr. Herbert (Calypso)  
Mango Vert (Calypso)  
Jean M. M. M. M. (Calypso)

### SIDE B

Harry In The Piggery (Calypso)  
I Love You So (Rock & Roll)  
I Should Have Told You (Rock & Roll)  
Can't You See You're Meant For Me (Rock & Roll)  
You're Mine

All tunes composed and sung by the Mighty Sparrow

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*Emory Cook*

The regional and temporal specificity of calypso lyrics increases their value as historical documents and vibrant narratives of the everyday, but pulls calypso in a different direction than the more universal treatments of love, politics, and melancholy found in reggae and blues. At their most typical, calypso narratives develop a tradition of Caribbean picaresque whose detail clearly draws on observation of local figures. Sparrow's songs stand out amongst those of his fellow singer songwriters for drawing this detail with exceptional nuance, humor, and invention. John Thieme explains how Sparrow's characterizations of local life are mirrored in V. S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street* as it tells of the aimless lives and misguided machismo of hapless local residents of Port of Spain: "Ultimately, despite their surface resilience, virtually all the characters in *Miguel Street* seem paralysed by their environment. Certainly all who aspire to any kind of metropolitan ideal are doomed to disappointment. Naipaul does, however, suggest the possibility of alternative positives, indigenous to the society, through the medium of his calypso allusions."<sup>2</sup> One such example of haplessness would be Sparrow's *Benwood Dick*, the tale of an ill-dressed suitor with a distinctively shaped penis: "If you see the man you might dead with fright/Especially if it's in the night/Wearing a big old straw hat/A dirty dirty alpagat/All he shirt black and greasy/I don't see what kind of business a man like this/Could have with my sister Milly,"<sup>3</sup>

In reality there may not be a music style with a closer connection to rebellion and resistance than calypso, whose DNA is forged from its direct links to the conditions of West Indian slavery, the silencing of slave discourse, and the need for a form of protest that was not recognizable to the colonial authorities. There are only oral records to account for the early 19th-century pre-emancipation song types that antedate modern calypso. Thieme points out<sup>4</sup> that it is other calypsonians like Atila the Hun and Chalkdust who are

most convinced by a genealogy of calypso that would date back to emancipation in 1838, or even earlier. West Indian scholars more cautiously commit to a late 19th-century birth for the modern form of calypso. In this scenario calypso emerged from the camboulay sugar cane harvest celebrations, where field workers needed relief after the grueling labor and cane burning (hence "cannes brulée" to camboulay). Camboulay was the first instance of carnivalesque street celebrations that involved stick fights and singing in patois. It was a commemoration that Trinidad authorities and landowning classes often tried to ban as whites were in a minority and felt intimidated by this lawless hiatus in economic laboring activity. As a song form originating in slavery the carnival singing had served to make fun of slave masters without their knowledge. Modern calypso has always continued the subversion by reviewing the year's news and broadcasting any glaring miscarriages of justice regarding infringements by politicians and administrators that the authorities have tried to conceal. Not surprisingly this has led to repeated attempts at censorship as the authorities have sought to control what they perceived as the insubordination of critical calypso.

Calypso starts to be sung in English in the early twentieth century as that language becomes more widely used. This attracts increased scrutiny from administrations who are less cognizant of the meanings of the songs when sung in patois. English language also has the effect of increasing the popularity of calypso, and in the pre-World War II period this helps to gain interest from North American record companies and recording artists like Bing Crosby who brought calypsonians to the United States. It also marks the broadening of topics from local concerns to international events like the abdication of Edward VIII, although these were usually still of some concern for Trinidad like the visit of the Graf Zeppelin in 1933. The internationalization of calypso was certainly furthered by

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<sup>2</sup> John Thieme, "Calypso allusions in Naipaul's *Miguel Street*," *Kunapipi*, Vol. 3, 1981, Iss. 2, University of Wollongong, <http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1111&context=kunapipi>

<sup>3</sup> V. S. Naipaul cites this calypso of Sparrow's in his 1962 memoir of returning to the Caribbean, *The Middle Passage*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> John Thieme, *Rewriting the People's Newspaper: Trinidadian Calypso after 1956*, in *A Companion to Poetic Genres*, ed. Erik Martiny, (Oxford, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012): 446–58.

la 2127  
STEREO

Sparrow in

LONDON

accompanied by

THE TROUBADOURS





previous page:

*Sparrow in Hi-Fi*, digital decal  
on ceramic tile, 2014  
Mighty Sparrow, Cook Records,  
Stamford, Connecticut, vinyl LP  
cover, recorded Port of Spain,  
Trinidad, 1959

opposite page + this page:

*Sparrow in London*, digital decals  
on ceramic tiles, 2014  
Mighty Sparrow, RA Island Series,  
Canada, vinyl LP cover, 1971

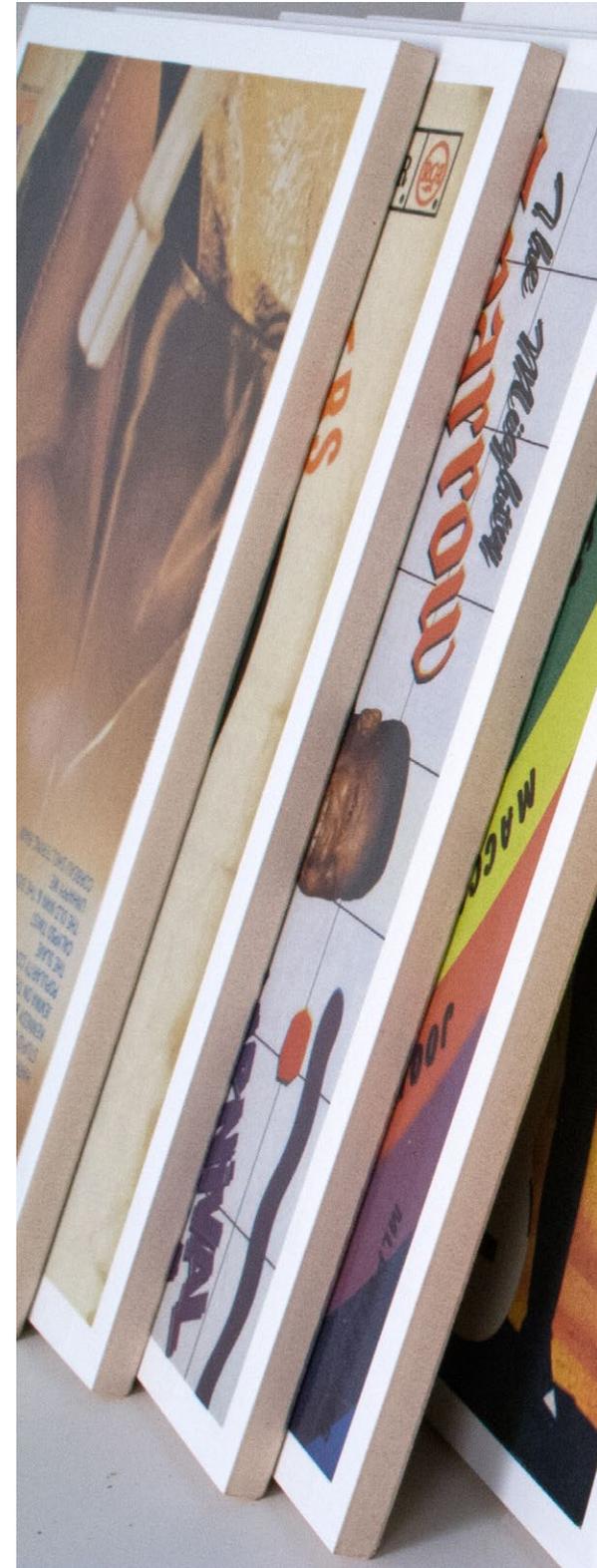
next pages:

Digital ceramic decals, ceramic tiles, **vinyl records**  
and installation view, *Sparrow Come  
Back Home*, DCCA, 2104

the lawsuit taken out by Lord Invader and Lionel Belasco whose *Rum and Coca Cola* was plagiarized by an American serviceman visiting Trinidad in 1943 and then covered without permission by the Andrews Sisters. Invader succeeded in suing for royalties of \$150,000 (close to \$1.5 million in today's equivalent). This was the first instance of commercial success and recognition for a calypso author's rights, although Invader had to concede his copyright in the process.

Typically in the pre-WWII period calypsos might use standard arrangements, repeating the music with varying lyrics. The emergence of ambitious younger singer-songwriters like Mighty Sparrow in the early 1950s is marked by several innovations. Musically ambitious and aware of their talents, they expect the financial rewards that are justified by the acclaim for their music. Instead of playing for small remuneration in the Carnival tents (where organizers would be making good money off their entertainment) they demand better compensation. They enact a protest by withdrawing from participation in Carnival events and begin to release solo LPs where previously the practice had been to release songs only as 7" singles or on compilation records. Both Lord Melody and Mighty Sparrow do this through RCA and Cook Records. These LPs are released in other West Indian islands (Barbados and Jamaica) as well as other countries including Canada, the U.S., and U.K. The lyrics become more inventive in adopting a wider use of colloquial English and Trinidadian slang, and cover a much broader range of topics informed by acute local observation. A new bawdiness is celebrated that would never have been considered appropriate before the 1950s.

Marking the emergence of the independence movement in Trinidad, this period shows singers explicitly supporting Dr. Eric Williams, the leading independence politician. Where calypso primarily criticized the colonial government, now it aligns itself with a party that it will largely continue to support once it is in power. This is another of the innovations that distinguishes the 50s generation of singers from their predecessors as they model a new role for calypsonians.





CARNIVAL



4188

The

S

E

U

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SPARKER BOW PARTY CLASSIC



MICK SPARKER



NLP 4199









## MIGHTY SPARROW'S CALYPSOS

“These are the true minor authors. An escape for language, for music, for writing. What we call pop-pop music, pop philosophy, pop writing—Wörterflucht. To make use of the polylingualism of one’s own language, to make a minor or intensive use of it, to oppose the oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality, to find points of non culture or under-development, linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape, an animal enters into things, an assemblage comes into play.”<sup>5</sup>

What can explain the quality of Mighty Sparrow’s music? What explains the stamina of his output—the steady flow of great songs in the first twenty-five years of his career? How do you account for the confidence of its melodic and lyrical inventiveness? What were the forces moving this level of musical productivity where a singer songwriter stays at the top of his game for so long? And how to account for a songwriting gamut from innuendo about Port of Spain Savannah prostitutes (*Race Track*, 1955) through political anthems for U.S. Civil Rights leaders—*Martin Luther King for President*, 1964—or denunciations of a Ugandan dictator—*Idi Amin*, 1976?

One way to grasp this range of approaches of Sparrow’s is offered by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of “minor literature,” which they develop to better understand the achievement of Franz Kafka, a Czech Jew living in Prague and writing in German, the language of oppressive administration. For Deleuze and Guattari the minor literature is always deterritorializing the language, is always political, and always represents a common voice. As they explain happens with Kafka, the calypsonian deterritorializes the colonizing language, in this case English, through carnivalesque vernacular reinvention, subverting its common usage and turning it back on the officials who rule by it. The minor literature of calypso speaks for the political potential of the community by performing this subversion in public, by inviting its audience to participate in

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<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, translated by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986): 26–27.



previous page:

*Jump for Jesse*, digital decals on ceramic tiles, 2014  
Mighty Sparrow, New Dove Productions, Brooklyn, vinyl LP cover, recorded Brooklyn, 1988

*Mighty Sparrow King of the Caribbean*, digital decals on ceramic tiles, 2014  
Mighty Sparrow, DJM Records, London, vinyl LP cover, recorded Port of Spain, Trinidad, 1965

opposite page:

*The Outcast*, digital decals on ceramic tiles, 2014  
Mighty Sparrow, National Recording Company, Port of Spain, vinyl LP cover, recorded Port of Spain, Trinidad, 1964

next page:

*Pussy Cat Party*, digital decals on ceramic tiles, 2014  
Mighty Sparrow, Charlie's Records, Brooklyn, vinyl LP cover, recorded Port of Spain, Trinidad, 1978

of a love-starved woman complaining to her partner Charlie who is always too sleepy for sex: "In the night I can't touch you/Yet you even vex when I watch you/But between food and sleep and the thing that I want, which more important?" Because of the limited privacy afforded by the narrow alleys and low-quality building materials of the poorer neighborhoods, these overheard conversations are realistic experiences. Likewise in *Mr. Herbert*, 1959, Sparrow describes the annoying experience, night after night, of overhearing a couple's lovemaking: "Gosh Mr. Herbert/Take your time Mr. Herbert/Not so hard Mr. Herbert/Oh Gosh, it nice Mr. Herbert."

There's the confidence Sparrow achieves from getting out of the yards, the rough neighborhoods in which he grew up in Port of Spain, while drawing on that experience for some of his finest calypsos. In the earliest songs (*Charlie*, *Mr. Herbert*, 1959) the humor is roguish, concerning opportunities for eavesdropping or voyeurism arising more from the lack of privacy than real maliciousness. *Maude*, 1959, concerns a character who flings her chamber pot's contents in front of Sparrow's door first thing in the morning, "Maude you mad/How could you throw this thing in me yard/You couldn't be right in your head/Because you went under you bed/Then you come out with you poe/And throw it in front me door." In the close confines of yard life there's no escaping neighbors' inconsiderate habits. *Carlton Peeping At Me*, 1959, tells of a mother constantly bothered by a peeping tom who has no trouble peering through the cracks of her thin-walled shack. "Carlton is a peeping tom. Carlton peeping at me/Wey he get this habit from. Carlton peeping at me/I come inside to rest, ah take off me shoes and me dress/But when ah peep through the jalousie who ah see, Carlton peeping at me." The song then segues into the routine recourse to violence that is a preoccupation of many of Sparrow's calypsos throughout the 1960s. In the end the woman recruits her two thuggish sons who are "Always beating people with iron and walking with gun" to throw pepper in Carlton's eyes and tell him to peep at his own mother from now on.

Also from 1959, *Gunslingers* comes directly out of the latent aggression of the yards as Sparrow tells of the hoodlums he mixed with growing up—"Sparrow selling guns nowadays, that's what really



pays/...Nearly every young man is a gun slinger/With his razor and his steel knuckle on his finger/Don't mind if they dress in suit and bow tie/All of them looking for guns to buy." The value of Sparrow's yard, or badjohn, calypsos as a critical commentary on progressive institutionalized educational efforts by the People's Education Movement has been explained by Rohlehr as an unexpected and unwelcome people's voice asserting the inevitable reality of street education over anything ameliorative that well-meaning authorities could devise: "Calypso texts uncover the distressing distance between Williams's efforts to create through education an enlightened and articulate modern national community, and the impermeable indifference to William's curriculum of the unmanageable rebels, outcasts, knife-and-razor technicians, gunslingers, and blood-and-sand gladiators in his constituency who have created their own cinematic lifestyles, counter-cultural mores, values, and modes of earning, granting respect, and self-recognition."<sup>6</sup>



The idea that the streets, yards, and shantytowns provide the only education that counts in the long term runs parallel to Sparrow's intermittent eulogies to the life-changing impact of conventional education. Rohlehr has explained elsewhere that "This other or outer world had alternative codes for living; calypso, with its rhetoric of celebration, praise, censure, lacerating laughter, and eloquent self-signification, was one of those codes."<sup>7</sup> So was the practice of pitched battles between supporters and bodyguard badjohns of the rival steelbands who would frequently attack each other's performances with knives and machetes, wounding players and destroying instruments.<sup>8</sup>

*Ten To One Is Murder!*, 1959, is a vibrant call and response song as if Sparrow is rallying the gang for a hostile outing: "Ten criminals attack me ah Miramar. Ten to one is murder!... Well the leader of the gang was hot like a pepper/And every man had a white-handle razor,/They say ah push they gal from Grenada." Using even more

raucous backing singing, another 1959 recording called *Don't Touch Me* lays down a fast percussive beat: "I does 'fraid to walk the street/ I don't know which gang I go meet/They have no understanding/ It's money or your life they demanding/So you give them money you ain't playing tough/They still bust your face because the money never 'nough." From the 1962 *Sparrow Come Back* LP is *Renegades* where Sparrow complains about a juvenile gang spreading ill will through the neighborhood: "They don't give a damn and they so far underage/They band like a blasted orphanage/The police should really interfere/They too young for this criminal career."

These yard songs culminate with two polarized tracks from the *Calypso Genius* LP of 1966. Set in Laventille, the part of Trinidad beset for decades by badjohn violence, *Shanty Town People* describes escalating harassment by a local gang who puts the narrator under a kind of house siege before one ultimate destructive act: "I can't live there and they won't allow me go/Whether morning noon or night they have a watchman in front me door/A short black one always bareback with dada head/I catch him passing through me window and he threaten to kill me dead/Well they break down me jalousie even though it nailed for me/They guarding me bedroom as if I in jail you see/They thief all me furniture and carry it to pawn/Set fire to me house and gone." Insofar as *Shanty Town People* is a song of victimization, *The Rebel* is its opposite, where Sparrow imagines an alternative life, empowered though no less bleak, for the long-suffering Laventille resident: "Once my schoolmaster told me/He wish police could hold me/When I was expelled I was left to roam/ Put out from school, put out from home/That's why I want to meet them badjohns on the street/To show them how revenge is sweet/I'm a rebel/I'm seeking my revenge in any way/ I'm a devil/I don't laugh, I don't smile, I don't play/Anytime we meet it's blood

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<sup>6</sup> Gordon Rohlehr, *Calypso, Education, and Community in Trinidad and Tobago: From the 1940s to 2011*, "Culture, Education, and Community: Expressions of the Postcolonial Imagination," ed. Jennifer M. Lavia and Sechaba Mahlomaholo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): 184.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon Rohlehr, *First Flight: Early Calypsos of the Mighty Sparrow*, (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Dalton Narine, *In the Mirror of Violence: The Bloody Art of Longtime Badjohns*, <http://www.panonthenet.com/news/2008/june/badjohns-6-29-08.htm>.



NLP5515

# TATTOOED LADY



NLP5515

*Cantado por*  
**EL SPARRITO**  
*El Rey del calypso*



TATTOOED LADY  
PAPA JACK  
EL RELOJ  
BIG BAMBOO  
JORDAN

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and sand." This kind of narrative confidence extends to the delight Sparrow takes in adopting different characters and the skill in drawing them, rather like someone devising sketches in a play. This is something Walcott notes in *The Spoiler's Return* as a Trinidadian idiosyncrasy—"all Port of Spain is a twelve-thirty show,/some playing Kojak, some Fidel Castro,/some Rastamen..."—and which is the approach Naipaul takes in fashioning his *Miguel Street* figures who, like the character Bogart mimicking the film actor, model themselves with fanciful notions of masculinity. The fact that it's tricky knowing the extent that Sparrow is parodying the behavior he depicts, is parodying inappropriate attitudes, or is objectively engaged in social observation does problematize the listener's role and complicate, in a provocative way, the impact and meaning of the songs. Notions of women's pleasure notwithstanding, it's with many of Sparrow's songs of sexual conquest that this predicament of the listener is most challenging. What should we make of *The Village Ram*, 1964, which seems to sanction roughshod sexual assaults on

women? "Don't try to escape/When I put you in the clinch/Don't care how you bite and pinch/And I got me hand on your mouth/The way I does lock your neck, you can't shout." If we take this Trinidadian Don Juan as one of Sparrow's assumed roles embodying all the satire such masquerading might afford, this is likely to oversimplify the song's reach. Is it more appropriate to accept shifting positions including the parody of a West Indian masculine stereotype, Sparrow's own lasciviousness, and a compromising identification with the protagonist himself, generating an unconventional polysemy that causes the listener's understanding to be more profound for involving pleasure, reflection, and confusion?

That Sparrow isn't consistent in this masculine assertiveness tends to support the idea of an enacted masquerade of machismo. There's the story of flight from the ardent Stella and the touching, if somewhat conventional romancing of *Maria*, 1959, and *Gloria*, 1960. Even ribald songs like *The Puddin'*, 1959, reveal a real affection, born of sexual attraction, but mutually considerate nonetheless: "They don't know why I love her so/...They find that the woman too damn ugly/The taste of the pudding is in the eating/.../Don't mind she look like a smoke herring/She really got the pudding." There's a similar warmth to *Veronica*, 1959, where the story of risky lovemaking continued up to the minute that the cuckolded husband returns, "Oh Lord it's too late/Ah go shut the gate/I know you want more/And I want more too/But we only have fifteen minutes/How much we could do?" suggests a certain tenderness between the lovers. Likewise *Move Your Hand*, 1960, narrating the equivocal responses by a woman to Sparrow's overtures on a bus, conveys the circumspection that tempers any eventual surrender: "Then she started pinching me/I thought I was pinching she/So I turn and say 'sorry'/For you darling, please forgive me/She call me a damn disgrace/Dis is not the time an' place." Achieving just the same mix of guardedness and acquiescence is *Behave Yourself*, 1961, with its surprising backing vocal chorus of a descending scale: "Behave yourself Sparrow, boy it getting late/Behave yourself Sparrow, well alright wait/Turn out the light darling, it shining too bright/O.K. doo-doo, I go gie you, all right don't fight."



## 1126 SPARROW IN HI-FI 1126

The artistry of the Mighty Sparrow is an established fact . . . . But the real breadth of his talent is seldom encompassed and presented as it is on this L/P which captures all the vitality and inimitable inventiveness of Sparrow at his best.

Slinger Francisco is a prolific composer and, quite naturally, perhaps, the quality of his work varies from near genius to merely good. (After all, the man who established the "new sound" in calypso, is only human). But the inconsistency of some of his L/Ps has not done him the credit he deserves, and the blame for this must be placed squarely on the shoulders of those responsible, and not with the artist himself.

The influence of rock-and-roll on Trinidad and Sparrow in particular reached its peak about the time when Sparrow had his fling at fighting with a gun instead of with songs. "The Gun Slingers" (opening Side A) stems from this moment, and is an enormously popular calypso in the West Indies.

The three rock-and-rolls recorded here give an inside glimpse of the Caribbean. It was not composed, sung or recorded for the states but for them.

### SPARROW IN HI-FI

#### SIDE A.

The Gun Slingers (Calypso)  
Carlton Peeping at Me (Calypso)  
Mr. Herbert (Calypso)  
Mango Verr (Calypso)  
Jean Marraunta (Calypso)

#### SIDE B.

Harry In The Piggery (Calypso)  
I Love You So (Rock & Roll)  
I Should Have Told You (Rock & Roll)  
Can't You See You've Meant For Me (Rock & Roll)  
You're Mine

All tunes composed and sung by THE MIGHTY SPARROW accompanied by Sparrow and the boys  
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KING SPARROW'S CALYPSO IN HI-FI — COOK 33 1/3 L.P. — 1126

KING SPARROW'S CALYPSO IN HI-FI — COOK 33 1/3 L.P. — 1126



## 920 KING SPARROW'S CALYPSO CARNIVAL 920

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"Calypso Carnival", however, is a well-balanced L/P. The quality of the material is consistently good and its presentation is very pleasing.

At least six of the tracks contain what can aptly be described as "Sparrow Standards": "Teresa", "Short Little Shorts", "PAYE" (on the A side) and "No More Rocking", "Russian Satellite", and "Postcard to Sparrow" (on the flip side).

### CALYPSO CARNIVAL

#### SIDE A.

1. Teresa  
2. Reply to Melody  
3. Mad Bomber  
4. Short Little Shorts  
5. Eve  
6. Paye

#### SIDE B.

1. No more Rocking and Rolling  
2. Country Girl  
3. Russian Satellite  
4. Stella  
5. Dorothy  
6. Postcard to Sparrow

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KING SPARROW'S CALYPSO CARNIVAL — COOK 33 1/3 L.P. — 920

previous page:

*Tattooed Lady*, digital decals on ceramic tiles, 2014

Mighty Sparrow, National Recording Company, Port of Spain, vinyl LP cover, recorded Port of Spain, Trinidad, 1966

opposite page:

*The Slave*, digital decals on ceramic tiles, 2014

Mighty Sparrow, National Recording Company, Port of Spain, vinyl LP cover, recorded Port of Spain, Trinidad, 1962

*King Sparrow's Calypso Carnival*, digital decals on ceramic tiles, 2014  
Mighty Sparrow, Cook Caribbean Limited, Port of Spain, vinyl LP cover, recorded Port of Spain, Trinidad, 1959

next page:

installation views, *Sparrow Come Back Home*, DCCA, 2104

With songs like *Lulu* and *Monica Dou Dou*, both from 1959, there is a shift towards the lubricious without, however, losing musical delicacy as they humorously recount the practicalities of managing love and lust. The first instance, an interesting example of a reflexive song with an ironic turn, tells of Lulu's resistance to the singer's advances out of fear of becoming the subject of one of his calypsos. In the second, Sparrow's seductive voice manages subtle phrasing and unexpected musicality from an uncomplicated melody, sometimes running single words across several notes. There is a strong brass introduction that belies the general softness of the song with its shuffling rhythm, light brushing of the snare drum, and double bass marking the beat. With an unusually exquisite voice he is wooing Monica ("Moni, Monica") with sympathy for her plight, left alone for long spells by her partner and having to turn tricks with sailors for extra cash: "This mister does leave me here alone, for weeks he don't come home," where that "alone" is stretched poignantly across a rising scale of three notes, Louis Prima style, but without the usual self-mocking manner of the latter's songs.

Yet none of the above calypsos has quite the crudeness (what the Trinidadians call "smuttiness") of many other Sparrow recordings. There is a case for saying that Sparrow broke through to a new level of lewdness redeemed only by the quality of his musicality and the humor of his lyrics. In *Elaine and Harry*, 1962, a young wife is complaining to her mother of the husband's sexual demands: "The mother say well, well, well, girl I envy you/I wish that your daddy would do what Harry does do/I'd be happy to feed him whether he beg me or not/And if I'm sleeping he could help himself from the pot." This tendency towards explicitly libidinal lyrics, only slightly masked by *double entendre*, certainly increases through the 60s and 70s. Obviously this content is expected by fans, but its sustained surge must indicate a proclivity for bawdiness on Sparrow's part. A selection of all that is out there would include *Castro Eating Banana*, 1964, which tells of children discovering their father Sparrow's pornographic images; the famous *Congo Man*, 1965, which relishes oral sex between a black man and white woman under the guise of



cannibalism; *Bois Bande*, from the wonderful 1967 LP *Spicy Sparrow*, acclaims the tree bark stimulant for increasing male potency; the bizarre *One Hand Man*, which sings of an amputee's sexual value for women, is from the very fine 1968 album *Sparrow Calypso Carnival*; *The Lizard*, *Pussy Cat*, and *Bang-Bang Lulu*, all 1969, may be self-explanatory; and *Sixty-Million Frenchmen*, in 1969, praises cunnilingus. Then in 1970 come *Pussy Laughing at Me*, *Spider*, and *Pogo Stick*; *Big Bamboo* and *Sell the Pussy* in 1971; *Miss Ruby*, *More Cock* in 1972, with *Pussy Quarrelling* and *Leggo Me Stick* in 1973; *Sol Fish* in 1976; then in 1978 Sparrow reprises the title *Pussy Cat* with an entirely new song (same *double entendre*) on the otherwise remarkable *Pussy Cat Party* LP. You would have to say that Chalkdust's refusal in 1976 to sing smutty calypsos is getting through to Sparrow whose salaciousness has started to wane by then: "The rich laughing, the poor starving/It's near famine,

prices soaring, no food in my pot/And you want me to sing about smut/I'd rather rot."<sup>9</sup>

If such "smut" can indeed be redeemed in Sparrow's oeuvre by humor and musicality there are a few winners. There's little question here about *Bang Bang Lulu* which is hilarious in sophomoric fashion and rolls along at a cracking pace. There are other good tunes—*Congo Man*, *Bois Bande*, *Sixty-Million Frenchmen*, *Sell the Pussy* and *The Lizard* among them—but on the whole, although these are not Sparrow's most musically inventive songs, it's hard to imagine his career without them.

In this sense Sparrow's more serious political calypsos sit comfortably enough alongside the carnal humorous songs on almost all of his LPs. They are inseparable parts of his world view and of the figure

of the calypsonian that he reinvented from the 1950s onward. On the rare occasion, like the version of *Jack Palance* that criticizes the American occupation, they intersect with great effectiveness: “When a Yankee drunk he don’t study age/I tell you, whether you are 24, 25, or 80, I am sure it will not interest a drunken Yankee/For when you drink your scotch and soda it doesn’t matter how old she is as long as the Yankee get what is his.”

As the leading candidate and party of the independence movement in 1950s Trinidad, Dr. Eric Williams and the PNM, the People’s National Movement, attracted the support of ambitious young calypsonians like Sparrow. As the PNM gained power this entailed an unusual reversal for calypso singers whose traditional role as critics of authority become unmoored with this new alignment to a party they would largely continue to support once it was fully in power after independence in 1962. This complicates calypso’s role as social satirist and political conscience. *William the Conqueror*, from 1957, cleverly manages to elevate Williams through the ironic insertion of a musical refrain from Rule Britannia, the archetypal rousing manifestation of Empire: “Praise little Eric, rejoice and be glad/We have a better future here in Trinidad/PNM, it ain’t got nobody like them/For they have a champion leader;/ William the Conqueror.”

Songs like *P.A.Y.E.*, from 1958, and *Leave the Damn Doctor*, from 1959, are rallying cries for the PNM. *Present Government*, from 1961, even blames the lack of infrastructural improvements on everyone but Williams himself: “Come on, what is wrong with this island?/Poor Dr. William/ Everybody doing what they like/Striking when they want to strike/It appears that nobody care ’bout the island economy/I tell you no gas today, no phone tomorrow/ What next I don’t know/No grave digging, no rubbish cleaning/ Only corbeau walking/The island you can see suffering politically/ Because the present government has some stupid opponent/Oh

Lord man, they ignorant.” Only in 1965 with *Solomon Out* does Sparrow start to openly criticize Williams’ policies, in this case the reinstatement of a disgraced government minister. It’s possible to see the yard songs with their continuing lament at the inveteracy of local violence as an implicit criticism of the failures of the PNM to provide social services and education that would realistically enable the poor to design a way out of shantytown. However, from the mid-60s onward, the dearth of calypsos from Sparrow dealing with local politics may be a result of his relocation to Brooklyn as much as revealing a disenchantment with the PNM.

It’s likely that his move to New York encouraged Sparrow’s interest in American politics resulting in some of his most memorable songs. There are two calypsos about Martin Luther King. The 1964 one recommends King for president: “I was born in the U.S.A./But because of my color I’m suffering today/...The white man preaching democracy/But in truth and in fact it’s hypocrisy/...So we want Martin Luther King for president/Tell the north, I go tell the south, mama...” There is one on John F. Kennedy’s handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis and another on his death. Much later in 1991 Sparrow sings *Crown Heights Justice* addressing the riots in Brooklyn: “Blacks and Jews should live as one/And celebrate/Here life is great/No swastika/No slave master/Instead of that is endless fight/Where we live here in Crown Heights...”

The oscillation between an engaged commentary and good-time partying has invariably marked Sparrow’s singing, sometimes even within the same calypso. The exceptional *Martin Luther King for President* moves from a slow lament to a riotous, danceable call to arms and back again, as if a church meeting converts to a club in mid-song. Much of Sparrow’s finest work was written about, or recorded in, locations outside of the West Indies, particularly in North America. This occurs some years after Naipaul’s deprecating account of Trinidadian racial politics and the islanders’ attempts at

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<sup>9</sup> Chalkdust, lyrics from *No Smut For Me*, from the 1976 LP *Ah Put On Me Guns Again*.

Americanization in his 1962 book *The Middle Passage*. At that time Naipaul claimed that West Indian writers, in thrall to their race and color groups, failed to represent their own people objectively. He revisits the West Indies as if to validate his pessimism about the place. He shows a grim insightfulness while taking every opportunity to confirm his prejudices about the islanders, their history and culture. In one surprising concession he describes calypso as the only instance where Trinidadian realities are made visible, yet even then he is quick to condemn the music as too idiosyncratic to have any meaning for the outside world: "The calypso is a purely local form. No song composed outside Trinidad is a calypso. The calypso deals with local incidents, local attitudes, and it does so in a local language. The pure calypso, the best calypso, is incomprehensible to the outsider."<sup>10</sup>

In a few years this would be disproved by the increasing internationalization of calypsos of Sparrow, Melody, and Lord Kitchener. If Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "minor literature" affords a way of understanding the subversion and force of calypso then it also shows how such use of local language opens an exit route from insularity to where it becomes meaningful far beyond its locality. In retrospect we can see that this applies particularly to the early calypso of Sparrow, Spoiler, and their contemporaries whose records Naipaul knew only too well.

With thanks to Urs Berger, Graham Johnstone, Andy Stillpass, Dmitri Subotsky, and John Thieme for their support along the way.

<sup>10</sup> V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*, quoted by John Thieme, *Calypso Allusions in Naipaul's Miguel Street*, *ibid*, p19.

images on front and back of book:

*Sparrow Come Back*, digital decals on ceramic tiles, 2014

Mighty Sparrow, RCA, Trinidad, vinyl LP cover, recorded Port of Spain, Trinidad, 1962

images on inside front and back covers:

unglazed reverse of ceramic tiles used in the installation