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A Mailman to make Government Understand: The Calypsonian (Chalkdust) as Political Opposition in the Caribbean

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Introduction

Caribbean popular music has served multiple functions. First, it has served as collective memory. In this regard, it has been both a chronicle of the past and reconstruction of that past. The constant reference to slavery in the music is a reconstruction—reliving the past as a lesson for the present and the future. The music reconstructs slavery and colonialism as sources of African fortitude and chronicles the everyday lived experience of the peoples of the region and their interaction with the record of the past then becomes a large part of the region's collective memory observes:

As an integral part of the institutional memory of the Caribbean region, an invaluable medium for maintaining a critical perspective on society contributions and controversies alive for future generations to learn from and ultimately, even revise. Finally when the memory becomes susceptible to distance and the imagination, music is one of the “sign-posts” that allow us to reconstruct our past out of the splintered recollections in the recesses of our minds and bodies. [\[1\]](#)

Going hand in hand with the role of collective memory, Caribbean music also functions as a function of affirmation of identity, a critical role given the erasure of the African past that occurred during the period of enslavement and colonialism. The music then becomes an important tool in the quest for reclaiming history and identity. Finally, Caribbean music has been a form of resistance against racial, class, and imperialist domination. By highlighting the various forms of inequality and oppression the music becomes a form of resistance that rebukes the oppressor in what Black Stalin calls “resistance language”.

This paper presents the calypso and the calypsonian in this context. It treats the calypsonian not just as a mirror of society but, more importantly, as an advocate of social and political change. In the calypsonian, the music maker, is portrayed as an agent of resistance, affirmation, and education who assumes the role of the wise man or woman messenger. This messenger teaches, defends, affirms, reports, interprets, attacks, scolds, and condemns. The calypsonian's creativity, then, is inextricably linked to the lived realities of the marginalized and the quest for self-definition and freedom.

Pratt (1990) locates music in a larger socio-political context that may or may not be the conscious intent of the artist. He privileges this political function of music, which he calls “political behavior” and which according to him “arises out of the unique aesthetic sensibility of the people seemingly to create a kind of spontaneous collective identity or facilitate the release of the people’s psychological energies.” [\[2\]](#) Echoing the relationship between community and music, Mattern observes that “music provides a form of communication through which the commonalities of community are created and discovered.” [\[3\]](#) He argues that African music “serves as a record of a civilization or community” and as historical and cultural memory. Turning his attention to “political” or “protest” music he locates it within the context of the class struggle or the struggle between the dominant groups and the dominated. He observes: “typically the intent of protest musicians is to oppose the exploitation and oppression exercised by dominant elites and members of dominant groups.” [\[4\]](#) The music then becomes part of the larger cultural and political resistance out of which notions of self and identity emerge.

This socio-political role of music is especially applicable to African diasporan music.

which have had to confront varying forms of subjugation from slavery through neo-colonialism. Central to the slave experience was the erasure of culture and dehumanization of the enslaved. Logically, then, the preservation of culture had to be the resistance against this dehumanization. In this regard, black culture, in particular music, is rooted in this resistance against inhumanity and the quest for humanity arises out of the social struggle and records, defines and mobilizes for it.

Rex Nettleford describes Caribbean popular music as the “raw stuff of protest” beyond fulfilling the universal need for entertainment to attract acute interest and significance for Jamaican and Caribbean cultural search for form and purpose. Manley captures this sentiment in the following quote:

Through it all, music was one of the means through which the slave held on to the past and endured the present. Any discussion of the blues, the calypso, or reggae begins at this point. Like all folk music, it is all essentially communal, but what is unique about this commentary is it reflects in every thought, in every musical pulse, something to do with survival and accommodation. The struggle of the diaspora struggle for a place in society to this day. Worse, they struggle to maintain their identities, mislaid as the slave ships made their way to the New World through the middle passage. Therefore, their commentaries must deal with these realities.

Chalkdust (1986) and Warner (1985) also identify the role of historical memory and reference to the calypso. They observe that the political history of most Caribbean nations can be traced through the calypso. According to a former Chief Minister of Trinidad, Albert Gomes, “Long after most of us are forgotten, certain calypsos will survive as reminders to some later generation of how we loved, labored and sinned.” [7]

The Political Calypso

Saunders et al identifies the overt political role of the calypsonian as central to the politics of the Caribbean.

Not only has calypso served as an unofficial record of historical figures and events, it emerged as a cultural weapon that yielded tremendous sway within the ears of the audiences of the region. Political leaders, from the colonial period through independence and the newly globalized Caribbean nation states, fear the power of popular culture for conveying and transforming the sentiments of Caribbean politics at an (inter) national level. [8]

Rohlehr also captures the convergence of politics and the calypso within the larger popular culture:

The calypsonian, master and keeper of all verbal codes within popular culture, has assumed the role of decoder and un-masker of the new sloganeering codes and masks that each regime of political chantwells has ambiguously employed to inspire society with notions of a desired ideal, and to conceal the distressing truth of our lived reality. [9]

Rohlehr (2001) identifies seven major functions of the calypso: worship, battle, celebration, social control, praise and popular narration. Although the word “calypso” was not used until the early nineteenth century, the musical form was evident more than a century before. As Rohlehr argues above, despite the many ethno-cultural influences cited, it is generally agreed that the roots of calypso can be traced to the West African music brought to the Caribbean by the enslaved Africans (Rohlehr 1990, Mason 1998). Rohlehr acknowledges the West African roots are manifested in the traditional calypso response and satire, but he contends that there were other influences along the way. The best definition of the calypso comes from Rohlehr, arguably, the leading scholar on calypso music. According to him: “It is related to all Black diaspora music, regardless of its origin, and carries with them traditional African functions of affirmation, celebration, praise, protest, blame, conflict of all varieties.” [10]

Rohlehr contends that the function of social control “is a way of drawing lines around a certain type of behavior either of the average clansman or the ruler himself, hence defining socially permissible bounds.” [11] The calypsonian then is the critic of the state, in particular those at the top who are charged with navigating the ship of state. [12] Rohlehr brings the calypsonian performer-critic directly into the political sphere as the guardian of political morality and justice. The critic becomes the symbol of political resistance and affirmation by speaking out on behalf of the aggrieved majority, chastising the powerful and articulating new forms of political morality and justice. Rohlehr locates this role in African society and culture: “in many African societies, the singer, the storyteller, the poet, the man of words is privileged to criticize social foibles.” He observes that this is often carried out with the help of “masking” in which the criticism is done “through the use of words, imagery, proverbs, fables and so on.” [12] Masking has proven to be a powerful tool in the face of government censorship of the right to free speech by both colonial and post-colonial governments.

The second function which is applicable to the political calypsonian is the praise song, which according to Rohlehr acknowledges the accomplishments of the hero and

society. He asserts that while the social control songs are the “vehicles of the praise songs “celebrate the achievement of the hero, however the hero is defined. He observes that a particular leader is sometimes the object of both social control. The third function of the political calypsonian is what Rohlehr refers to as “political reporting.” Here the calypsonian functions as a reporter and interpreter of events; the singer as a reporter and editor. Rohlehr says this type of calypso “comments on interesting events and their place in the community or society” and he depicts the calypsonian as a “narrator.”

Warner identifies the political calypsonian as one “that monitors what is happening and uses the platform of the calypso to expose his listeners a point of view that is personal one, but more often than not is indicative of what the man in the street has to say about a particular situation.” [15] LaRose refers to the political calypso as music that has the kaiso of defiance: a certain kind of defiance, a marching and warrior type of music, the kaiso.” [16]

Calypsonians have also weighed in on the socio-political function of the calypso. In “Calypso” (1968), the Mighty Duke, who won the prestigious calypso monarchy of Tobago a record four consecutive years, calls it “editorial in song” which comes from deep within.” He elevates it beyond simply “a work of art” to a music that reflects “the life we are living.”

I am sure you don't know what calypso is
The words that we rhyme and sing
Is only half the thing
I could tell you that
Calypso is more than a work of art
It is a feeling which comes from deep within.
A tale of joy or one of suffering
An editorial of the life we living.

Black Stalin, another celebrated political calypsonian, locates the calypso in the context of the Caribbean experience and sees its primary function as one of resistance. For him, it is “resistance language”; and a “way of life.” Like Duke, he sees the calypso as more than just music: “You’ve got to understand, kaiso is more than just a music that’s passed on, it’s a whole way of life. We could do whatever we want and we still can’t get away from it.” David Rudder in his “Calypso Music” (1987) also characterizes the music as something that comes from “deep within.” Invoking Rohlehr’s “social control” function,” he highlights the connection between the lyrics and the behavior of the politician.

It is a living vibration
Rooted deep within my Caribbean belly
Lyrics to make a politician cringe
Or turn a woman's body into jelly
It is a sweet soca music, calypso
You coulda never refuse it, calypso
It make you shake like a shango now, calypso
Why it is you shaking, you don't know, calypso.

Brother Valentino shares both Rudder's characterization and Black Stalin's un- of the calypso. But he identifies another role—the role of the music in shaping or what he calls “the lifeblood of the people”:

The calypso was always the most dominating factor, because it related to people's lifestyle better than any of the other music. It was your lifestyle reflection of a people's lifestyle... Calypso is a thing that could make people love you or it could make people love you. It could make people cry, it could make people laugh, and it could make a politician cringe according to David [

Continuing with the larger role of the music beyond the dancehall, Chalkdust is a medium of national unity and a tool of education.

Born in struggle, born out of protest, today the calypso is the medium through which many groups, ethnic and otherwise, are being united. Today the calypso has become a powerful educational resource used in schools by many teachers from primary to university level, not only to make the lessons more interesting but to motivate children to learn, and to make them better understand our social, economic and political development. [19]

The Rise of Authoritarian Governance in the Caribbean

Independence came to the Caribbean courtesy of a nationalist movement that had a broad consensus among the various segments of the colonized peoples. However, the nationalist fervor would soon unravel as the new post-colonial rulers began to move away from the overriding principles of the independence movement. Bouges contends that “the moment of independence was also a moment of re-colonialism. Bouges calls it “the double transformation of colonialism into post colonialism and neo-colonialism.” [21]

This movement away from the independence ideals converged with the coming generation of Caribbean scholars. Radicalized by the independence movement, a new kind of education these scholars were asking questions about the content of independence. They rejected the independence leaders' gradualist approach that invariably catered to the imperatives of the former colonizers and advocated a break with colonialism and the institution of a political economy that reflected political independence. In short, therefore, the question was whether independence meant reform of the colonial order or freedom from its clutches. This standoff proved to be a second independence struggle that began with the Black Power movement that engendered a radical leftist upsurge in the 1970s. If the earlier independence movement was fueled by the need to get rid of colonial rule, this new movement focused on turning the rights won at independence into real freedoms.

The Black Power movement began with the Rodney incident of October 1968, when the Jamaican government's decision to ban Walter Rodney, a Guyanese scholar, from re-entering the country. This action precipitated a local reaction which inspired a movement across the region that would have a decisive impact on the political scene of the decade. The "Rodney Riots" were followed in 1970 by the "February Revolution" in Guyana where Black Power demonstrations brought the government to its knees. The movement inspired a cultural renaissance among the African descended peoples that was a flush of African pride and interest in their African heritage. Second, it ignited a revolutionary spirit that would serve as the basis for the broad radical movement that pushed for revolutionary action. Third, it inspired a new Caribbean nationalism among the peoples on a shared history and the unity of the ethnic groups.

At the political level the influence of Black Power radicalism engendered a similar autocratic governance. Fearing the spread of radicalism to their countries, most governments took a confrontational attitude to the movement. They passed laws to suppress dissent and in the process trampling on civil liberties such as freedom of speech and freedom of association. Radical leaders were routinely harassed and persecuted. Some cases were assassinated. [\[22\]](#)

The particular politics of Trinidad and Tobago

The political calypso from Trinidad and Tobago cannot be divorced from the social evolution of the country. Trinidad and Tobago gained independence from British colonial rule as part of a decolonization wave that started at the end of the Second World War. People of African slaves and Indian indentured laborers, the country is demographically similar to the other islands. Independence was attained in 1962 under the leadership of the People's National Movement (PNM) of renowned scholar, Dr. Eric Williams.

Trinidad and Tobago is a union of two islands—Trinidad is the larger partner smaller—with a population of close to two million. Unlike most Caribbean countries, the population is divided evenly between Africans and East Indians, the latter Caribbean servants at the end of slavery in the 1830's. As a result of this ethnic makeup the politics is determined by ethnic consideration with each group having its own economic sphere. Indians dominate the commercial sector along with the small group and the agriculture sector, while Africans dominate the armed forces and other sectors. The PNM held power for thirty years beginning in 1956 when the country gained independence from Britain. The PNM held power for such a long period largely due to the government's use of state resources as a trade-off for votes but also because it won the support of a Muslim faction of the East Indian community. Since 1986 the government has been shared between the PNM, the Indian-led UNC and the multiracial NAR.

The early PNM government opted for a politics of accommodation with the result being a serious transformation of the society. The first decade saw very little change in the circumstance of the poor. This made the government a target for the radical Black Power Movement that swept the Caribbean in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Black Power demonstrations and mutiny in the army led to the "February Revolution" in 1978 which almost overthrew the government. While the government granted some of the demands of the movement, the revolution was followed by an authoritarian form of government. The government passed draconian laws aimed at stamping out dissent. The PNM remained in power partly because the rise in oil prices in the 1970s brought an unprecedented amount of money to the country. The government embarked on a program to tackle structural unemployment and poverty but these invariably became the victims of partisan corruption as PNM supporters were favored.

Because of its oil resources Trinidad and Tobago fared better than its Caribbean neighbors since the industry was dominated by foreign companies, the gains did not translate into sustained development. Despite efforts by the government to control part of the oil revenue and link it to other sectors of the economy, the end result was the continued dependence of the country. By the turn of the 1980s oil production had begun to decrease leading the government to cut back on many of the welfare programs it had instituted. In addition, the death of the party leader Eric Williams in 1981 had a negative effect on the country he ruled for 20 years with a firm grip. His death left a gaping hole in the political landscape. Eric George Chambers, led the party to victory in the 1981 election, but as the economy declined he was portrayed as a weak and uninspiring leader.

Not surprisingly the PNM lost the next election in 1986, by a wide margin. The newly formed National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR), which was an alliance of various parties and individuals. Significantly the alliance included the East Indian led United Labour Front (ULF) which was the latest version of the Indian party. The party however

Robinson, a one time deputy leader of the PNM. The NAR's term coincided with the decline of the economy forcing the government to approach the IMF, which required structural adjustment, including removal of government subsidies, cut in government spending, devaluation of the currency, relaxation of tariffs and increase in private enterprise. The cumulative effect on the working people was devastating. In addition the NAR suffered an internal rift between the Indian and African factions, with the former charging the Prime Minister with high handed governance. The party eventually split in 1988 when a faction led by Basdeo Panday left.

As was expected the NAR was ousted at the next election and the PNM regained power under a new leader Patrick Manning. The Manning government benefited from some economic reforms initiated by the PNM, but like previous leaders the Prime Minister was criticized for authoritarianism. Thus after serving one term the PNM was replaced by the United National Congress. The UNC owed its victory to the actions of the Tobago based Democratic Action Congress (DAC) led by ANR Robinson, which joined an alliance with the PNM. It was a 17-17 tie in Trinidad. Robinson soon became President, a prestigious but largely ceremonial position. The UNC victory was historic, in that it marked the first time an Indian-led government had come to power. Almost immediately African activists charged the government with marginalizing Africans, the same charges Indians had leveled against African-led governments. Another charge leveled against the government was that it was a puppet government.

The next election held in 2000 resulted in another tie, this time the tie included the PNM and the UNC. It was left to the President, ANR Robinson to once again make a choice, this time in a different capacity. This time he chose to ask the PNM to form the government. The UNC government had to function without a parliament as the UNC refused to cooperate with the PNM speaker as a prerequisite for the parliament to convene. Thus, when the budget was not passed after a year the government had no choice but to call elections which were won by the PNM. This time the economy had rebounded, thanks to the discovery of more oil and gas. The issue, therefore, is no longer stewardship of the economy, but ethnicity. Since coming to power the PNM has gone after UNC for corruption during its tenure. In the past several UNC functionaries have been prosecuted and found guilty including former Prime Minister Basdeo Panday. Despite the relative health of the economy, Trinidad has become a hotbed of drug trade, which has spurred increased crime, violence, and kidnapping.

True Opposition

For Warner, Chalkdust is the quintessential political calypsonian who saw his role as being that of the people's spokesperson." [23] Comparing him to the Mighty Sparrow, the most outspoken political calypsonian of the previous decade, he observes

He would call names and point an accusing finger in a way Sparrow has and his treatment of pieces of PNM party and society gossip has made eagerly awaited and listened to every year. His melodies are not as catchy as Sparrow's but the public willingly forgives a weak melody for social and political content.

Chalkdust's critique of the status quo, unlike Sparrow's, went beyond anti-autocracy to include Black Nationalism, Caribbean Nationalism and social justice. In this regard, he correctly links his emergence to the Black Power movement and portrays him as a critic of the government." [24] Rohlehr (2001a) also locates Chalkdust among those calypsonians who "functioned as monitors of political discourse and behavior."

Chalkdust belongs to the Black Power wave of political calypsonians in Trinidad which includes others such as Black Stalin, Duke, Valentino and Maestro. War and these calypsonians as a "new generation, or rather a new spirit of social and political commentators—still in the traditional mold, but with a renewed sense of purpose." Rohlehr says that these calypsonians "have sought to give the Africans in Trinidad and Tobago a reward." He continues:

Where before, the calypsonians laughed divisively at African cultural traits, especially African forms of religions like the Pocomania, Shango, Vodun and Baptists... today he sings in praise of such African traits, giving the traitors themselves a new and acceptable sense of values. [26]

Chalkdust's career literally was born amidst controversy over the limits of the freedom of speech. The independence government, like the colonial government, viewed the political calypsonian with suspicion. Attempts at state censorship by the calypsonians' determination to maintain their traditional role of speaking the downtrodden and according to Rohlehr, to expand "the space within which might be given fair play." Chalkdust's criticism in song of the then Prime Minister with Trinidadians, who left for foreign countries, led to the invocation of a colonial law prohibiting public servants commenting on politics and from holding more than one office. Chalkdust fought back in song—"Reply to the Ministry" (1969) and "The Letter to the Minister" (1969). The process forced the government to retreat. For Rohlehr this episode represents a moment in the struggle for freedom of speech: "Chalkdust's great contribution to freedom in Trinidad and Tobago lies in the fact that he challenged the minister and the malignant state machine." [27]

Chalkdust views his role primarily as the defender of the voiceless and monitor

quo. The latter role is captured in several of his calypsos including “Letter to George Wechsler” (1976), “Chalkie the Mail Man” (2006) “The Tent is it” (2001) and “They put me down” (2003). “The Unwritten Law” (2003). “Letter to George Weeks,” which advises labor leader George Weeks, to leave politics and enter the calypso ring, is a commentary on the political role of the calypsonian: “educate the populace/ show them the problem that we face.” He speaks about the calypso in keeping the government on its toes and about his own duel with Eric Williams.

If you want Eric to go
Hit him where it hurts for so
Walk slow
And George come and sing calypso
To knock him out
Hit below
Like me and Valentino
Punch slow
And Georgie come and sing calypso

In “Chalkie the Mailman” he casts himself as the link between the people and the government. The assumption is that the government is out of touch with the feelings of the people do not have mediums through which they can channel their concerns.

My role as a calypsonian
Is a mailman
To make government understand
How the people thinking
And all what they saying
Bout all them things whey happening

Rohlehr has observed that the calypso tent where the calypsonians ply their trade during carnival season has evolved into “a sort of popular equivalent to parliament” a “public space” largely as a result of the tenacity of the calypsonians’ in defense of their right of expression.^[28] In “The Tent is It” (2000) Chalkdust invokes both Rohlehr’s image of parliament and Valentino’s “True Opposition” (2001) in which the calypsonian is the only viable opposition to the government. If he [Chalkdust] stands on the other side of the racial fence, in this calypso he stands on the side of the poor. He elevates the role of the calypsonian to the status of a major political actor—as representatives of the social conscience. The calypso is also an indirect criticism of the elite nature of government and the post-colonial Caribbean and the concomitant marginalized of the poor.

I am for PPP
The Poor People's Party
Is them I represent
And the Kaiso tent
Is my parliament

For Chalkdust the representative of the poor should avoid conventional political parties; he/she should not favor one party over the other. The inference here is that in their rhetoric, there is no difference among them. Even the National Joint Action Committee (NJAC), the Black Power party, is not an option for him. Since he has expressed his discomfort with the NJAC in the past, one must assume that his discomfort is with the NJAC that dominated electoral politics in the 1980s. He elaborates on this theme in "Too Much Party." The political parties, then, has not been an option for Chalkdust. He sees them use people as "mats." He also would not be bought by promises of material wealth by politicians who he does not equate with fairness or justice.

I am no door mat
For them Red House Rats

Car, house and loot
I don't give a hoot
I prefer truth
And men of repute
I am for fairness

And justice
I am for people
Black, White or Purple

Chalkdust vs. Eric Williams and the Government

This government highhandedness naturally found its way into the calypsos. So the calypsonians on the subject, Brother Valentino dubbed them "the true opposition." Generally, the calypsos tended to fall into two broad categories—exposure and criticism. The former highlighted scandals such as government corruption and conflicts of interest; the latter often took the government to task for these and other transgressions.

Chalkdust music/lyrics emerged as a consistent critic of government highhandedness, betrayal of its nationalist obligations and its neglect of the poor and the powerless. This pronged approach meant that Chalkdust was simultaneously exposing the go-

the story of the oppressed and advocating a new nationalism. It also meant the government “cornered” at all times. His view of Caribbean leaders is aptly captured in later calypsos, “Caribbean Leaders” (1998):

Caribbean leaders are all the same
Power gone to their head
Because they rule a piece of earth
They feel they possess some worth

In one of his signature calypsos, “Ah put on me guns again” (1976), Chalkdust criticizes the government’s highhandedness as the main reason for his decision to return to the political arena. He zeroes in on the government’s dismissal of top civil servants who did not support the government. According to Chalkdust when “the board at Telco tell Ivan Williams to go,” when the Minister, Eric Williams, “run Mr. Irwin Merritt from the State and the Senate,” when “the board are charged and then discharged,” and “when the auditor show ten million go up his guns again.” He has taken the role of the “attack-dog” seriously as evidenced in the opening stanza of “Ah put on me guns again”:

Back in '68
When I start to sing calypso
I used to shoot straight
All my enemies I kill slow
I would shoot right and left
Big shot men met their death

One of those who met his death was Karl Hudson-Phillips, the then Attorney General and Minister in-waiting. Perhaps Chalkdust’s best known calypso, “A Fraid Karl” (1976), may have had a decisive impact on the political career of Hudson-Phillips, who is depicted in the calypso as a dictator and a “seditioner” that the society should be afraid of. The reference to the sedition laws passed under Hudson-Phillips’ watch as part of a wider use of the legal system to stem the growing dissent. When Eric Williams announced his intention to step down as leader, Hudson-Phillips was thought to be his logical successor. Williams changed his mind, setting in train a rapid decline of Hudson-Phillips’ political career and eventual exit from the party. Although he would reemerge in the 1980s as the leader of the opposition party, the Organization of National Reconstruction (ONR), he never regained the same status in the political arena. Regis agrees that Chalkdust’s calypso effectively ended Hudson-Phillips’ political ambitions for the top job:

Chalkdust's "Ah Fraid Karl" (1972) effectively destroyed any ambitions Phillips may have had of becoming prime minister. It impresses horror on the collective psyche which was prepared for them. [29]

Chalkdust made much of the rift between Dr Williams and Hudson Phillips as ambitious, power-hungry pretender to the throne against the spiteful master-loves me" (1973), he opined that Williams was also afraid of Hudson-Phillips: "Chalkie alone pal/ I and all 'fraid Karl." Chalkdust does something interesting presents Williams as "fearful," a characterization that was inconsistent with the invincibility. He also asks in "Clear you Name" (1974), "Did you retain your po Karl?"

In what became Chalkdust's trademark approach, he uses Hudson-Phillips as through which he launches an attack on government overreach. This is what "masking" and Chalkdust describes as "spinning from the back of the hand," a reference to the guile of the leg spinner, perhaps of the most complex bowler in the calypsonian assumes the role of the reporter, or Duke's editorial writer, as scandals in the government.

They say a young minster was found
In a hotel with a call girl in town
But I aint singing about that...
Ah 'fraid the seditioner...
They say PNM was nearly wrecked
By the secretary and his rubber check
But ah 'fraid, I don't know

It is in this context of opposition to government over-reach that Chalkdust, another calypsonian, became a thorn in the side of the PNM government and its Williams. He would later apply the same standard to other governing parties even though it could be argued that he has not been as obsessed with other leaders with Dr Williams. A close reading of his calypsos reveals a consistent attempt to disrobe the leader, to "cut him down to size." Several of Chalkdust's calypsos are critical of the Prime Minister, Eric Williams. These include "Somebody Mad" (1972), "Mouth Doc" (1972), "Two Sides of the shilling" (1971), "Clear Your Name" (1973), "Loves Me" (1973) in which he portrayed the Prime Minister as being, among other things, dictatorial, out of touch and foolish. Williams reportedly hit back at the calypsonian him a "jackass." This is part of what Rohlehr refers to as the threat and counter-threat of the politician and the calypsonian.

Regis (1999) locates the “Chalkdust-Williams feud” in the government efforts to silence Williams in 1968. He, however, opines that Chalkdust had an ambivalent attitude to Williams. If his criticism of the Prime Minister was harsh, he nevertheless acknowledged that Chalkdust had a tremendous worth in calypsos such as “Let the Jackass Sing” (1974) and “Ah can’t bury Williams” (1999). His extreme anti-PNM-Williams calypsos, therefore, were not about Williams the person but of his politics, particularly on issues relating to race. Chalkdust in “Ah can’t bury Williams,” locates his criticism of Williams within the traditional role of the calypsonian: “To attack Williams in calypso was traditional.”

Regis thinks Chalkdust’s ambivalence towards Williams stemmed from the PNM’s policies on education and the development of calypso, a view that Chalkdust did not share. However, another explanation lies in Chalkdust’s generation dismay at the praxis of Williams’ generation of leaders—the contradiction between their anti-colonialism and their post-colonial conformism and anti-independence. This contradiction was central to the Black Power movement’s critique of where independence was headed—why those who marched with the lower class for independence had turned against workers. Why those who maligned the colonialists and imperialists in the 1950s were now and mimicking their policies and governance style in the 1960s? Why those who fought white racism were now preserving the same racist power structures? These questions were central to Chalkdust’s praxis—a combination of anti-authoritarianism or revolution and Black Power. Calypsos such as “We are ten years old” (1972), “Massa day d” (1976) and “Ah put on me guns again” (1976) reflected this duality. Chalkdust himself put Williams in perspective in this quotation:

I disliked some of the policies that seemed to ignore lessons of history and the destructive effects of Capitalism and Imperialism and its accompanying and degrading of black people, yet I admire him for his beliefs and practice of non-discrimination on grounds of race, color or beliefs. While I dislike trying to solve all problems by historical documentation and use, and while I dislike him for taking lots of burrowed ideas historically developed and used by others and replanting them wholesale in our society, I am proud to have been in Eric Williams’ heyday for it was his application to study, and his love of academic disciplines that fired my thinking process and helped me to make the decision that I too shall become a historian. [30]

In “Clear Your Name” (1974) Chalkdust launched his most stinging attack on Williams on the Prime Minister to refute the many rumors associated with both his personal and professional life. As was the case with “A Fraid Karl” the calypso recounts a litany of charges. The calypsonian compares to the “Watergate” scandal in the USA:

For seventeen long years you've stayed in power
But soon you'll have to go
But many things happened under you doctor
That all of us don't know
Though most of it may be just plain rumor
Doc if you must remain great
Before you go please clear the air
With a local Watergate

While the calypso was highly critical of Williams, it was simultaneously a subtle acknowledgement of Williams' exalted place in Trinidadian and Caribbean history. His seeming ambivalence towards Williams speaks to his dual and contradictory role in politics. On the one hand he is the messenger of freedom, the educated hero-clarion call, "Massa day done," mobilized the nationalist upsurge that gave hope to the oppressed. But he is also the maximum leader who behaved like a modern monarch whose actions invited skepticism from his followers and derision from his detractors. Chalkdust puts this hero-villain attitude towards Williams in giant-jackass terms:

In the near future our young children will study you in class
They would want to know if you were a giant or simply a jackass
I hope Doctor that they will find you a man of integrity
But to hold a place in all history Doc answer me truthfully

Chalkdust also zeroes in on the need for open government. He suggests that the secrecy that surrounded Williams was bad for government accountability. In this poem he makes two important linkages. First, he argues for a linkage between the "great" and "good" governance; he "begs" Williams to be guided by the "giant" in him rather than the "jackass." Second, he sees the relationship between leader and the people as a process of evaluating quality of leadership. Drawing on his own training in history and political science, and his stature as a reputable historian, he frames his argument in historical terms:

You know from history that many great men
Have gone on to lose their fame
For they were hiding secrets from people
Or rumors of their name
So Dr. Williams I beg you kindly Sir
As a great intellectual
Let your life be an open book
To be seen and read by all

In "Somebody Mad," he portrays Williams as a madman whose madness was what Chalkdust sees as bad government policies on housing, taxes, culture and soldiers who mutinied during the February revolution. The image of the madman is a Caribbean popular culture. Black Stalin invoked it as a possible characterization of an African nation and David Rudder's "Madman Rant" (2001) portrays the man of sanity. As usual Chalkdust creates a character through which he conveys his mask. In this instance, the mask is Dr. Bharrat, a psychiatrist.

In the oval to see Pele match
I sat next to Dr. Bharrat
We had a long talk, I said listen Doc
You know about mad people a damn lot
Round the world you does travel
To study insane people
But Doc why do you go overseas
When we have mad men here like peas

The government's decision to locate a housing complex in close proximity to the stadium is depicted as gross madness.

Well then if a man could watch the labass right there
And build houses so near
for people to stay
To take in that stinking stench the whole day
Somebody would have to be mad
Somebody up in the White Hall mad

He compares a decision to send female models instead of calypsonians and stage acts to a cultural event abroad to a calypsonian going to USA to sing soul music instead of calypso.

If I should teach a Nigerian
To model a dashiki
I say you mad
And if Chalkie went to Washington
To sing soul and rock steady
I say you mad
Well then if a man
Could leave calypso and pan
To represent us up in Switzerland

And send six girls to model their behind
Somebody have to be mad

Finally, he takes the government's tax policy to task. In particular, he criticizes the poor. Here Chalkdust highlights the moral and political responsibility of the government towards the weak and implicitly favor less taxation for the poor. This was a critical issue for the rest of the Caribbean in the 1970s as governments sought to find ways to modernize while trying not to alienate private capital. In Trinidad, which imported a considerable amount of its food items, prices on the retail market tended to be higher than in some other countries in the region. Chalkdust correctly makes the linkage between taxes and the price of basic food items.

If I turn down a hungry man
Even though I have cash on me
I say you mad
Alright, and I if I watch that very man
And take away his money
I say you mad
Well then, if every year a man taxing we skin
Bread, butter, milk, oil, gas, and rum raisin
Although we are jobless, poor and scrunting
Somebody would have to be mad
Somebody up in White Hall mad.

Although Chalkdust denies that he was speaking about the Prime Minister, his reference to Whitehall, the offices of the Prime Minister. His reference to Williams, even as he portrays him as insane, points to the duality of Williams in the popular consciousness.

Doctor Bharrat now get this straight
I am not talking about Eric
I don't connect him with insanity
Cause he went to a university

"PNM loves me" targets government concealment of unfavorable acts by its ministers, the Prime Minister's high handedness and the willingness of the top leadership to do what they wish. In effect the calypso points to the lack of democracy in the political process and enumerates the government's abuses through the voice of the Public Relations

finds himself in disagreement with the General Council over a move initiated to admit Chalkdust to the PNM. Whereas the General Council favors admitting Chalkdust and the Prime Minister are against such a move. This has been an issue in Cabinet whether to bring rebels into the fold of the party as a means of neutralizing them from the outside for fear that once inside they would expose "party secrets." The PRO's opposition is based on the fear that Chalkdust would reveal such secrets:

Merritt say, If you love him bring him in
But be prepared for anything
Like alyou want the public to get to know
That we fired Jean Miles from White Hall just so
Cause she slap up a Minister who tried to kiss her
If you want the nation to know the truth
How Karl beat Eric in his libel suit
And Eric have to pay him plenty money to boot
Well then Merritt say it's no big thing
Bring him in

Chalkdust draws a line between the membership and the leadership; he portrays himself as endorsing his criticism of the party,

The people in PNM love me
Although Merritt warned them
They say let's make him a member still
To shake up the PNM
They say if men like Chalkie were inside here
The big boys would have a scare
And we would get to know the PNM members
Who thief Special Works money in St. Clair

The Prime Minister's response to the news that the General Council voted to accept Chalkdust highlights Dr. Williams' authoritarian grip on the party,

But when Eric heard the great good news
He nearly charged him for sedition
He told him go and tell the Trinidad Guardian
We reject the application
History proves that I must keep incompetent men
To remain in my high position.

Almost two decades later Chalkdust's "The driver cannot drive" (1989) captures sentiment towards the National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR) government's landslide victory against the almost invincible People's National Movement (PNM). The PNM ran into trouble amidst a declining economy and political infighting. The Prime Minister, Eric Robinson, a former deputy leader of the PNM under Williams, was depicted as a taxi-driver: "It took a year for passengers to realize/they say the new driver can't drive."

In this calypso, Chalkdust assumes the role of the political economist as he criticizes the government for abandoning economic independence in favor of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)/World Bank structural adjustment program and implementing harsh economic policies that erased some of the social programs implemented by the previous government. Here he is recognizing the onset of globalization and its potential negative consequences for working people in the Caribbean. He also highlights the impact on education and social welfare net programs such as the Cost of Living Allowance (COLA), but he is also faulting the government for caving in so easily to the dictates of the IMF.

The dictatorial politics of the wider Caribbean are also captured in this calypso. It draws attention to excesses of the Eric Gairy government in Grenada, which had resorted to other things, using violence against its opponents: "In Grenada the Mongoose was the Bishop." The "mongoose" he refers to is the infamous Mongoose Gang, a paramilitary force that served as the personal "army" of the Prime Minister while Bishop, the father of the current Prime Minister, died after he was beaten by members of the mongoose gang during an anti-government demonstration.

Conclusion

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which Chalkdust's calypsos influenced public opinion, whether they had any influence at all. But as a radical critique of the political establishment, it is an important part of the larger narrative of resistance. The popularity of the calypsos in wider society meant that this radical critique reached wider audiences than other forms of communication. Further, because the calypsonian, unlike the politician, does not depend on the support of the listeners, he or she stands a better chance of engaging the attention of the government.

The anti-government critique in Chalkdust's calypsos exposes the sometimes authoritarianism in the Anglophone Caribbean. The region's avoidance of military rule and other forms of dictatorial rule has tended to mask the authoritarian nature of its governments. Consequently it is viewed as one of the most democratic regions of the world. Chalkdust's calypsos challenge that assumption by taking the listener beneath the veneer of democracy. This is a delicate undertaking in a region where political dissenters have often been victimized by governments, which have been relatively successful in deeming

of the state. What is even more important about the political calypso is its ability to articulate the plight of opposition political activists.

The calypsos, which highlight the plight of the poorer social classes and berate the government for either ignoring them or for enacting policies which exacerbate their conditions, are a part of this radical critique. These calypsos are grounded in a larger critique of post-independence Caribbean governments which have adopted a pro-capitalist economic approach. For example, the 1970s, for example, is portrayed by Chalkdust as the consequence of government neglect and policies that militate against the interests of the Black working class.

Finally, as the most overt of the political calypsonianians in Trinidad and Tobago, Chalkdust ventures into forbidden areas of anti-government criticism such as holding up the Prime Minister to scrutiny and ridicule. This is particularly significant in the case of Eric Williams, who was a god-like figure in the country. That Chalkdust was able to penetrate the political establishment with a combination of wit, humor, rumor, and political critique, points to the power of calypso music as a potent form of political protest.

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