

Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso  
Traditions in the making

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## Background to West Indian music

Popular fascination with music from the Americas has been of great significance in the twentieth century. The United States is usually recognised as the source of this trend, with African-American styles the most prominent. Less documented, but equally influential, is equivalent black music from the Caribbean and Latin America. This rose to prominence from early in the century with the tango (from Argentina), and includes rumba (from Cuba), biguine (from Martinique), and samba (from Brazil). Each style reflects contributions from differing European languages – Spanish (tango and rumba), French (biguine) and Portuguese (samba). In the English-speaking world, calypso (from Trinidad) gained popular recognition from the 1930s.

Calypso, samba, biguine and (sometimes) rumba are each associated with Carnival, the ever popular Shrovetide festival throughout Latin America. All have African-American origins that date from slavery. The evolution of black music in Trinidad has cosmopolitan importance. Some of these developments can be traced in the United States, mainland South America and other islands in the Caribbean.

### **Prelude – Trinidad Carnival, Canboulay and black music in the 1870s**

Vernacular music formed the core of the popular masquerade, especially Canboulay the midnight opening activity of the festival. Some 50 years later Lewis O. Inniss described 'the bands' in this decade:

As a preliminary to enjoying a good Carnival it was necessary for its votaries – especially those who intended to *jeur* Pierrot (play as clowns) to visit Gasparillo in order to select a suitable stick. For it was supposed that Gasparillo was the only *habitat* of the Baton Gasparee which was recognised by all as being the weapon *par excellence* for the part. This stick had to be prepared by singeing over a fire to remove the bark and then rubbed with coconut oil in order to be *Bien Bandé* i.e. properly prepared for use.

At twelve o'clock on the evening of Shrove Sunday the blowing of horns, or empty bottles as a substitute, was the notice for the assembling of the bands, Belmont, Corbeaux Town, New Town, Dry River, Dernier point, etc., etc. These headed by the champions who could *hallé baton* skillfully with a *grande tambour* and a collection of shack-shacks to give the music, torches made of resinous wood to give light, marched down the streets yelling ribald songs.

The city was in total darkness at night in those days. When they came to some convenient spot the drummer put down the drum and sitting astride it proceeded to *batte tambour*, the women who carried the shack-shacks making a vigorous accompaniment whilst the crowd danced *Corlindas*, the women singing *Bel-Airs* and *hallé baton* (stick-fighting) waged among the men.

It is not difficult to foresee that bands of men marching through the streets armed with sticks would lead to altercation. The Canboulay Riot – the most serious confrontation in the history of Trinidad Carnival – took place in 1881. This melee led to an investigation by the Colonial Office in London and the future of Carnival was examined carefully:

Some feel that the Carnival if left alone will die out. With this view I do not concur. Experience does not show that fewer people from year to year take part in it. On the contrary, one of the most objectionable features of it, namely the bands, are a creation of quite recent times, and they are largely fed by immigrants from other islands, the number of whom is constantly increasing. With reference to this point, it is worthy to notice that the census thus taken for 1881 shows that during the last ten years the number of natives of other West Indian Islands residing in Port of Spain has been increased by upward of 5,000 or upwards of 100 per cent. Others urge that the Carnival should be stopped altogether, on the ground that in itself it is a senseless and irrational amusement, and affords a pretext for the indulgence of

unbridled licentiousness on the part of the worst of the population. But I do not either agree with this view. However objectionable some of the features of the Carnival are, I believe it is looked forward to as the only holiday of the year by a large number of the working population of the town, who derive amusements from it and I think to stop it altogether would be a measure which would justly be regarded as harsh and might lead to serious dissatisfaction on the part of the working classes.<sup>1</sup>

This was the considered view of R. G. Hamilton, in his report to the Colonial Secretary (the Earl of Kimberly). Many of the underlying reasons for such actions, however, are not explained in these two complementary accounts. Indeed, they pose the question where and how did these traditions evolve? In addition, Carnival did not 'die out': the festival remains a principal event in the island's annual calendar, with music its fundamental component.

To answer these questions, and explore ways in which black culture developed in the Caribbean, it is necessary to know something of the region's complex history from its European discovery by Columbus in 1492.

### **European colonisers, post-colonial conquests, and the slave trade**

Slave culture in the West Indies reflects the relationship of peoples from three continents – Europe, America and Africa. This was forged by European exploration, conquest and trade, beginning in the late fifteenth century.

Different geographical conditions in each Caribbean island (or mainland America), and interactions with differing European traditions, were modified by fortunes of war and other political circumstances. These produced complicated cultural patterns that became entangled with the traditions of the area's original inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> Native Americans were decimated by diseases introduced by Europeans. This, and hostility to territorial overthrow, led their conquerors to seek African labour for large-scale plantations, growing staples for expanding European economies. Black people were coerced to replace the indigenous population. Like the Native Americans, with whom they sometimes intermarried, African slaves did not represent

one 'culture' but were drawn from many areas of that continent, adding to the evolving complexity.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the importation of Africans was the most consistent factor in a region that epitomised the instability of European nations jostling for trading supremacy. Many West Indian islands changed hands, some on several occasions. Both Jamaica and Trinidad were originally Spanish – their British acquisition was almost one-hundred-and-fifty years apart; the first in 1655, the second in 1797.<sup>3</sup>

Individual territories were subject to differing material developments. Trade (and therefore cultural contact) was maintained with Europe, the American mainland, Africa, between islands, and elsewhere, but enterprise fluctuated with political circumstances. Trinidad is a particular example, with ties to several European countries, Africa, the Orient, Spanish-speaking Latin America and most of the islands in the Eastern Caribbean, as well as the United States and Canada.

### Cultural 'repression' and African 'resistance' of slaves

Opinions differ whether slaves maintained a degree of cultural integrity in the face of oppression. One theory argues they were overwhelmed by the ideas of their 'European masters'. Notwithstanding, while African tradition was actively discouraged, this was not absolute. Cultural values were sustained and developed in resistance to enslavement, especially in activities beyond the compass of the repressors. This 'African' fidelity was dynamic and varied according to space, time and circumstances of enslavement, manumission, escape, or eventual emancipation.

During slavery, complicated class structures developed. In very simplified terms African-Americans can be divided into two groups: slaves newly arrived from Africa, and creole slaves (born in the Americas). Often, they preserved the identity of their African 'nation'. There were also free(ed) Africans, and people of mixed (African/European/Native-American) ancestry. Free Europeans were generally the controlling plantocracy. They maintained a class hierarchy based on skin-colour gradations.<sup>4</sup> In the British Caribbean, this structure operated virtually exclusively until the slave trade was abolished in 1807.<sup>5</sup> Ensuing changes allowed the evolution of almost wholly black creole populations and cultures in respective territories.

## **Emancipation – consolidation of new African-American cultures**

Slaves were granted freedom on 1 August 1834 in the British West Indies, but a scheme known as ‘Apprenticeship’ was introduced to retain the plantation labour force. This failed in 1838 when ‘Apprentices’ became free citizens on 1 August in that year.<sup>6</sup> In one sense, this parallels the liberty gained by slaves who escaped and established free (Maroon) communities away from plantation control – a radical change in their circumstances.

The result of this change varied from territory to territory. In general, a new culture evolved that transformed, developed and replaced earlier patterns with a positive response to freedom. Descriptions of black culture by the white elite reflect these circumstances.

Some cultural traits continued, such as the call and response singing of work songs, including shanties (or chanties) – this remained, because black people were employed, or employed themselves, collectively, in the slavery- and post-slavery periods.<sup>7</sup> A similar apparent stability can be demonstrated for the use of certain musical instruments known or believed to have been brought from Africa.<sup>8</sup>

## **Indentured labour – a substitute for slavery**

Planters looked for means to maintain a reliable and cheap labour force. Several methods were adopted. Free Africans were encouraged to migrate across the Atlantic or were rescued by the British Navy (while in transit to countries where slavery still existed); Chinese were engaged as indentured labour; and, most successfully (for the planters), so were many people from the sub-continent of India. From the mid-nineteenth to the early-twentieth century, a steady stream of East Indians was brought to Trinidad, Guyana and, to a lesser extent, Jamaica. Indentureship tied workers to plantations, providing the continuity for which estate owners had been looking. Although considered only in passing, East Indians became part of the cultural *milieu*; they responded to dynamic circumstances that influenced their heritage in much the same way as people of African origin.

### The significance of the drum

From slavery, most white observers associated drums, drumming and related dancing with Africa: this was both direct (performances by newly arrived Africans) and indirect (drum dances performed by creoles). Europeans in the Caribbean feared the drum and always controlled it as a 'nuisance' or, prior to Emancipation, because of its potency in signalling revolt.<sup>9</sup> The complex pattern of drum rhythms was outside European compass and posed an additional threat founded in incomprehension. Proselytising Christian missionaries saw drum dances as sacrilegious and tried to stamp them out. The drum symbolised not only 'uncivilised' Africa, but also violent disorder and the work of the devil.

For European missionaries, drumming posed a particular dilemma. In their homelands it was the fiddle rather than the drum that was sometimes cast in the role of the 'devil's instrument', especially when providing accompaniment for 'wild' dancing. The association of unbaptised black people with 'non-Christian' belief was enough to transpose this symbolism to drum dances. Unaccustomed dance movements, sound, and the continuous rhythmic playing of the drummers, added to missionary opposition.

These interpretations are far from the truth, even in the eyes of diarists and travel writers. Dances were not exclusive, nor the accompaniment of drums. Activities might include other styles involving different musical instruments. Drumming was also dependent on circumstances of place, time, and precedent.<sup>10</sup> In one respect, however, the potency of the drum was sustained as a signal for African integrity: by its use for sacred ceremony. Despite changes, exacted by separate evolution and cross-fertilisation, links to both sacred and secular events were maintained. On this level, the drum remains a symbol of Africa in black music from the Caribbean.<sup>11</sup>

### The role of the fiddle

The fiddle was used in two principal categories of performance: dances and processions.

Among factors that encouraged black slave musicians to adopt the fiddle were creative adaptability, the instrument's relative availability, and a nostalgic inclination by the plantocracy for music from their homelands.

This led to absorption of European melodies and dances, especially at festive occasions when ritual licence allowed black and white people to mix on terms of 'equality'. 'African' dances were also performed by black participants.<sup>12</sup>

While there is a strong tradition of playing string instruments in the West African savannah, which may account for easy adoption of the fiddle by black slaves, in manufacture and design the instrument was European. Alongside association with dances from that continent, the instrument gained an allegorical status representing 'civilisation' (or, 'decorum') in the New World. This does not deny the role of the fiddle for other music-making, but emphasises a singular factor among black musicians and white observers of their playing.<sup>13</sup>

In parallel with the drum being a most appropriate musical symbol for Africa, it can be said that the fiddle became the symbol for the European contribution to black music in the West Indies. These are simplifications, but provide reference points for considering complex cultural evolution in the region, especially in the nineteenth century.

In the British Caribbean, music ranging from the 'mother country's' social 'elite' to the 'folk' had considerable influence. Military repertoire is represented by African-American membership in bands of the armed forces and police, after black musicians were allowed in their ranks.

### **Sacred and secular rituals and social institutions**

One way in which links with the African past can be explored, is by sacred and secular rituals and associated music and dance.

The European nations that conquered the Caribbean were nominally Christian and imposed an annual cycle of religious festivals on the area. These had evolved from the seasonal rotation of the northern hemisphere, adopted and adapted by the Church during conversion to Christianity. In turn, some cross a divide between sacred and secular that was developed to accommodate the delicate relationship between Church and State. A further complication was the split between the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.

The most persistent musical evolutions in the Caribbean are associated with sacred or secular events that sometimes combine – as with Carnival. Usually, they show evidence of cross-fertilisation stemming from the

adaptation to new circumstances by people in the world diaspora to the Americas.

In Jamaica, where the predominant Christian influence has been Protestant, the primary black sacred and secular celebration is known as 'Jonkonnu'. It has been held at Christmas for over two centuries and, since 1838, on 1 August, in commemoration of the ending of Apprenticeship. Among other 'Protestant' islands, St Kitts-Nevis have their 'Christmas Sports' (including mumming), Bermuda its 'Gombey' parades, while the Bahamas also use 'Jonkonnu' as the name for their Christmas festivities.

Caribbean-French sugar planters and their slaves, from Martinique and other French territories, settled in Trinidad in the 1780s. They sustained the influence of Roman Catholicism, consolidating the island's most important sacred/secular festival – Carnival. To a lesser extent, Christmas is also celebrated. The history of both events can be traced from the time the British took the island. Shrovetide Carnivals are held also in Carriacou, Dominica, Grenada, St Lucia, St Vincent and Tobago<sup>14</sup>

### **Dances, processions and seasonal occasions**

Festivals provide a focal point for different musical styles that have evolved in each Caribbean territory. They also integrate with common elements such as language and migration of people (from island to island, or elsewhere) in the course of international circumstances.

Hierarchical groups (usually elected), that perform at festive gatherings, have existed since slavery. Music is fundamental to these celebrations and includes dressing, singing, dancing, and marching competitively to music. In the historical record, these associations were widely distributed throughout the Caribbean, Latin America and United States. Black 'Kings and Governors', for example, provided an extra feature of election days in eighteenth-century New England. Generally revolving around the Christian calendar, celebrations incorporated European and African masquerade traditions (also founded in the agricultural season).<sup>15</sup>

Festivals in the English-speaking Caribbean were of great significance in the development of the region's musical traditions. Reports of topical themes in African-American songs range from slavery to the present. Calypso is a famous example of this genre. This evolved in Trinidad from the heritage of slave dancing societies, Carnival bands and other influ-

ences.<sup>16</sup> The history of Trinidad Carnival provides a means of tracing and understanding these proliferations. In turn, the annual cycle of the festival allows greater appreciation of the island's cultural (and political) position in the Caribbean and its contribution to popular culture in the English-speaking world.

### **Carnival and black music in Trinidad**

Trinidad was discovered by Columbus in 1498 (he named the island for triple peaks representing the Holy Trinity). The island was ruled by Spain for virtually 300 years and remained one of her most 'underdeveloped' American possessions. Only in the 1770s, with the 'Bourbon reforms' of Charles III – designed to rejuvenate flagging colonial efficiency – did the Spanish crown pay attention to this thinly populated, almost uncultivated territory. A *Cédula* issued by Charles in 1776 highlighted the neglect. With no Catholic Europeans available for emigration, this invited West Indian French planters to transfer slaves for work on new estates. They were encouraged by land grants

Influenced by France, and set on maintaining Spanish control and the Roman Catholic faith, Charles III extended this provision in 1783 by issuing a further *Cédula de Población*. Any Catholic was allowed to settle in Trinidad providing he agreed to certain conditions, including a loyalty oath to the crown.

At this point, the population was very small. It comprised white Spanish- and French-speaking colonists, 'coloured' people, black slaves, and remnants of the Native American community, whose forebears had originally inhabited Iere (their name for the island).

Over the next fourteen years a great number of French planters grasped the opportunities to settle in Trinidad, escaping the maraudings of the Napoleonic wars. In consequence, when Britain conquered the island in 1797, there was a significant French-speaking and mainly creole constituency. The French elite had established themselves as a landed aristocracy, using their black slaves to create flourishing plantations growing tobacco, sugar, cotton and coffee.

A large and speedy increase in settlement followed 'capitulation', with migrants coming from the Spanish Main, North America, Africa and British West Indian islands. There was also some French emigration.

Despite this, the French community remained in control of the island's economic core.<sup>17</sup>

With virtually all of the early slave population having 'been born in the French islands', black culture also reflected this African-French-Caribbean bias, including the establishment of 'patois' (Caribbean French Creole) as a lingua franca. The arrival of new slaves did not change this pattern. The unusual French character of late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Trinidad was remarked upon by L. M. Fraser in his important memorandum to the Colonial Office on the 'History of the origin of the Carnival' (1881).<sup>18</sup>

From the arrival of French planters, the history of Carnival can be divided into four phases. These cover slavery, the period immediately following Emancipation, the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and the period from 1897 to the aftermath of the First World War.<sup>19</sup> This complex development illuminates the interrelated evolution of black music in the island.