Contesting Calypso, Soca, and Nationhood in Trinidad

Over the past two decades, numerous books have been published on calypso–Trinidad’s pre-Lenten Carnival music. Encompassing a range of literary, musicological, anthropological, and historical perspectives, this scholarship has been particularly strong on the emergence of the modern calypso form around 1900 and its development through Trinidad and Tobago’s independence from Britain in 1962. Jocelyne Guilbault’s new book is a most welcome addition to this literature, given her focus on Carnival music from the postindependence years to the present. An ethnomusicologist, Guilbault previously studied the music of St. Lucia and was the lead author (with Gage Averill, Édouard Benoit, and Gregory Rabess) of an important book on zouk in the Francophone Caribbean, Zouk: World Music in the West Indies (1993). Her ethnographic and musicological skills, along with her knowledge of local and global dimensions of Caribbean music industries, make her well qualified to tackle the complexities of postcolonial calypso and its musical offshoots, including soca (a dance music with a prominent bass line and dense electronic texture), chutney soca (a synthesis of soca and Indo-Trinidadian musical elements), ragga soca (soca influenced by Jamaican dancehall), and rapso (a blend of chanted poetry, calypso, and other musical styles). Guilbault’s primary objective is to examine how calypso has been constructed as the national music of Trinidad and how its postcolonial offshoots have challenged this construction and expressed alternative understandings of nationhood and belonging. She is particularly concerned with “governing sound”—how various discourses and practices (or “technologies”) have shaped perceptions and uses of music, and how music enables distinct ways of thinking and acting.

In her first two chapters, Guilbault presents an examination of preindependence calypso, based almost entirely on secondary sources. Though she employs a Foucauldian analytical vocabulary, these chapters do not offer any major new insights on the politics of calypso during the colonial era. In the book’s following six chapters, however, Guilbault draws on more than ten years of fieldwork, including interviews with many prominent musicians and promoters, to develop an impressive account of the myriad ways in which power has been exercised in recent decades in the production and consumption of Carnival music in Trinidad.

Guilbault notes that, after independence, “calypso became an important site in which to articulate received notions of modernity, authenticity, originality, and ‘cultural’ independence” (pp.135-136). She discusses how calypso has been shaped by nationalist promotion, by a relatively undercapitalized music industry, and by competitions during the Carnival season, which are essential venues for developing calypso careers but also have a constraining effect on artistic expression. In addition, she addresses music arrangers, who have had a profound impact on the calypso tradition but, to date, have received insufficient scholarly attention. Among the best parts of this book, in fact, are profiles of Frankie Francis, who...
expanded the use of written musical arrangements after World War II and was a key figure in the sound of calypso recordings around the time of independence, and Art de Coteau, who dominated arranging during the late 1960s and 1970s and attempted to maintain a calypso style free of non-Trinidadian influences.

Guilbault also effectively employs this biographical perspective with descriptions of several well-known, but quite different, calypsonians. She begins with the veteran Black Stalin, who is widely viewed as a quintessential calypsonian, given his Afro-Trinidadian working-class background, an emphasis on social commentary in his lyrics, and a musical style firmly rooted in “traditional” calypso. She then examines four other calypsonians whose gender, ethnicity, and/or class destabilizes this conventional calypso persona: Calypso Rose (an Afro-Trinidadian woman), Denyse Plummer (a “Trinidad white”), Crazy (a Chinese Creole), and De Mighty Trini (a “Syrian,” though actually of Lebanese descent). Though all four artists faced substantial challenges in breaking into the calypso scene, their success helped to redefine who could sing calypso and be emblematic of the Trinidadian nation.

At a more structural level, the calypso tradition was destabilized by the rise of soca, chutney soca, ragga soca, and rapso. Guilbault explores “how the new Carnival musics, making audible the presence of heterogeneous constituencies, have redefined the terrain on which national culture is debated” (p. 169). These calypso offshoots introduced new instruments and other musical elements, created more space for a variety of artists, expanded audiences, and (with the exception of rapso) more fully affirmed dance and pleasure as part of musical experience. Moreover, the soca forms are part of a music industry that extends beyond Trinidad to include much of the anglophone Caribbean and diasporic communities in North America and Britain. While the Calypso Monarch competition is restricted to Trinidadian residents, the International Soca Monarch competition is open to performers from anywhere.

Though soca emerged in the 1970s, Guilbault’s discussion focuses on the 1990s, when a fast-tempo, highly synthesized type of soca became quite distinct from “traditional” calypso and when chutney soca and ragga soca gained considerable public prominence. She attributes these developments in part to the neoliberal economic environment of the decade, during which the Trinidadian government increasingly emphasized the commercial value of popular arts and a variety of entrepreneurs were able to expand the infrastructure for artistic expression. Again, Guilbault’s arguments are enhanced by sketches of individuals, including Machel Montano, who, with his mother as his manager, forged a financially successful international soca career; Rikki Jai, who became a leading figure in chutney soca; and George Singh, who established the Chutney Soca Monarch competition in 1996.

Though she is attentive to diverse musical trends and individual artists, Guilbault does not attempt to offer a general history of calypso and soca since independence. Such a book remains much needed in Caribbean music studies. Guilbault, however, does provide a well-researched and perceptive account of how the Carnival music industry has evolved and of how the politics of inclusion in music making and listening are interrelated with vigorous debates in Trinidad about art, tradition, and national identity. This book is strongly recommended to anyone interested in Caribbean studies, musicology, media studies, and the politics of culture.