

# Arrested for a 'scandal' song

By the ROARING LION

SOME people believe that the Calypsonian, under poetic licence, can say or sing whatever he feels. This is so, it is argued for he is saying whatever he says *pro bono publico* (for the public good). The following historical facts may clean up some misconceptions.

The examples advanced to show that nothing was legally wrong with what Cro Cro sang, were all based on Calypsoes sung in the fifties.

This has amazed me quite a lot, because, as far back as I can remember, nothing explosive took place in Calypsodom in those days. No one sang any Calypso that warranted police action or any other action for that matter.

Shorty and his *Om Shanti* caused a hue and cry from certain quarters, but that was a matter of religion for which ecclesiastical laws exist, but that was much, much latter than the Fifties.

In fact, that was only a few years ago.

Frankly, from what I have heard people say about that matter, I am of the opinion that they have absolutely no knowledge about what went on in the distant past regarding Calypsoes and Calypsonians.

## Law Enforcement

The truth is, all the excitement and law enforcement as far as the Calypso and Calypsonians are concerned, took place between the Thirties and Forties; that was the time Calypsonians fought a live-or-die battle for the survival of the artistes and art form.

Let me enumerate some of the clashes that took place between the troubadours and the law in those days.

I am sure my readers will be surprised; for it is a fact that those who came after those dates are unaware of it.

Though news of the happenings percolated throughout the "marish and the parish" (Tom, Dick and Harry) the news media at the time paid little or no attention to it.

In 1934, the year in which the French folksong *Ballade* (1295) was recorded for Trinidad under the pseudonym "Calypso" the gentleman who initiated the idea was one Eduardo Sa Gomes, a native of Portugal. (Here I must remind my readers that I am talking about the recording of Calypso and not "Paseo", or, any other style of folksong).

The law governing what can or cannot be said in a theatre (tent) or dance hall was introduced and came into force that same year, December 13, 1934.

## Law Debated

It is called the "Theatre and Dance Halls Ordinance."

Naturally, the Tent comes under the heading of "Theatre", but the term Tent was also specifically stated in the ordinance.

When the law was being debated in the Legislative Council in 1951, Raymond Quevedo known in Calypso circles as Atilla the Hun was a member of the council, and he was opposed to the law as it stood, and during his debate on the matter, he said:

"My reason for giving notice of my intention to move a further amendment that the word "tent" should be deleted from the Ordinance is that, under that Ordinance, the Governor in Executive Council made regulations which include the following:

"No profane, indecent, or obscene songs or ballads shall be sung or spoken."

He continued: "I agree with the regulation because no man should be allowed to go about making use of obscene or profane expressions, or abusive language.

"If he does, he should and can be taken before a magistrate and dealt with. But one regulation with which I do not agree says:

"No stage play or songs shall be presented or sung which are insulting to any individual or section of the community, whether referred to by name or otherwise."

Another regulation reads: "No acting or representation calculated to hold up to public ridicule or contempt and individual or section of the community shall be presented or performed."

By this and the regulation already referred to, no Calypso singer could render a song if it was considered likely to hold up any individual to contempt, regardless of how much the individual's actions might have deserved the contempt of his fellowmen.

## Sleepless Nights

The Original Bill brought by the government was passed and the amendment, which was intended to free the Calypso tent and the Calypso from restrictions, still contained in the amended Theatre and Dance Halls Ordinance, was defeated."

The only change in the Ordinance regarding the tent was instead of the police having the power to grant the licence nightly as was previously the case was now vested in the magistrate with the power to give a licence to the tent for the duration of the entire Carnival season.

But, if at any time during the season, Calypsoes were sung offensive to anyone, that person could take action by bringing the matter before the Magistrate's Court.

It is really true that the pioneers of this world in any field are not the ones who are given credit for their accomplishments. They labour, and spend sleepless nights in pursuit of the golden mission, and when their efforts blossom and bear fruit, "whosoever will may



come" and lay claim to the harvest, and be glorified and praised for doing nothing, leaving the pioneers completely forgotten.

This is especially true in a society where the history of its past is not kept alive.

Let me now unite of the difficult situations the Calypsonians of yesteryear (1930-1950) faced in order to keep the art and themselves alive. Notice the ensuing:

In 1935 I wrote a song that became the "Leggoe" (Carnival-song) that year. The title is *Sally, Sally Water*. The tune was lively, tuneful and catchy. When I recorded it in the USA (Decca Co.) the police banned the sales of the records.

Along with that, a number of people were arrested during the Carnival for singing it.

Of course some of them were improving their own words. The shipment of records was thrown overboard out in the harbour. But it was sold in other countries. Following are two verses of the song:

*"I bounce up with a girl, she was a wealthy dame,  
You can imagine how the Lion made his name.*

*(repeat)*

*She said she loves me till she's confused,  
She offered a gift, but what do you think I'd choose?*

*Chorus*

*I chose her Sally Sally waters,  
Sprinkle in her saucer,  
Rise Sally, rise Sally,  
Sally, Sally water"*

*Second Verse*

*She said Lion I love you, I said I love you too,  
And I will like to play a game of bat-and-ball with you,  
She said I don't think you can clean bowl me at all  
I said well if I break your wicket, please don't you bawl*

*She said a prize for whoever wins the score,  
I won, what do you think I asked her for?  
For her Sally Sally water, sprinkle in a saucer, etc.*

Now Sally Water is a Nursery Rhyme, but the police claimed it was vulgar.

"Give me the thing that you have in your belly" was deemed to be vulgar.

In 1940, a high-ranking official who by virtue of his office, lived in a high class area in St Ann's, was being plagued by someone who took a likeness to his wife.

## In Total Secrecy

It happened, according to Brer Rabbit, that the other man was also a man of rank, so it was Bim and Bam.

Now Madame Owl, who is usually on the spot to see just what is going on, happened to be present when Mr Bim arranged with Bo Too Kooma to "pass-out" Bam (get rid of him) and politely rest him on a bench somewhere around the Savannah where he could be seen early in the morning when Compen Cock crow to notify the Marish and the Parish that it is a fateful morning.

Soon as Mr Cock sounded the alarm, all the residents of the forest hastened to the Savannah to see and speculate on the cause of Mr Bam's death.

The whole drama of Bam's death was well timed, arranged, and in total secrecy. So the police of the forest led by Bam-jigeema who was a finger print expert in "Toyam" (a fabled city in Trinidad) wasted no time in declaring that it was suicide. But Madame Owl insisted that it was a case of murder, and in vexation, called up certain troubadours (calypsonians) and briefed them on the matter. The Calypsonians discussed the case and assigned it to me for the usual treatment. I relayed the news as follows:

*A man was found dead around the Savannah,  
The police said its suicide, Nancy claimed its murder. (repeat)*

*He said sure, he knows the murderer,*

*Whose name is Ti Bomina and lives near the Savannah,*

*The dead man he said, was a bigtime Commander,  
And used to play "dolliee house with the wife of Ti Bomina*

*You may draw your own conclusion,  
But I reserve my opinion."*

The sequel to this Calypso was I was arrested by one Corporal Lashley with a warrant at No. 13 Prince Street, on the bright and sunny morning at Kyron Benjamin's tailor shop.

I was accused of singing a Calypso that was slanderous, defamatory, and contained false accusation, about the governor.

The next night, Saturday, 17 policemen led by Sargeant Stephenson were put on duty in my tent on Nelson Street, (Victory Tent).

Space does not permit me to write all that took place in the tent, except to say that they could not prosecute, because, my song was a nancy story, and the main character in it was Ti Bomina, he was the star.

In 1949 Atilla was taken to court for permitting a singer to render a song which subjected a member of the community to ridicule. He was charged for an infringement of the Theatre and Dance Halls Ordinance and fined. I know. I was there.

## Heads Examined

I have written this because I want Calypsonians to know just where they stand with the law. Certainly they can sing what they like, as long as they are clever enough to disguise their songs.

But writers today don't seem to be able to write that sort of compositions, and leave nothing to the imagination.

The truth is that singers today are getting away with murder, and they don't know it.

There is no law specifically against Calypsonians, they can sing whatever they wish to, but if what they sing is unlawful they can be charged as every one else.

And those who say there isn't such a law, need to have their heads examined.

People will incite you to sing, but will they pay the lawyers fee when you are charged?

Nobody really wants to hinder the Calypsonians. Calypso is not an art in the hands of the artiste with ability and imagination. It could be a dangerous weapon.