

Preparing for Cariwest: Music of a West Indian Dance Band*

MICHELLE BOZYNSKI

When I asked Menon Vishnu why he had spent the last 12 years performing calypsos in the Edmonton area, he said simply: "I play bass guitar and this is the music that I know. What else would I do?"¹ As a founding member, bass player, sound mixer, and music manager for the Trinidadian dance band Tropical Fever, Vishnu shares with its four other members an awareness of the band's vital role in the community. Few local bands bring the calypsos of Trinidad to Central Alberta. As well, Tropical Fever's participation in the local Caribbean festival, Cariwest, contributes significantly to the success of this important annual celebration of the West Indian community's cultural identity.

The project that led me to Edmonton's West Indian community developed from an investigation of fieldwork methods and procedures. For me, a musicologist, this project began as an exploration of ethnographic methods and turned into a study of Tropical Fever and its preparation for Cariwest. Throughout the 6-month project, I faced questions ranging from the physical (How will the video camera work in a dark room?) to the more theoretical (In this situation, am I "other"?—cf. Grenier and Guilbault 1990).

As the project took form, I began to realize that the process by which the band prepared itself for the summer festival was a microcosm of the greater community's preparations. By focusing on the band's methods of accessing the year's new calypsos and of selecting particular songs to add to their repertory, I aimed to gain greater understanding of the reasons behind their efforts, and on a larger scale, behind the community's efforts. Accordingly, I focused primarily on the band's rehearsals. Concentrating on the musical process rather than the finished product, I tried to examine the process itself as community-building and meaningful and to discover how the final result gains meaning through the process (cf. Gallagher 1991).

I also hoped to find out how Cariwest's meaning develops beyond rehearsals among participants: from costume makers and patty bakers to fund raisers and parade organizers. My own participation in the band's process, through promotion of the group, active involvement in some public dances at which they performed, and finally "playing mas" with the group at Cariwest, offered me the unique opportunity of becoming, as Annemarie Gallagher has put it, "an 'outsider-insider' member of the community" (1991: 1).

In my view, the value of such an approach is manifold. My experiences within the community and my own process of discovery — through direct observation, interviewing, and audio and video recording — have helped me understand fieldwork itself as a process. These techniques and methods of ethnography — this process — provide a foundation for the work and aids in understanding the music makers and their rehearsals. Through such understanding, one can discover calypso's importance and Cariwest's *raison-d'être*.

Results

My first contact with Edmonton's Caribbean community was through Brian Alleyne, the parent of a friend. As the president of the Western Carnival Development Association, Cariwest's fund-raising and organizational committee, Alleyne provided me with background information on Trinidad's Carnival, the similar role played by Edmonton's Cariwest, and the importance of such a festival to the West Indian community's identity. With much enthusiasm and support for my project, Alleyne introduced me personally to Edmonton's Caribbean "scene" and to the producers of Tropical Fever, Menon Vishnu and Milton Zaiffdeen.

Interested in, and curious about my work, the band invited me to their West Indian and non-West Indian "gigs." As I became increasingly aware of the function of calypsos as continually developing and annually celebrated commentaries on life, love, and current issues, I began to focus on the rehearsal process rather than these public events as a source of greater insight into calypso as something meaningful to the music makers themselves.

As it developed within the rehearsal setting, the band's music became a vehicle for personal expression beyond its eventual public function. By focusing on the band's process of selecting and integrating new calypsos into their current repertory, I sought to discover how the music became process and to understand better Tropical Fever's role as a unique interpreter of this music.

Though the band members at first seemed uncertain about my interest in their rehearsals, they accepted me and, I think, became accustomed to my presence. As I became more comfortable with the music, I focused on the context of the music making: the interaction of band members, the physical environment of rehearsals, and the specific sequence of events within rehearsals. The process — or should I say “ritual”? — of most rehearsals included a social gathering afterwards with friends who had attended, to offer comments, chat with the band members, and enjoy the music.

Most rehearsals were held in the living room of Vishnu's apartment. There he lived with his wife Kathy and their three-year old son Dariun. When the synthesizer, mixer, amplifiers, and speakers were set up for an evening rehearsal, the setting was crowded. Due to lack of lighting in the living-room, the kitchen light cast shadows on the rehearsal space. The atmosphere was, however, comfortable and relaxed.

One might even have thought the rehearsal too casual. Throughout the night, friends as well as band members would come and go, causing frequent interruptions of the rehearsal as such. I myself was even encouraged to interrupt a session if I had questions, even though I reserved my queries for the break periods.

Often rehearsals would be scheduled for about 7:00 but begin no earlier than 8:30 or 9:00, ending around midnight out of consideration for the neighbours. Then would begin the post-rehearsal gatherings. Sometimes lasting until 4:00 or 5:00 a.m., these always featured food and drink.

The rehearsal pattern is one part of the band's overall process of integrating new calypsos into their repertoire. Over the four-year period of the group's existence, this process had become quite highly developed. Each member's role was clearly defined. By the time a particular calypso was ready for group rehearsal, Vishnu had organized a preliminary mix of synthesized music, including samples of brass, steel-band and any

other sounds not produced “live” by the band members. Vishnu, as indicated earlier, was also responsible for the bass guitar lines. Gavin Williamson, the lead male vocalist, rendered the melody line and determined the lyrics, whereas Dennis Zaiffdeen formulated the rhythm guitar part and background vocals, and Mickey Maharajh developed the intricate and often improvisational lead guitar line. Cathy McDonald, the band’s female vocalist at the time, was mainly responsible for her part of the background vocals.

During a rehearsal, the band would concentrate on one or two calypsos, arranging and modifying the music to satisfy their needs. From a comfortable key for Williamson’s voice to an appropriate style of backup singing, from the sequencing of synthesized sounds to the coordination of guitar chord sequences, the rehearsal process continued until a successful interpretation of the original calypso, evoking its spirit, had been achieved. Often, however, the members’ specific standards, those on which they based the success of their interpretation, were difficult to discern.

Doubtless, dynamism and liveliness of interpretation were valued, as was the music’s ability to promote dancing and enjoyment. As Williamson said, their interpretation of the calypsos had to have a “good beat” and had to “sound good” to be successful.²

The group’s strategy for accessing and selecting calypsos is another important element of the overall process. Interviewing was, of course, fundamental to my understanding of their efforts. The younger members of the band, Vishnu and Williamson, were more readily available, and seemed enthusiastic about my questions from the very start. The older musicians, once comfortable with my presence, openly provided valuable input.

While organizing the band’s equipment for an afternoon gig, Vishnu described the band’s various methods of gathering the music. As soon as the new calypsos were released on record (a few days before Carnival in Trinidad), the group began to receive copies from a network of family and friends. All the music they received was in recorded form, that is, albums or cassettes. (Little or no sheet music exists.) Family members in Trinidad informed the group of popular calypsos. Friends who had traveled to Trinidad, lent the members music they had bought. Still others, living closer to home, compiled and sent tapes of the songs

they enjoyed. Music originally emanating from Trinidad spread rapidly throughout the Edmonton community.³

Once the band members had listened to the calypsos, they determined as a group the songs on which they would work. The most popular calypsos, favoured by the Cariwest judges and most requested by the band's West Indian audiences, were readily added to Tropical Fever's repertoire. As well, each band member had his/her own opinions on the making of a successful calypso interpretation.

Learning the new music was a time-consuming, tedious aural process, one that would inevitably result in deviations from the original versions. These deviations made the band's interpretation unique. Synthesized sound, changes to song refrains, and a second, female singer for backup vocals give Tropical Fever a personal voice within this public forum of expression and self-affirmation.

Beyond questions of the band's musical process, interviews also enabled me to gain a greater understanding of the meaning behind the lyrics, behind the calypso itself, and behind the people — that is, what it is, at least culturally speaking, to be "West Indian." Through the band members' musical and social insights, I began to understand such elements of the songs as double entendres, the meanings in many calypso lyrics that are not readily apparent to outsiders. In addition to its historical significance, the double entendre today serves as a "game." Insiders understand and enjoy the often sexual puns, while outsiders and children are left to enjoy the music in innocence. Slang expressions, colloquialisms, and Hindi words are used to mask the jest, just as festival participants are masked by their costumes during the celebration. An example is the suggestive title a calypso added to the band's 1992 repertory: "Aowoh Beti" ("Come, Girl").

Interviews with Brian Alleyne amplified and clarified such published accounts of West Indian Carnival as Brown (1990), Cowley (1985), Juneja (1989), McLane (1991), Myers (1980), Quevedo (1983), Regis (1988), Shepperd (1984), and Warner (1988). As in Carnival, the role of calypsos in Cariwest is to provide a verbal gesture or release that reflects and parallels the physical release (through dance, playing mas', etc.), which is central to the festival. As Alleyne suggested, calypso is a lifeline to the ever-evolving heart of Trinidadian thought and expression. Calypsos communicate the sentiments and frustrations of the current year as well as the ideologies that underlie them. These thoughts,

these ideologies are the driving force of the musical activity.³ Similarly, Olive Lewin (1980) considers West Indian calypsos “an integral part of cultural and social life” insofar as they “mirror popular attitudes or philosophize, teach, and appeal to the social conscience.”

In trying to understand the cultural background of Cariwest, what was not said or — could I say? — what was inherently “West Indian” about the process, was most valuable (cf. Spradley 1980). One of the band member’s friends called it “being a ‘Trini’.”⁵

The community members’ attitudes towards my presence and my questions seemed very significant. Although I began as a true “outsider” to the community, I felt I was quickly received and accepted. As a “participant observer,” I attended many of the band’s dance gigs and promoted their work by distributing posters, arranging announcements in the University newspaper, etc. The group’s enthusiasm for my study, their personal concern for the success of my efforts, and their unending offers of information were very encouraging. When I asked about this seemingly community-wide open-ness and ready acceptance of non-West Indians, another friend of the group, Glynis Alleyne, said, “That’s what being ‘Trini’ is all about; it’s part of our culture.”⁶

One reason for this openness to “others” may be found in Trinidad’s history of ethnic diversity; another, in a desire to be accepted by Edmonton’s larger community. Several band members confirmed the latter point in both words and actions, attempting to spread their music by playing several free concerts at elementary and high schools around Edmonton.⁷ Such open-ness appeared as much within as outside the Caribbean community, as the band spent many hours helping a fledgling calypso group, Savage, to develop their own style and repertory.⁸

This “West Indian-ness,” this easy-going approach to “outsiders” and life extended also to “time.” Executives, managers, and band members exhibited a freer, more fluid approach to time. Many rehearsals as well as gigs began hours after their scheduled start. These delays were accepted and even expected within the West Indian community. For example, I arrived at a West Indian dance two hours late to find that few guests and no members of the band had arrived. When I asked about this approach to time, Dennis Zaiffdeen commented heartily, “So you’ve now been introduced to ‘Trini’ time!”⁹

This approach to time and “West Indian-ness” in general seems linked to the calypso itself. Calypso’s free-spirited style is meant to

liberate its listeners and promote dance, which offers freedom of movement through time. Through its fast and easy tempos and hypnotic beat, calypso seems to reflect the West Indian community's cultural identity.

Conclusion

Personal and cultural identity is affirmed through Tropical Fever's calypso performance. In rehearsals, the group makes the music their own and prepares to offer it to the larger community. At such events as Cariwest, Tropical Fever gives the calypsos life and shares in the community's celebration and affirmation of their cultural selves, their "West Indian-ness." The band's musical process in rehearsal is but one way of reaching this goal. Just as every task in preparation for Cariwest is indispensable to the festival's success, the band's rehearsals are a vital part of building community and affirming identity.

Similarly, every task in the field work was vital to my understanding the meaning behind the band's efforts. Beyond direct observation and interviewing, audio and video technology enabled me to record sound and space, specifics and subtleties in the band's process of integrating calypsos into their repertoire. Discussion between songs revealed much about the process of making musical decisions. In particular, a video-tape sequence in Milton Zaifdeen's basement, seldom used for rehearsals, shows how the community gets involved in the process of making calypsos.

While the band rehearsed "Parbatee," a new calypso for the band's 1992 repertory, a volunteer making costumes for Cariwest, was working in an adjacent room. She entered the rehearsal area to discuss the term "Jahrayin," a prominent word in the song's refrain, helped the band with pronunciation, and explained the term's meaning. Such interruptions were infrequent but well received by the band.¹⁰

Through field work I gained not only a greater understanding of the West Indian community's cultural identity but also, in some respect, of my own identity within the greater Edmonton community. As Christopher Small suggests (1987: 31):

Whatever form of music making or listening we care to engage in, we may be sure that we are taking part in some way in a ritual which affirms the values we ourselves hold.

POSTSCRIPT

Since the completion of this study, Tropical Fever participated in further Cariwest festivals and won several Best Band awards. The integration of the annual calypsos continued and, despite many personnel changes within the group, the band remained a vital component of the West Indian community's music making. For the 1996 festival, Tropical Fever's parade theme was "The Glass Menagerie." Although Tropical Fever disbanded in the Spring of 1997, its role has been taken up by other groups. Cariwest remains an important venue for community building, and the music is its voice.

NOTES

* A version of this paper was read at the 1993 Conference of the Canadian Society for Musical Traditions.

1. Interview with Menon Vishnu, April 1, 1992.
2. Interview with Gavin Williamson, March 25, 1992.
3. Interviews with Menon Vishnu, March 25 and 26, 1992.
4. Interview with Brian Alleyne, January 30, 1992.
5. Interview with "Steve", February 7, 1992.
6. Interviews with Glynis Alleyne, throughout February and March, 1992.
7. Interviews with Gavin Williamson and Menon Vishnu, February 7 and March 25, 1992.
8. Interview with Menon Vishnu, March 25, 1992.
9. Interview with Dennis Zaiffdeen, February 7, 1992.
10. Interviews with members of Tropical Fever, April 8, 1992.

REFERENCES CITED

- Bowles, Paul. (1940). "Calypso: Music of the Antilles." *Modern Music* 17/3: 154-59.
- Brown, Ernest D. (1990). "Carnival, Calypso, and Steelband in Trinidad." *Black Perspective in Music* 18/1-2: 81-100.
- Brown, Lloyd W. (1971). "The Mask That Grins: The Calypso Tradition in the West Indies." *Journal of Popular Culture* 4/3: 683-90.
- Cowley, John. (1985). "Cultural 'Fusions': Aspects of British West Indian Music in the USA and Britain, 1918-1951." *Popular Music* 5: 81-96.
- Gallaugh, Annemarie. (1991). "Researching Calypso as a Way of Life." *Musiology & Ethnomusicology at York* 7: 1-2, 7.

- Grenier, Line and Jocelyne Guilbault. (1990). "“Authority” Revisited: The ‘Other’ in Anthropology and Popular Music Studies.” *Ethnomusicology* 34/3: 381-97.
- Juneja, Renu. (1989). “We Kind of Music.” *Popular Music and Society* 13/1: 37-51.
- Lewin, Olive. (1980). “Calypso.” In Stanley Sadie, ed. *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. London: Macmillan, vol. 3, 634-35.
- Myers, Helen. (1980). “Trinidad and Tobago.” In Stanley Sadie, ed. *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. London: Macmillan, vol. 19, 146-50.
- Quevedo, Raymond. (1983). *Atilla’s Kaiso: A Short History of Trinidad Calypso*. Trinidad and Tobago: University of West Indies Press.
- Regis, Humphrey A. (1988). “Calypso, Reggae and Cultural Imperialism by Re-exportation.” *Popular Music and Society* 12/1: 63-65.
- Shepperd, Patrick. (1984). “Caribana.” *Polyphony: The Bulletin of the Multicultural Historical Society of Ontario* 6/1: 135-39.
- Small, Christopher. (1987). “Performance as Ritual: Sketch for an Enquiry into the True Nature of a Symphony Concert.” In Avron Levine White, ed. *Lost in Music: Culture, Style, and the Musical Event*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 6-32.
- Spradley, James P. (1980). *Participant Observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Warner, Keith Q. (1988). “Calypso, Reggae, and Rastafarianism: Authentic Caribbean Voices.” *Popular Music and Society* 12/1: 53-62.

Résumé: *Michelle Bozynski relate ses expériences avec l'ensemble trinidadien Tropical Fever. Elle se concentre principalement sur les répétitions de cet ensemble pour Cariwest, célébration annuelle du carnaval d'Edmonton, pour étudier les interactions et les valeurs partagées qu'elle a pu relever dans les processus utilisés par le groupe lors de la constitution d'un répertoire et ceux utilisés par la communauté elle-même, au Canada et aux Caraïbes. Dans son article, Mme Bozynski, qui cite des théoriciens tels que Spradley et Small, nous offre une réflexion sur ses fonctions diverses de chercheuse et de participante.*