

Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal

Volume 3

Issue 2 *Calypso and the Caribbean Literary*

Imagination: A Special Issue

Article 2

December 2005

Bop Girl Goes Calypso: Containing Race and Youth Culture in Cold War America

Michael S. Eldridge

anthuriumcaribjournal@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium>

Recommended Citation

Eldridge, Michael S. (2005) "Bop Girl Goes Calypso: Containing Race and Youth Culture in Cold War America," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol3/iss2/2>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal by an authorized editor of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact repository.library@miami.edu.

In early July 1957, United Artists rushed into wide release its latest contribution to the burgeoning “teen-pic” genre. The film’s improbable plot revolves around a dour psychology grad student (played by a thirty-eight-year-old Bobby Troup) whose empirical data on mass hysteria show incontrovertibly that rock and roll is about to be supplanted by calypso—much to the dismay of his bald, bespectacled, rock-loving thesis advisor. The professor’s club-owner chum, Barney—a crass, cigar-chomping lunkhead who has bet his business’s future on rock and roll—belligerently dismisses young Bob’s findings. But Professor Winthrop, who ruefully understands that “you can’t argue with science,” contrives to save his skeptical friend from ruin by persuading the club’s main attraction, perky ingenue Jo Thomas (Judy Tyler, who would costar that same year with Elvis Presley in *Jailhouse Rock*), to study under his own star pupil behind her boss’s back. When Barney belatedly learns of Jo’s clandestine flirtation, he sees red—until he watches her raise the roof at a rival venue with a vaguely tropical tune exhorting calypso to “roll” and “rock” in order to “raise [its] flock.” Then, with all the zealotry of the fresh convert, he rechristens his own nightspot “Club Trinidad,” strings palm fronds and fishnets on the walls and ceiling, bedecks himself and his staff in tattered shirts and straw hats, and takes to addressing his patrons as “Gatos” (“That’s calypso for ‘Cats,’” he explains). Vindicating Bob’s thesis, the youthful club-goers at the former “Club Down Beat” are duly hysterical over Jo’s new act. Record executives materialize out of thin air, falling over each other to sign her, and everyone, we’re given to understand, lives happily ever after.

The fairy-tale ending actually would not have seemed so implausible when filming began a couple of months earlier. The Calypso Craze was then at its zenith, and brash predictions of rock’s imminent demise filled the air. But the reason it later seemed preposterous—and the reason for the studio’s nervous haste in hustling the movie, strangely titled *Bop Girl Goes Calypso*, to market—was that it turned out to be a very late entry in the calypso derby. Following on the heels of two earlier contenders, Allied Artists’ *Calypso Joe* (with Ellington alumnus Herb Jeffries in the title role, opposite a then unknown Angie Dickinson) and Columbia’s *Calypso Heat Wave* (featuring aspiring song-and-dance man Joel Grey and lounge singer Maya Angelou), United Artists’ picture hit the screens in a much different climate, as the fad was fizzling, and the film’s “Rock versus Calypso” premise was largely moot. Calypso, it was generally agreed, had lost.

Never mind that United Artists had hedged its bets on the outcome of the contest all along: advertising the picture as a battle of “Rock ‘n’ Roll vs. Calypso!” committed the studio to neither one combatant nor the other. Indeed, the film’s promotional packet encouraged theater owners to sell “tropical” tchotchkes in their lobbies while hosting neighborhood “Rock-‘n’-Roll Nights,” and to stage “Rock vs. Calypso” competitions by recruiting placard-carrying teenagers, soliciting “campaign” coverage from hometown radio DJs, and holding mock elections officiated by local personalities and music writers. But in the rubble of the calypso craze crash, *Bop Girl*’s promoters scrambled to play down its Caribbean content even further. Exhorting “hepsters” of all stripes to “beat those bongos and let those trumpets wail,” they generously pledged that “rock-

'n'-roll addicts ... calypsomaniacs, and just the plain jazz lover will all find something to cheer about." Though some posters, lobby cards and newspaper ads still billed the film as the "Greatest Calypso Carnival"—"A fiesta with a bongo beat about a curvy calypso cutie who taught a square prof all the angles!," others dubbed it the "Greatest *Rock 'n' Roll* Carnival," and still others (less ambiguously, if more provocatively) the "Greatest Rock 'n' Roll *Riot* Ever" (emphasis added). In some cities, moreover, the film's title was mysteriously truncated to *Bop Girl*. Finally, while a handful of ads and posters retained an image of Judy Tyler in an outlandish "creole damsel" get-up with frilly cuffs and collar, the majority showed her busting off the page as a tight-skirted, open-shirted rocker striking an insolent juvenile delinquent pose.¹

What makes this marketing muddle of lasting interest, however, is not so much its schizophrenia as the candor—perhaps the cynicism—with which it unveils the broken-down mechanism of the calypso fad's promotion, which had been slapdash and jury-rigged all along. *Bop Girl's* own thematic viewpoint is similarly haphazard. Even as the film cheerfully alleges that calypso carries the day, it makes a much more convincing case for the *real-life* winner of the rock-versus-calypso sweepstakes. A crucial exchange midway through the picture between Bob and a still-skeptical Jo, for instance, apologizes for rock and roll at some length. Explaining that the hysteria over rock is a "symptomatic reaction" of "American youth" to their many "problems, fears, and hopes," Bob feelingly philosophizes about how rock songs make one feel "emotionally ... safe, by anchoring you to Mother Earth even as you soar like a balloon." Sadly, he explains, the mooring that rock provides can't last, because "we're in a very restless world, always demanding something new." But luckily, calypso has not only "tremendous excitement potential," but "roots ... [that] go very deep in the ground," and lyrics which (in his bizarre estimation) "are the plaintive lament of the wearied worker ... the escape valve that makes it possible to go on living." "Like our [sic] very own spirituals!" marvels Jo. Making room for a "*calypso* spiritual" on the American cultural scene, she and Bob agree, is the one remaining challenge. Yet even Tyler's pivotal tune complains that calypso "Don't move my feet" because it's "Too soft and sweet." If it ever hopes to attract a young audience, she scolds, it will have to "Get with the beat"—the Rock 'n' Roll beat. ("Oo-ba, shoo-ba / Rock, Calypso! / Oo-ba, shoo-ba / Roll, Calypso!" she chirps, with her backup band, Lord Flea and His Calypsonians, gamely seconding the motion.)

Her sound proposal is undercut by the fact that in the world of the film, calypso *doesn't* become more like rock; nor, contrary to what the narrative ostensibly proposes, does rock become more like calypso. Rather, both come to sound more like Les Baxter, and the fact that the film's logic leads to such a tawdry musical compromise—what one wag calls "a cultural hybrid native to no place outside the San Fernando Valley"—betrays the even-handed timidity of its message.² What this underscores again is that the supposed battle between rock and calypso—which the press had played up from the earliest days of the Calypso Craze—had been bogus from the outset, a pseudo-contest which the music industry had gladly countenanced if not staged outright. It stood to profit from the outcome either way.

At the same time, however, the film's wishy-washy proposition that the dispute might be resolved by having it both ways cannily reflects not just Mr. and Mrs. America's Atomic-Age anxiety over the potential explosiveness of rock and roll, but their fundamental ambivalence about substituting calypso as the object of their daughter's musical affections. On its face, that is, the story—even the title—of the film is a tidy encapsulation of the wishful fantasy that the American teen (personified as a spunky, fresh-faced, yet dangerously sexual "Girl") might renounce her unhealthy fascination with that degenerate Negro music and "Go" for the altogether more wholesome calypso.³ But what, in the context of such fantastic racial and sexual psychothematics, could it have meant to "Go Calypso"? For calypso was surely an unlikely candidate for the salvation of American Girlhood from the imminent peril of rock and roll.

The underlying logic of the pipe dream was incoherent on at least two counts. That calypso was *also* an historically black cultural form had long been conveniently overlooked in the US, explained away with the tacit understanding that the refined manners and quaint accents of its indigenous practitioners rendered them a different *sort* of black—black with an asterisk, as it were. (One reason that "boatloads of returning tourists" from the West Indies had come home to America "the most ardent calypso disciples," opined one contemporary magazine, was that "[y]ou're no sooner off the boat than you're regaled with a personalized calypso tone-poem rendered in Oxford accents" (Sasso 80).) West Indian blacks, moreover, weren't currently demanding to "integrate" with the American body social then, or so it seemed. While Lord Flea and his Calypsonians (in reality a souped-up mento band "discovered" and promoted in the US by a Miami hotelier) might add a tinge of authentic tropical color, not to mention a gust of sensual tropical "heat," to the cool pallor of *Bop Girl's* collegiate clubland, structurally speaking the film's truecalypso champion—and the title character's designated love interest—is the woodenly dispassionate Bobby Troup. Calypso's blackness is thereby provisionally erased, or at least tightly enclosed, within a blond, crew cut wrapper. Flea and company signify in a different register, evoking a happy-faced, tropical version of plantation-apartheid in which dark-skinned people still exist primarily to serve and entertain white people. At home or abroad, West Indian blacks were thus exoticized, held symbolically at a tourist's distance, confined to the stage or the other side of the serving tray. Flea and his "calypsonians" conform to the type: as grinning, head-wagging, straw-hat caricatures, they are props for Bop Girl to regard and perhaps mimic, but never touch, figuratively or otherwise. In fact, the one time Tyler so much as shares the stage with Lord Flea, is when she is pointedly refusing to "dig" calypso: "I gotta bring down and knock Calypso / 'Cause you don't rock, Calypso." In the face of her censure, he and the band are reduced to barely articulate, bongo-playing "savages" complaisantly parroting the "Oo-ba, Shoo-ba" chorus. To the extent that calypso ever "get[s] with" rock and roll's "beat," then, it does so within the starched confines of white-bread romance.

More awkward was the fact that if rock and roll was held by anxious parents to be inherently salacious, calypso could hardly be thought less so, least of all in its typically American incarnations, which by the mid-1950s made a great show of being spicy and risqué.

Even Journalist Robert Metz, who seems to have originated the orthodox line that calypso was doing “what a multitude of mothers and a corps of cops could never do: drown out rock ‘n’ roll music,” deadpanned that “[w]hether [calypso’s ascendance] will be good or bad for the morals of teenagers ... is a question open to debate.”⁴ One pulp monthly, *Real: The Exciting Magazine for Men*, was even blunter. The joke was on the “blue-noses,” it smirked: “If they were rattled by some naughty rock tunes, they will become positively obstreperous” once they really listen to calypso. Its “animalistic” beat is “throbbing” across the country, *Real* leered, while its lyrics (on “Ekberg’s bosom [and] Elvis’ pelvis”) “swim free-style from one line of sex to another” (Sasso 80).⁵

The observation was specious, if only partly so. It is true, of course, that an important strain in calypso tradition (about which most Americans were in any event thoroughly ignorant) made creative use of double entendre and innuendo, usually in the service of boilerplate boasts of romantic prowess or jabs at the moral hypocrisy and sexual indiscretions of the rich and powerful. Indeed, the Trinidadian middle classes had for decades waged a quixotic campaign to launder calypso and other carnival practices of such embarrassing tendencies, and calypsonians had repeatedly mounted spirited defenses of the redeeming social merits of their art.⁶ Yet to acknowledge this racy subgenre hardly implies that calypso *per se*, as many Americans seemed to think, was “all about” sex. When it took matters sexual as its subject, Trinidadian calypso was often suggestive, sometimes ribald, but rarely crude. Yet the same could hardly be said for much of what passed for calypso in mid-1950s America—which was determinedly, exaggeratedly, vulgar, even as it wore this vulgarity as a badge of authenticity. *Real*’s pulp sensationalism was an extreme case, but among American journalists it was nevertheless an article of faith that in its pristine, “unexpurgated” state, calypso was variously “sassy,” “shady,” “naughty,” “risqué,” “earthy,” “bawdy.” Genuine calypsos, every hack knowingly reported, were “strictly suitable for stag parties”—“so spicy they ha[d] to be laundered for American audiences.”⁷ It’s hardly surprising, then, that for many American fans, calypso’s alleged lubricity was the very basis of its appeal. Even the sober *New York Herald-Tribune* stated matter-of-factly that “the not-too-well-hidden meaning is basic to calypso’s success” (Kavaler 4). The Duke of Iron (Cecil Anderson), a Trinidadian émigré who sang calypso in Harlem and Manhattan throughout the 1940s, had recently staged a comeback on the strength of such sophomoric single-entendres as “[She Had] Lovely Parakeets,” “She Has Freckles On Her, But,” “I Left Her Behind for You,” and his signature tune, the notorious “Big Bamboo.”⁸ To the *Herald-Trib*’s interviewer, he simply shrugged: Americans demand songs about sex, so what’s a poor calypsonian to do?

How, then, could suburban parents in a panic over rock and roll’s threat to their children’s moral hygiene (and, by implication, its menace of contagion of the social order with the germs of restiveness increasingly associated with black people) possibly see calypso as a preferable alternative to the demon rock and roll? They could do so, above all, by personifying it in Harry Belafonte.

This was hardly a stretch. Though Belafonte was a native New Yorker, his infatuation with calypso was rooted in long spells of his childhood spent in Jamaica, where he was exposed to a wide variety of Caribbean music—including Trinidad’s carnival music, whose practitioners regularly circulated throughout the West Indies, both in person and on disc. After refashioning himself as a folk singer in 1951 (the makeover followed a critically encouraging but personally unfulfilling debut as a jazz-pop crooner), Belafonte had begun incorporating Caribbean material into his repertoire, quickly turning two old 78s by King Radio, “Man Smart, Woman Smarter” and “Matilda,” into reliable show-stoppers.⁹ In 1954, his puckish performance of “Hold Him Joe,” a traditional (and somewhat risqué) West Indian tune also known as “My Donkey Want Water,” in the Broadway revue *John Murray Anderson’s Almanac*, garnered rave reviews. By this point, Belafonte’s star was rising fast: his nightclub act, which easily sold out the largest rooms in the bigger cities, was drawing fanatical audiences and sensational notices in the trade papers, and he was beginning to land promising roles in high-profile Hollywood films. Finally, when a segment he headlined for NBC-TV’s *Colgate Comedy Hour* (“Holiday in Trinidad,” conceived as a kind of musical tour of the West Indies) in October 1955 won him still more national acclaim, he lobbied RCA to let him put out an entire album’s worth of West Indian songs. The result, *Calypso!* was recorded that same autumn but diffidently issued by RCA only in May 1956.

Belafonte’s legions of fans sent the album to number one on the charts by September (it would become the first LP ever to sell a million copies in its first year), but the befuddled label neglected to release a single until late October, after a hitherto obscure folk trio called The Tarriers began climbing the charts and appearing on *Your Hit Parade* with an adaptation of “The Banana Boat Song” they’d learned from folksinger Bob Gibson, who had in turn picked it up while working on cruise boats off the coast of Florida.¹⁰ RCA then rush-released Belafonte’s own “Banana Boat Song (Day-O),” which his frequent collaborator Irving Burgie had lifted from other Jamaican folk sources.¹¹ Belafonte’s version quickly eclipsed The Tarriers,’ though both were covered instantly by everyone from Steve Lawrence to Sarah Vaughan. By the time *Billboard* announced “Hot Trend: Trinidad Tunes” in hyperventilating headlines on the cover of its December 26th issue, the Calypso Craze was well underway.

For all the sound and fury associated with it, however, the calypso wagon was always firmly hitched to Belafonte’s star. And despite Belafonte’s famous reluctance to accept the title of “Calypso King” conferred on him by an eager press (he decried the Craze loudly and repeatedly), the hundreds who tried, and mainly failed, to hit big with calypso were largely riding the King’s coattails. Every newspaper and magazine article about the Craze devoted an obligatory paragraph or two to speculation on its causes, with explanations ranging from the sociological (the postwar rise in Caribbean tourism) to the mystical (calypso’s “irresistible” beat). Most, however, eventually settled on what one fan magazine dubbed “the Belafonte-Did-It-Theory:” without Belafonte, this hypothesis went, calypso would have been nothing (Green 21).¹² Lead singer Tony Williams of the Platters, quizzed by *Melody Maker* as he toured the UK

for his own analysis of the latest rage back home, put the matter succinctly: “if you don’t dig [calypso] in the States, then you’re square,” he allowed. Yet he quickly cautioned against making too much of that fact, as “all that craze is due to Belafonte.” And in any case, he demurred, calypso “won’t go as far as rock-‘n’-roll” (qtd. in T. Brown).

For the vast majority of Americans, then, the Calypso Craze was really what *Look* magazine dubbed a “Belafonte Boom:” in the popular mind, the exciting singer and the exotic song were virtually synonymous. That Belafonte’s followers were overwhelmingly white no doubt speaks to the racial politics of the entertainment business in general, but in particular it shows how easily whites could embrace Belafonte as the exceptional black man: well-spoken, intelligent, charismatic, and, well ... *sexy*. While his nightclub act was all class, his open-shirted, tight-trousered costume deliberately emphasized his trim, muscular physique. At this point in his career, moreover, Belafonte was not only a top-drawing nightclub entertainer and a chart-topping recording artist, he was beginning to look like the first *bona fide* black screen idol, as well. Women, white and black, teenaged and middle-aged, regularly mobbed him backstage, captivated by what one fan magazine called “his ‘Valentino-like’ spell” (“Girls” 45). His sultry, light-skinned good looks, together with the lilting accent he affected for his West Indian repertoire, imbued him with a marketable “exotic” racial ambiguity, and Belafonte himself admits that he was someone of whom a liberal-minded white father might comfortably, if disingenuously, say, “that’s the kind of Negro I’d like my daughter to date.” If the overriding aim of the all-American dad were to contain his daughter’s fascination for the Big Bad Black Man, then, it would seem to make perfect sense to channel her errant attraction towards the genial Belafonte.¹³

Of course, this “Negro” whom many whites saw as non-threatening was actually a political radical whose leftist sympathies and support of the Civil Rights movement became more open as the repressive climate of the Cold War eased. But the ironies surrounding Belafonte in this context are multiple. For starters, the man who exuded (and cultivated) an undeniable sex appeal was himself on a mission to clean up calypso’s slack image. As he saw it, American calypso’s vulgar penchant for titillating double-entendres pandered to the worst racist clichés about black folks in general and lascivious island “natives” in particular. To counteract such demeaning representations, Belafonte now says that he aimed to project a more dignified and sophisticated image of West Indians and West Indian culture.¹⁴ But in some sense Belafonte’s earnestness missed the point. That is, it overlooked the likelihood that the scurrilousness at which he took such umbrage was itself being propounded ironically: in performance, songs like “The Big Bamboo” and “Don’t Touch Me Tomato” were insufferably cute and corny, their hokey sexuality brimming with ostentatious camp.¹⁵

Such irony can cut both ways, of course. If all those blue calypsos were only ironically—and therefore safely—outrageous, it was in part precisely *because* of what Belafonte had alleged: that they were openly trading on shopworn stereotypes about “natives” of all sorts, whose sexuality (as the West has perennially delighted in discovering, from Vespucci to Gaugin to

“South Pacific”) is at once thrillingly uninhibited¹⁶ and disarmingly innocent. *Real: The Exciting Magazine for Men* put the paradoxical chestnut just that baldly: calypso was unquestionably all about sex, yet at the same time it was “childishly naïve” (81), infused with “a kind of perverse purity:” “no matter how shady the implication ... seems to be,” *Real* insisted, calypso “retains an underlying native innocence that the staid statesider can’t quite comprehend” (Sasso 80). The standard calypso costume—the garish colors, the exaggerated tatters, the outlandish straw hats, etc.—overplayed the point, fairly screaming carefree poverty and cornball rusticity. Even many of calypso’s more serious explicators wound up shilling it as a sort of siren song with the power to transport repressed Northerners to more easygoing mental climes. Geoffrey Holder, the phenomenal young Trinidadian dancer-choreographer who had risen to fame after bringing his own troupe to the States on a shoestring (he eventually danced in *Aida* at the Met and acted in *Waiting for Godot* on Broadway, though his breakthrough came in Harold Arlen’s exoticist *House of Flowers*), sympathetically explained to the *Herald-Tribune* that “[i]n a tense city like New York where people are busy making money, they seize upon calypso as a way to make them lose their inhibitions” (Kavaler 4). And dance instructor Robert Luis concluded the purple-prosed introduction to his booklet *Authentic Calypso: the Song, the Music, the Dance* even more amenably:

To the native of the Indies calypso means unbridled happiness, a release from life’s tensions and frustrations ... rum and drums ... dance and romance.

To his North American counterpart, the tense, overworked businessman of our bustling metropoleis [sic], calypso can also offer a wonderful fount of relaxation. (N.p. [5], ellipses in original.)

The travel industry had long drawn from the same well of clichés about tropical paradises filled with lithe black bodies, touristic truisms that served as comforting reconfirmations of familiar stereotypes. There was nothing inherently unsettling, then, about the idea of morally unrestrained “natives” so grateful for our financial attentions that they might freely grant certain other favors in return. Contained within such colonialist paradigms of knowledge (not to mention symbolically sidelined to an offshore environment where the racial and sexual strictures of Cold War America were understood to be more or less suspended), calypso was thus effectively neutered, and any potential disturbance it might pose to middle-class America’s moral equanimity was checked in advance.¹⁷ This begins to explain how calypso, for all its vaunted licentiousness, could be envisioned as a more acceptable (black) suitor for the wayward affections of white American girlhood. The “camp” factor ensured that calypso’s sex appeal—like Belafonte’s, in a way—was largely notional. Like the standard-issue straw-hat-and-tattered-trouser costume of the American calypso performer, it was *schtick*, albeit a *schtick* which quietly maintained the old colonialist myth of native simplicity while loudly protesting that any soupçon of suggestiveness in the infantilized *indigène* was merely a put-on. Under such guise, any over-the-top sleaziness could be excused as apparently off-color but ultimately all in fun. To lure teens away from hot rods, rock and roll, general disaffection and delinquency, then, calypso had to

seem naughty enough to be appealingly transgressive—but the naughtiness had to be scripted, managed, and *contained*.

The teens, to their credit, weren't falling for it. As a strategy of containment, the calypso switch was perhaps too cheerfully transparent. And anyway, if the teens weren't quite buying calypso, then neither, exactly, were the adults who peddled it. In fact, the patent phoniness of the fad was another theme that was sounded early and widely: the distinction between authentic and synthetic, ersatz and genuine, "the bonafide Calypsonian and the commercial singer of calypso songs who merely pretends to legitimacy" (*Calypso* fanzine 25)—this was a commonplace in Craze reportage. So when Belafonte inveighed against the record industry's shameless opportunism, irritated that what was being fobbed off on a credulous public as calypso was not in fact calypso (and incensed, moreover, that calypso's true folk roots were being obscured and perverted in the bargain), he wasn't really saying anything that dozens of others hadn't remarked upon before. Robert Metz, for instance, taking *Variety*'s sardonic cue about "the Brill B[uilding] set" churning out calypsos "by the steel drumful" ("Calypso Here I Come"), likewise disparaged Tin Pan Alley's slapdash cynicism: "professional tunesmiths have thrown away their handbooks on rock 'n' roll," he reported, "and have begun grinding out 'calypso' songs which have little if any relation to the real thing."

There was a general awareness, too, of the hokum factor behind the Craze's prevailing aesthetic: no story was complete without a throwaway line about the scads of nightclubs nationwide that (like *Bop Girl's Club* Trinidad) were hastily flinging up "a batch of fishnet cork floats" and relaunching themselves as calypso lounges ("Trinidad Time"). That this stock theme-décor was conceived as pure theater is borne out by a description in Harlem's *New York Amsterdam News* of the Ekim Calypso Dock, newly opened in the back room of a venerable Irish bar near Columbia University. "[D]esigned and created by Danny Wright, a former off-Broadway producer," the club was "an actual reproduction [!] of a Caribbean pier, as culled from the travels of its creator: fish nets, rum barrels, ropes and costumed waiters, will add to the atmosphere" ("New Calypso Room Opens"). Meanwhile, *Variety* noted "the rapidity with which a lot of Harlemites have hidden their origins, accented the wrong syllables and are now passing themselves off as being from the islands" ("Could Calypso").¹⁸ When *Time* finally weighed in on "Calypsomania" a month later, it led off by drily observing the brisk sales of ready-made "Calypso Kits (including bongo drums, a gourd and a pair of maracas)" at New York's "august music-house," G. Schirmer (the entry-level kit listed at \$24.50).

In fact, to hear Robert Dana tell it in the *New York World-Telegram and Sun*'s weekend magazine, it was an open secret that American calypso was deliberately, slickly inauthentic, and that many if not most of the top performers favored "highly commercial adaptations" that were "streamlined to fit the untutored American taste" (10-11).¹⁹ In view of this, The Fabulous McClevertys, a successful calypso act from the Virgin Islands, struck Dana as having found the perfect middle ground: they "make no unnecessary concessions to commercialism but compromise only in making lyrics intelligible." Moreover, "[t]hey retain the authentic rhythms

but expurgate lyrics and watch their diction”—exactly the qualities that critics were applauding in the reluctant King of Calypso, Harry Belafonte. At this relatively early stage of the Craze, in fact, while many observers prized Belafonte precisely (though misguidedly, as he was at great pains to point out) for his supposed “authenticity,” others were of the opinion that imitation calypso was actually *preferable* to whatever the real thing might be.

A comparison of two notices in the January 2nd issue of *Variety* is telling. The same (anonymous) reviewer found the material performed at Montreal’s “El Morocco” by King Caribe and his Steel Bandits (“all legit personalities from Trinidad,” he asserted—though unbeknownst to him, they had only lately, and expediently, taken up calypso) lively and colorful, but too “specialized”: it “would perhaps be more effective in these climes to work in a few of the more familiar West Indies chants.” By contrast, the effete frippery of Lord Lance (a white Englishman whose gimmickry included a monocle and top hat) actually “boosts overall values because [he stays] with the more obvious items”—that is, the pseudo-calypso standards that North American audiences had come to expect—rather than “the more obscure calypso routines that a native group might inject” (“New Acts”). That this frank preference for *faux* was justified by appealing to a need for latitudinal adjustment is striking, especially considering the rather distorted geographical lens through which Americans habitually viewed the Caribbean; it amounts to an unabashed contention that Americans’ dopey ideas about the West Indies should govern the performance aesthetic of what they took to be West Indian music. (There were shades of this sentiment even in Belafonte’s well-intentioned ambitions to dramatize and “interpret” West Indian folk music for American ears.) The Versatones, alumni of Harold Arlen’s *House of Flowers* and protégés of Belafonte, put the claim more bluntly: authentic calypso, they declared, was beat-heavy but melodically dull and monotonous; Americans, to their credit, “try to make it more musically interesting” (qtd. in Dana 10).

Perhaps the most influential proponent of this line of thinking, however, was Manny Warner, talent scout, (self-) promoter, and founder of Monogram Records, which somewhat grandiosely claimed to have the “largest [and] latest [calypso] catalogue in the world.” While lamenting the dearth of “authentic talent” in the U.S.—and he meant to get right on top of that problem—Warner insisted nevertheless that “[f]or the general public . . . some Calypso songs must be tailor-made. Authentic Calypso, being the folk medium it is, deals with local problems and is delivered in the patois of the Islands. Much of its meaning is lost when presented to a mass American audience.” To answer “the need for songs which retain the native flavor, but are more suited to the requirements of an American audience,” then, Warner simply decided to write his own stuff (“Behind the Scenes”). Thus was born “Big Bamboo,” “Parakeets,” and a flood of other off-color tunes, which undoubtedly figured among the “more obvious items” that *Variety* had in mind. Jean Ferdulli, who had opened Chicago’s pioneering calypso nightclub The Blue Angel in 1953 largely at Warner’s instigation, was just as brazen if a bit more incoherent: “Calypso,” he told *Ebony*, “must be treated with respect”—which, for him, meant precisely that “[it] must be embellished and glamorized. It must be packaged correctly,” he clarified. “If it is

not treated with respect,” he concluded, more presciently than he realized, “I believe it will die” (“Fad”).

In short, if most American fans preferred calypso processed, glamorized, and embellished—“Calypso, American Style,” one fanzine called it—and if, in the end, this was “not really calypso” ... well, then, as *Time* magazine breezily concluded, “no one seem[ed] to care” (“Calypsomania” 50). At least, not anyone who much mattered. “Already complaints are being heard,” *Time* fretted, “that U.S. calypso ... is corrupting a fine old tradition, just as old-time jazz lovers thought big-band, arranged jazz was a sad decline from the old, improvised New Orleans roughhouse.” But the tone of *Time*’s report also implied an awareness that nostalgia would be an ineffectual response to the taste of the American consumer. And the analogy it employed suggested that in any event, such wistful sentiments were largely confined to reverent paternalists who (like LeRoi Jones’s “Dixieland revivalists”) arrogantly imagined they knew what “ancient colored men” should sound like, now and forever (Jones 203).

That assessment was not so far from the mark, actually—though in calypso’s case, the self-styled purists were actually romantic types more concerned with preserving certain imaginary qualities possessed by dusky tropical maidens. In the summer of 1955, the eminent jazz critic Leonard Feather led the way as he haughtily recounted his own recent visits to Jamaica and the Bahamas, pronouncing himself disappointed in the profusion of “bastardized” calypso he found there, clearly the product of American tourists’ predilections. Trinidad itself, he speculated ignorantly, might still be relatively unspoiled, and he hoped to get there one day. In the meantime, at least, Belafonte was giving us the real hot item back home.

The idea that American brutes had deflowered West Indian virgins, pressuring them to surrender what *Real* magazine referred to as their “native musical innocence ... [by] consciously catering to what they believe Americans will like” (Sasso 81), was not new: novelist, composer and amateur orientalist Paul Bowles had founded this school of criticism in response to the passing calypso fad of late-1930s New York, and many calypsonians also maintained (with more than a little chauvinist pique) that American GIs had ravished Trinidad and its culture during World War II, usually with the compliance of what they figured as a two-timing local jezebel. This was not quite what Feather, Sasso, and Co. had in mind, as their version of the gripe ascribed all agency to the big, brawny Americans, without considering whether their Trinidadian partners might have had some role in engineering, or indeed profiting from, the long, complicated affair. In any event, their brand of paternalism characterized a whole cottage industry of self-appointed experts and purists full of sniffy indignation over the dreck that now passed for calypso.²⁰ Some, especially early in the decade, were holdouts from the New York-based Folk Song movement of the ‘30s and ‘40s, which under the banner of a kind of popular-front internationalism had earnestly championed calypso as the unvarnished expression of one of the world’s folk cultures. Though the dwindling disciples of this vision—artists, activists, intellectuals and college students—were ever more marginalized as “arty” and elitist, and/or simply persecuted as un-American in the early 1950s, for all such true believers “the folk”

were *ipso facto* authentic, and the slightest taint of commercialism was anathema. An October 1950 *New York Times* review of a performance by Massie Patterson's Carib Singers, one of several ethnographically-oriented folk troupes in New York that catered to liberal white audiences, gives a glimpse into the widening schism between two competing aesthetics: what Miss Patterson's singers and dancers provided, said the *Times* approvingly, was "authentic" folksong from the Islands, "not a night-club Trinidad."

Other devotees had actually come by their enthusiasm for calypso via commercial means, a sin for which they sought to atone by cultivating the supercilious authority and fanatical attention to detail characteristic of the jazz buff and the record collector. Unlike the tasteless, gullible masses, they knew what the "real thing" was, and they sought it out intensely. Though these aficionados rarely spoke for themselves, they were alluded to in the press as the nameless "purists" who "will no doubt tell you that ... true calypso ... like ... Dixieland jazz ... should be extemporized" (Ellin), the connoisseurs whose collective opinion formed the basis of the authentic/synthetic split that structured so much of the reporting on the Calypso Craze. Belafonte (who, *Variety* once said gratefully, had taken folk singing out of the "arty" confines of Greenwich Village) was often conscripted to serve as spokesman for this camp. According to the sidebar of a *Newsweek* story whose overriding purpose was to decide the degree to which the current craze (which "embrace[d] all manner of rhythmic Caribbean aberrations") could "claim some legitimate kinship with the true calypso," Belafonte wanted "no identification with 'this so-called calypso'. ... No matter how big this craze gets [he declared], I will never sing one of those phony numbers merely to sell a lot of records" ("Calypso Craze").²¹ Surveying the "burgeoning battle between the calypso purists and the make-a-quick-buck copyists," Robert Sasso of *Real* found that Belafonte's hot (if half-accurate) denunciations even suited the pulp magazine's punchy prose style:

Authentic calypso is a very special song form. ... Synthetic calypsos are just gimmicky tunes that lack the throbbing 2/4 or 4/4 beat. This current mania for some of the musical nonsense conveniently labeled calypso is due in large measure to Tin Pan Alley. They feel that rock 'n' roll has just about lost steam—and they are starting to push calypso and the poor imitations for all they are worth. I want no part of the hysteria or to be associated with any cult form whatsoever. (80)

When Belafonte couldn't be trotted out to make this point, however, actual Trinidadians (or Trinidadian expatriates, or even singers commonly mistaken for Trinidadians) would do. *Down Beat* set the precedent in mid-1956 with a feature on the Mighty Panther, a well-regarded veteran of the Young Brigade Tent who was then making his American debut at Chicago's Blue Angel. The story dutifully followed Panther's lead in distinguishing between dues-paying tent calypsonians and all the "commercial singers of Calypso only pretending to legitimacy" (by which he principally meant Belafonte) who were showing up on US marquees (L. Brown). That Panther had labored to "[make] Americans keenly aware of the difference between the true

calypso and the ersatz,” however, didn’t prevent him from claiming authorship of the notoriously phony “Big Bamboo,” which he recorded, along with several other famous pseudo-calypsos, for an album promoted by his American label as “A Party Record for Adults to Enjoy.”²² Some months later, Robert Metz called upon another *bona fide* calypsonian, Gorilla, who likewise explained that the ability to compose extemporaneously was the main distinction between “pure” calypsonians and calypso *singers*, who merely memorized other people’s tunes. (In Gorilla’s opinion, Belafonte was strictly speaking neither one nor the other.) This axiom was lazily echoed by scores of journalists, who dropped it into potted histories in which calypso was romanticized as having descended from the secret language of slaves forbidden to speak but permitted to sing. Only on rare occasions, as in Jesse DeVore’s profile of the Mighty Dictator, “one of the few authentic calypsonians in the United States,” in the *New York Amsterdam News*, was the difference elaborated upon more precisely.

For *Real* magazine, meanwhile, it was the US-based Duke of Iron, whose calypso résumé dated back to 1940, who assumed the role of grizzled veteran authorized to draw such a distinction. “The current crop of ersatz calypso chanters,” he scoffed, were “parasitic parrots. They memorize the melody and lyrics to a handful of songs and spend their time singing them repeatedly. They have no imagination. No fervor. Nothing. ... A true calypsonian is an artist, a creator, a man of deep sensitivity. He creates his lyrics from what is at hand. ... Calypso in its truest form is a topical kind of music” (qtd. in Sasso 80-81). How the Duke squared this principled stand with the fact that he himself had had no experience as a calypsonian before emigrating to America, wrote almost none of his own material, and had lately revived his flagging career by flogging a handful of off-color tunes he had recorded for Manny Warner’s Monogram Records, isn’t known.²³ Even *The New Yorker* descended from its Olympian heights, in the company of its “eloquent friend” Joseph Willoughby, gentlemanly elder statesman of the West Indian community in Harlem, who had served the preceding autumn as the magazine’s native informant on the quaint customs of West Indian carnival (“Mardi Gras”). As the composer of several popular calypsos himself (he co-authored Louis Jordan’s 1946 hit “Run Joe,” which had been dusted off for the current craze), Willoughby was in a hard place: he stood to profit personally from the current fad, and was understandably loath to invite a “conspicuous and regrettable diminution of the possible financial rewards.” Yet he obligingly regretted the sensational character of the more commercially oriented calypsos, fearing “that the cause of calypso [was] not being well served artistically,” and he spent the bulk of the piece holding forth on the characteristics of the more genteel and erudite brand of calypso that he personally preferred (“Life and Love”).

In the end, though, all of this semi-informed and sometimes self-contradictory quibbling—this ventriloquizing of Trinidadians in order to bolster one’s otherwise dubious authority (clearly the word of a Geoffrey Holder, “a man who first heard [calypso] from his mother,” could not be gainsaid)—wasn’t about the distinction between ersatz and authentic *per se*. The cheesy material that Lord Kitchener—whose credibility was hardly in question (he was

perhaps the most revered calypsonian in Trinidad of the past half-century)—was then performing for audiences in Britain rendered those categories problematic, at the very least. The paramount thing was the mere act of *making* the distinction. Declaring one's quasi-ethnographic knowledge of “the real thing,” asserting one's power to discriminate between the genuine and the phony, clucking your tongue over slick American louts perverting pristine folk traditions—this was finally a way of establishing and defending imperial claims of knowing. The smirking insinuation that “we know what the real thing is, and it's much too earthy for clean-living Americans”—at root another effort at racial and sexual containment, albeit a more titillating and seemingly transgressive one—was an earlier variation on the theme. But the implied argument, nearly Conradian in nature, behind the sniggers went something like this: Yes, we're foisting this cute hokum on the American public, though we all know what lurks underneath its campy veneer. Namely, the lure of the *real* calypso: its full-strength, “animalistic,” island sexuality, to which American nightclub calypso continually refers, if only as the shadow refers to the substance. For decency's sake, the truth of calypso has got to stay suppressed—but it is still there, hidden (luckily, luckily).

Depending upon the character it ascribed to the authentically exotic, then (virgin or whore, noble savage or savage she-devil), the discerning pose was rooted in an off-the-shelf ethnography or the sophomoric self-regard of an adolescent empire. In either case, it reflected a uniquely American brand of callow internationalism, the geopolitical and cultural outlook of a nation eager to claim a worldly sophistication at just the moment it was claiming ownership of the world (and remaking it in its image).²⁴

Elaine Tyler May argues that the relative security of the suburban domestic idyll was always felt by those who lived it to be precarious and fragile, under a tacit but ever-present threat from all sorts of shadowy outsiders as well as from more immediate rumblings of social disintegration. It is crucial to keep in mind, then, that as Americans went crazy for calypso, the *birthplace* of Calypso, like much of the rest of the Third World, was clamoring for independence from its colonial masters. Often with relative order and civility, though sometimes with considerable rancor and bloodshed, black people the world over were seizing control of their destinies, and it must have been plain to anyone who cared to look that, as James Baldwin had put it in 1955, “the world [was] white no longer.” Obviously depicting “natives” as simple, languorous and oversexed—more concerned with dancing, drinking rum and fooling around than with fomenting revolution—could have a certain sedative effect; repeating those ragged stereotypes, one might delude oneself into thinking that there was no trouble in paradise.

The trouble brewing at home, however, where the Civil Rights movement was coalescing and race relations were growing tenser all the time, would have been harder to ignore. The Montgomery bus boycott dragged on through all of 1956, for instance, and various challenges to court-mandated school integration, including that of Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, played out in the spring and summer of 1957.²⁵ But an even more salient context for the Calypso Craze was the gruesome murder of Emmett Till, the black teen from Chicago killed by racist thugs in

Mississippi in August 1955 for the crime of dallying (as they saw it) with a white woman. Indeed, despite—or perhaps because of—what Patricia Williams calls our nation’s “complexly libidinous history,” segregationists’ most reliable bugbear was the perennial specter of miscegenation. That the full integration of blacks into the American body politic would entail the mixing of flesh and the amalgamation of the gene pool was for them no flight of fancy but a dead certainty. Keeping the Negro in his place unquestionably meant keeping him *out* of white women’s pants.²⁶

While right-thinking Northern whites ordinarily did not voice such cracked thoughts so freely, that is not to say that they perceived African-American aspirations as any less threatening to their newly prosperous way of life (or even that their own libidinous logic was any less twisted). Rock and roll, which after all came straight into the bedrooms of the sons and daughters of suburbia via the record-player and the radio, might well be regarded as the stealthiest agent of a thoroughgoing corruption of the social order; and by such paranoid reckoning, it would have made a certain amount of sense to prescribe calypso as preventive medicine. Unlike rock, calypso was not *seriously* threatening to contribute to the sexual delinquency of white American girlhood. Yet, the more Hollywood elucidated the Calypso Craze’s racial and sexual unconscious, the more incoherent its logic appeared. *Bop Girl*’s ending, for instance, would seem to represent a fatal compromise of the original plan for calypso to oust rock, since the “Calypso Rock” that its heroine ultimately embraces is a conscious hybrid, and hybrids are inevitably the product of crossbreeding. Granted, the film offers no suggestion that calypso-rock’s conception has taken place any way other than immaculately—which is to say, symbolically. But according to the heroine’s climactic anthem, helping calypso to increase and multiply in a non-indigenous North American environment would have to involve some rocking and rolling somewhere along the line. Such an outcome hardly constitutes a successful sublimation of America’s inter-racial anxieties. Even so, at the end of the day Hollywood was satisfied with seeing calypso—or a facsimile of it—merely *tame* rather than displace rock and roll. Rock, so *Bop Girl* would have it, could paradoxically be domesticated by taking up with a “foreign,” more rustic, yet somehow less “savage” version of itself.

But whether calypso’s proponents fondly hoped that it could help banish the twin threats of black sexual and political upheaval from American consciousness altogether or simply box them into a more manageable package, in the end it failed to do either. As one nay-saying record store owner told the *Miami Herald*: “the kids just [were]n’t going for it.” To be sure, there may have been credulous kids who were briefly taken in by the Calypso Craze, just as they were gulled by a dozen other manufactured fads. But Eisenhower-era teens related to rock and roll more profoundly than they did to, say, Davy Crockett caps. And as long as everyone else treated calypso ironically (or mock-ironically), it was impossible for teenagers to see it as truly subversive—or consequently, as attractive—as rock. By the end of 1957, rock and roll was not only more popular than ever, but more closely associated in the minds of its white teenage fans with black political causes. And youth culture, now openly identifying with the outsider status

and restrained rebellion of American blacks, was, in the words of Andrew Ross, ever more firmly centered around “interracial affiliations[,] fantasies of sexual mobility” (64), and a general “willingness to cut across class-coded and color-coded musical tastes” (77). In retrospect, then, Bop Girl’s brief affair with Calypso amounted to an experiment gone awry. The upshot was that although calypso was now in some sense permanently entrenched in the gene pool of American pop culture, the gene had been altered in such a way as to be effectively neutered, stripped of any power to affect that culture meaningfully.²⁷

Joe Klein, writing of the Folk Revival of the late 1950s and early ‘60s, contends that “the patina of integrity and authenticity covering white collegiate folk music ... offered record companies an exit from ... the racial and sexual fears that had generated mainstream disapproval of rock and roll” (Santoro 34). If Klein is right, then the Calypso Craze was in its own botched way a warm-up exercise for this negrophobic “exit strategy.” And even though the dry run failed, one could still argue that the diffuse but pervasive tendency towards containment that characterized the 1950s ultimately succeeded even while backfiring. Even if rock and roll had not been thwarted by calypso, that is, calypso *itself* was lastingly relegated to the province of the quaint, the corny, and (above all) the un-hip. At best, Calypso was Rat Pack cool *avant la lettre*: savvy, supercilious, and slightly louche, the cool of thirty- and forty-year-olds behaving like teenagers. Despite its indigenous history of incisive social critique, and despite the increasingly open political radicalism of its American avatar Belafonte, calypso’s embroilment in the failed effort to “contain” rock and roll helped discredit it as a music of squares and social reactionaries, thereby cementing its lasting reputation in the U.S. as kitsch.

Now, it is possible that some stealth strain of Caribbean culture has still had the last laugh here: Bo Diddley famously (perhaps unwittingly) based his eponymous beat—one of the founding rhythms of rock and roll—upon the *clave*, and before you know it, the Buena Vista Social Club has colonized suburban CD players and the “Reggaeton Virus” has infected North American dancehalls. Indeed, Ned Sublette has convincingly demonstrated how Cuban music and Caribbean traditions have “insinuated themselves into every breakthrough moment in American music” (Ross 91), and Mimi Sheller has argued that while the North’s “consumption” of the Caribbean—its “landscapes, plants, food, bodies, and cultures” (22)—has been central to the narrative of Western modernity, nevertheless where America is concerned, “the Caribbean is already within, and to consume it is really to regurgitate what is already there” (178). America may *think* it knows what it is ingesting when it heaps up the Caribbean on its plate (white sand beaches, spliff-smoking rastas, hurricanes, boat people, and “Hot Hot Hot”), when history shows that a much subtler and more complicated sort of Caribbean was a key ingredient of the American recipe all along. And it is an ingredient that remains undigested, or so we might like to believe. No matter how “much the Caribbean is ... eaten [by America],” Sheller muses, “it is never eaten up;” no matter how thorough America’s success in containing it, it “can never be simply consumed, swallowed ... and discarded” (175). This, no doubt, is what Harry Belafonte meant, in part, when he paternalistically prophesied in May of 1957 that “calypso [would]

survive all of us ... no matter what's done to it now" (Kavaler 21). But whenever some ironic hipster or drunken baseball fan performs a casual act of modern-day minstrelsy by breaking into a jokey chorus of "Day-O," why, then, it can be difficult to maintain that in America, calypso has not been chewed up and spat out, its only "undigested" remainder a dimpled wad left on top of the nation's bedpost. Still, there's always a degree of self-conscious sheepishness to this minstrelsy, not unlike the campiness that characterized the Calypso Craze in general—and this ought to remind us of what Eric Lott pointed out a decade ago. All such acts of racial impersonation involve a peculiar kind of mimicry: they express both a deep-seated loathing and a twisted longing, equal parts ridicule and desire, for their object. White America "went calypso" precisely in order to *avoid* black America—and failed. Perhaps this strand of unresolved longing and loathing, for African-Americans *and* for their fantasy stand-ins, the West Indians, is what remains, undigested, of calypso in America.

Notes

Research for this article was carried out under a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities during 2001-2002.

¹Michael Barson and Steven Heller's *Teenage Confidential: An Illustrated History of the American Teen* provides a concise and accessible pictorial survey of the sensationalist iconography of the wild teenage delinquent. The *Bop Girl* poster is of a piece with the artwork of hundreds of other pulp novels, magazines, comic books, movie posters and advertisements of the day directed primarily at teens.

²Judy Tyler's "calypso" numbers were penned by Les Baxter, the godfather of Exotica—an ersatz-tropical idiom of the 1950s that mixed "Afro-Cuban rhythms, unusual instrumentations, [and] environmental sounds" with "lush romantic themes from Hollywood movies [and] evocative titles like 'Jaguar God'" ("What Is"). (For a brief biography and discography of Baxter, see "Les Baxter," *Hyp Records/Vinyl Safari*, ed. Tony Wilds, 1998, 9 September 2003 < http://www.hipwax.com/music/exot_ib.html >; and "Les Baxter," *The Space Age Pop Music Page*, 10 September 2003 < <http://www.spaceagepop.com/baxter.htm> >. (Wilds's "Exotica" page is also excellent.) A more thorough overview of Baxter's work can be found at "The Exotic World of Les Baxter," *Club Velvet*, ed. Dean Vaccaro, 10 September 2003.) The piece that makes a calypso convert of Barney is strongly tinged with *sonand mento*, while Jo's costumed showstopper at the newly metamorphosed "Club Trinidad" is more mambo than calypso.

³How "Bop" figures into this shorthand is a bit more complicated: it evidently stood for a loosely forged metonymic chain of black musical forms that all somehow threatened to unravel the moral fiber of the nation. As LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) points out in discussing the social implications of bebop's eccentric style, "the white musicians and other young whites who [in the 1940s] associated themselves with this Negro music identified the Negro with separation [and] nonconformity" (187-188); bebopper (and later, beatnik) jokes generally "referred to *white nonconformists* ...and not to Negroes" (190). Oddly, the pseudo-calypso of the mid-1950s took on certain beatnik trappings—notably bongo drums—and its aficionados were not infrequently lampooned as finger-snapping, beret-wearing hipsters. Like *Bop Girl's* Barney, ads for calypso clubs often employed hep-cat lingo (Maxim's Calypso Den in New York invited patrons to come hear the "Cool Cats from the Caribbee"), and one self-consciously swinging magazine characterized the entire phenomenon as one centered around "Those wild Trinidadies": "What started many years ago as a parochial passion in certain chi-chi cliques is now throbbing and reverberating in virtually every hamlet from here to Squaresville" (Sasso 80).

⁴It was actually Boston's celebrated "jazz priest" Norman O'Connor who had first made the prediction, relayed excitedly by *Variety*, that calypso would soon write rock's epitaph ("Warning"). But Metz's seminal article for the International News Service was syndicated—and pilfered—repeatedly. The formulation just cited, from the Chicago-based African-American

picture magazine *Hue* (“Will Calypso Craze Doom Rock ‘N’ Roll”) was further stylized in *Ebony* (“The Fad from Trinidad”): “The calypsomania also did what the police and PTA couldn’t do. It nudged rock ‘n’ roll off the front pages.” Metz’s original read: “Calypso ... may accomplish what platoons of parents, sociologists and police have failed to do. It may push rock ‘n’ roll from the top spot in popular music.”

⁵In addition, marvels one wolfish club-owner quoted in the article, calypso’s beat seems to have a “narcotic effect” on many “females.”

⁶The most eloquent, perhaps, came from Atilla the Hun (Raymond Quevedo), who in “The Banning of Records” (1938) protested:

To say these songs are sacrilegious, obscene or profane
Is nothing but a lie and a burning shame
If kaiso is indecent then I must insist
That so is Shakespeare’s “Venus and Adonis”

Boccaccio’s tales and Voltaire’s *Candide*
The Martyrdom of Man by Winwood Reade
But o’er these authors they make no fuss
But want to take advantage of us.

⁷The two final quotes are from Sasso and “The Fad from Trinidad,” respectively. The litany of adjectives was plucked randomly from Dana, “The Fad,” Sasso, “Will Calypso,” and “Calypsomania,” but similar descriptors were repeated *ad nauseum* elsewhere. (One of the second-tier promoters of calypso in New York, R. Jason Phillips, billed one of his early shows at the Calypso Room on East 59th Street as the “Mad Fad from Trinidad” with “the slightly sinful lyrics and tricky rhythms.” The show’s headliners were Lance Haven, “The Bad Lad from Trinidad,” and Lady Calypso, “The ‘Tomata’ from Jamaica.” (See advertisement in the *New York Sunday Mirror* 24 February 1957: 57.)

⁸The first stanza and chorus should be sufficient to convey the song’s character:

I asked my lady what could I do
to make her happy and to keep her true.
She said, “My friend, one thing I need from you
is a little tiny piece of the big bamboo.”

She wanted big bamboo four feet long,
big bamboo so full and strong.
Big bamboo stands up straight and tall;
only big bamboo pleases one and all.

⁹These calypsos were also among the first tunes Belafonte recorded after signing with RCA in 1953.

¹⁰Some of the preceding factual information comes from Arnold Shaw's *Belafonte: An Unauthorized Biography* and Colin Escott's essay accompanying a boxed-set survey of Belafonte's early career on Bear Family Records; some comes from interviews with Belafonte himself. For material on The Tarriers and Bob Gibson, I'm indebted to entries by Ronnie D. Lankford, Jr. and Richie Unterberger, respectively, in the on-line version of the *All-Music Guide* < www.allmusic.com >. It's perhaps of passing interest that the original, mixed-race lineup of The Tarriers, unsung heralds of the Folk Revival, included a young Alan Arkin.

¹¹A Brooklyn native of Barbadian parents, Burgie was a university-trained musician who had flirted with the leftist Folk Song movement in the late 1940s. He had been performing calypsos for several years as "Lord Burgess" when he was tapped first to assist with the *Colgate Comedy Hour* segment (where "Day-O" debuted) and then the *Calypso!* album. (He also recorded two albums of his own in 1954 and 1955, "Lord Burgess: Caribbean Folk Singer" for Paragon and "Lord Burgess' Calypso Serenaders: Folk Songs of Haiti, Jamaica And Trinidad," on the Stinson label.) Though many of his tunes were merely "inspired" by Caribbean material, Burgie's practice of appropriating and/or embellishing West Indian folk melodies and copyrighting them as his own was neither rare nor unprecedented. Belafonte eventually recorded thirty-six of his tunes.

¹²While it took months for many promoters to stop believing their own hype, everyone ultimately came to realize the full implications of the Theory: economically speaking, apart from Belafonte, calypso really *was* nothing—something the big record company A&R men had suspected all along—and moreover, Belafonte was the only performer with "legs." The fanzine article's author, a theatrical agent whose firm boasted "a larger stable of calypso entertainers than any other" (Green 17), must eventually have appreciated this fact more ruefully than many. For a survey of calypso's rise and fall on the *Billboard* charts, see Funk, "Calypso Recording Craze."

¹³White southerners, maniacally sensitive even to make-believe miscegenation, brooked no such fine distinctions. Blanching at the whiff of romantic attraction between characters played by Belafonte and Joan Fontaine in *Island in the Sun* (adapted from Alec Waugh's bestselling novel and released after months of advance publicity in June 1957), they demanded that their scenes together be censored from screenings in Southern cinemas. That Belafonte, divorced from his first (black) wife, Marguerite, actually called the white liberal bluff by then marrying a white woman could only have confirmed the worst fears of Southern racists.

¹⁴Belafonte was not a prude, yet leaving aside the truth that a kind of grotesque caricature was in fact being routinely passed off as "calypso"—sometimes with the collusion of West Indian and/or West Indian-American performers, his stance is still open to charges of presumptuousness and condescension. (It would be one thing if his point were that West Indians' image had been

commandeered and exploited by others, and he, who had exceptional access to the media, were setting about to correct things on their behalf. But if his point were that West Indians were perfectly capable of deciding how to portray themselves and were simply, in his opinion, doing a bad job of it, that would be something else again.) Statements Belafonte made in 1957 and repeated in subsequent interviews often seem to point a scolding finger at Trinidadian calypsonians themselves. But in conversation with me (12 April 2002), he clarified that his condemnation was really targeted at the sorts of calypso-burlesques that were spread *ad nauseum* by “Hotel Calypso” singers and other lesser stars in the calypso firmament.

¹⁵From another point of view, though, he was spot on—since, after all, this type of irony habitually cuts both ways. As the deconstructive adage has it: the man who says one thing while meaning another still says that first thing. Besides, there’s every possibility that calypso’s insinuating kitsch was an instance of “stealth” irony—something that feigns not to mean what it says when it actually *does*.

¹⁶An ad for an appearance by singer-dancer Josephine Premice (“and her company of Afro-Cuban [*sic*] Calypsonians”) at the Dunes, Las Vegas, featured a bust of Premice with sensuous lips and downcast eyes framed by her own sinuously beckoning fingers, and promised that the show would be “Wild! Savage! Electric! Pagan! Primitive! Passionate!” (Advertisement, *Las Vegas Sun* 7 January 1957: 3).

¹⁷Even if suburbanites’ affinity for calypso constituted a pallid rejection, however feeble or subconscious, of stultifying middle-class domesticity (some may have understood that calypso was associated in some distant way with “bacchanal”), any hint of insurgence it might have entailed was so thoroughly policed as to be rendered impotent.

In our own day, the locus of “safe abandon” has moved northward to the margins of the Caribbean, as *The New Yorker*’s Rebecca Mead explained in a brilliant analysis of the rituals of Spring Break, especially as they are ritually enacted for the hugely popular “Girls Gone Wild” exploitation videos: “The popularity of [such] hokey simulacra,” wherein gleefully uninhibited co-eds “spontaneously” bare their breasts for the camera, demonstrates on the part of participants and spectators alike a “conscious enjoyment” of a pre-scripted moment of mock-daring that is “both visually persuasive and unmistakably inauthentic ... at once convincing and implausible.” Its editing into such tediously repetitive (and tame) pornography yields an “atmosphere of exemption ... [that’s] surprisingly orderly.”

¹⁸Lucy Kavalier struck a similar note in the *New York Herald-Tribune* several months later (“Many a night club owner is hurriedly putting up palm leaves, stepping up his rum order, and importing talent from one of the islands, be it Trinidad, Staten, or Manhattan”), as did *Ebony* magazine (“Owners of plush supper clubs are sprinkling sawdust on the floor, hanging fishnets on the ceilings and reopening as calypso clubs. American singers, striving for that fresh-from-the-islands effect, are wiggling like Elvis and broadening their A’s”).

¹⁹Of course (as I argued above) the “taste” being kow-towed to had just as much to do with orientalist assumptions as deficient understanding.

²⁰It’s hard not to read their opprobrium as yet another prohibition against racial and cultural mixing—masquerading as, of all things, a self-directed sanction against cultural imperialism.

²¹Easy for him to say; he was *already* selling a lot of records. An alternate citation prefaced this adamant declaration with a further refusal: “[I]f phony synthetic cliché calypso material floods the market, they’re not going to get me to sing it or pose with one of those straw hats” (Gleason). Having posed in just such a ridiculous, straw-hatted getup in John Murray Anderson’s *Almanac*, of course, he had already paid his dues in that regard.

²²Given calypso’s “blue” reputation, it may come as no surprise to learn that some consumers placed it, in the continuum of recorded music, alongside the stag records that were also in vogue at the time, or the raunchy comedy albums of Redd Foxx, or even the gently naughty albums by comediennes Ruth Wallis (of “Boobs” fame) and Rusty Warren. In fact, Wallis capitalized on the calypso craze by composing an entire album’s worth of “Saucy Calypsos.”

²³My catty aside is perhaps too unkind. The Duke was a genuinely talented (and tireless) performer and a longtime fixture in New York, a favorite of both white and black audiences. Though fan magazines like *Calypso Album* went to some lengths to fabricate a pedigree for him as an “authentic” tent champion in Trinidad, this line from the same magazine’s puff-piece profile is probably a more accurate assessment of his credentials: “His act is characterized by an authenticity few Calypso singers presently in vogue can achieve. The Duke imitates the exact style of the Trinidad singers who perform during carnival time in Port-of-Spain” (“Duke of Iron”). By this point in his career, however, he took pleasure in posing as the dean of calypsonians in America, and his claim generally went unquestioned. In February 1957, in distinguishing “natives” (or “islanders”) from “non-natives,” *Variety* unhesitatingly placed the Duke in the former category—along with Lord Burgess (Irving Burgie, from Brooklyn), Lord Flea (a Jamaican), and Johnny Barracuda (a student at Columbia who emigrated from Jamaica as a child, but who was often billed—as in the “Calypso Mambo Panorama” sponsored by “The Jewish Men of Queens”—as having come “Direct from Trinidad”) (“Non-Trinidadians”). A month later, *Time* also counted the Duke—and Lord Flea—under the elastic category “authentic” (“Calypsomania”). By May, the *New York Times* could be a bit more exacting in its taxonomy, thanks largely to a piece it had run a few weeks earlier by Trinidadian dancer and showman Geoffrey Holder, then headlining a monumental “Calypso Festival” at Loew’s Metropolitan in Brooklyn, exhaustively dissecting for the *Times*’s discerning readers the difference between “true Calypso” and “Manhattan Calypso.” Clearly echoing Holder, John S. Wilson divided his review of recent calypso records into “Calypsonians” (not to be mistaken for mere “Calypso singers”) and “slicked-up Calypso.” In the former slot he put Trinidadians Lord Beginner, Lord Melody, and Small Island Pride, along with “older practitioners” such as Wilmoth Houdini (another

Trinidadian expatriate who had at least competed, but never quite “made it,” in Port-of-Spain), and ... the Duke of Iron.

²⁴Thanks to Hope Munro Smith, who voiced this idea at the Joint Annual Meeting of the Society of American Music and the Center for Black Music Research in Port of Spain, May 2001.

²⁵1957 also saw the establishment of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission and the passage of the first Civil Rights Act—relatively toothless compromise measures intended, no doubt, to contain any more radical or violent aspirations on the part of African Americans. (For a compelling account of the behind-the-scenes machinations that scuttled any more effective civil rights legislation in 1957, see Robert Caro’s *Master of the Senate: The Years of Lyndon Johnson, Volume 3* (New York: Knopf, 2002).)

²⁶I’ve already mentioned Southern hysteria over the hint of interracial romance between Harry Belafonte and Joan Fontaine in Darryl F. Zanuck’s *Island in the Sun*, a steamy melodrama that generated notoriety in the press even as it was under production in Trinidad in late 1956. But it is fair to say that Zanuck’s confused parable of U.S. racial tension, clumsily displaced into the Caribbean (with Belafonte again embodying American and West Indian blacks at once), is itself fairly shot through with anxiety over miscegenation. Belafonte plays David Boyeur, a charismatic labor organizer and populist agitator on the fictional island of Santa Marta (“our homegrown revolutionary,” the grandfatherly colonial governor lightheartedly dubs him) who ominously instructs a visiting American journalist that the island’s most pressing concern is “the color problem.” (“What we want is equality,” he vows grimly.) The correspondent’s take on this tip, oddly, is to “out” the mixed-race ancestry of the fading planter-aristocracy’s most prominent family—much to the consternation of its marriageable teenage daughter, who is secretly pregnant by the governor’s dashing son (himself passing through Santa Marta on his way to Oxford after a Middle Eastern stint in the colonial service). By contrast, the family’s resentful, ne’er-do-well son, who is standing against Boyeur for a seat in the island’s legislature, briefly tries to make political hay out of his newfound pedigree by eagerly pleading to a surly and skeptical crowd, “I am one of you!” The governor’s young (white) aide-de-damp, meanwhile, has openly, if chastely, taken up with Margaret Seton, a self-possessed West Indian shop clerk (played by sultry Ohioan Dorothy Dandridge) who has tired of a lengthy but unproductive flirtation with Boyeur. Of all the film’s mixed-race couples, then, separatists should have found the least to object to in Belafonte and Fontaine, as theirs—the only pair composed of a black man and white woman—is also the only one to abort before it ever lifts off. In a disjointed climactic dialogue in which the would-be lovers testily trade racial suspicions, recriminations, and regrets, Belafonte ultimately spurns Fontaine’s advances: “My people wouldn’t understand,” he concludes. “They’d think I’d betrayed them.” Segregationists could breathe easy: black men would *voluntarily* keep to their own kind.

²⁷In view of the fact that rock and roll was so often denounced as “degenerate” music, a final aside on *Bop Girl*’s romantic subplot may be of interest. In order for the union of Bob-the-

calypso-herald and Jo-the-erstwhile-rocker to be completed, Bob must dump his domineering fiancée, a eugenics enthusiast with a single-mindedly clinical ambition to bear her crew-cut boyfriend's baby. That the *new* couple implicitly eschews the ideology of race purity (according to the reading I advanced earlier, Bob rather laughably stands in for the domesticated Negro) presumably signifies their broad-mindedness.

Works Cited

- Atila the Hun (Raymond Quevedo). "The Banning of Records" (1938).
- Barson, Michael and Steven Heller. *Teenage Confidential: An Illustrated History of the American Teen*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998.
- "Behind the Scenes King of Calypso." *Calypso Album*. Ed. Arthur Unger. New York: Modern Music Publications, 1957. 61.
- Belafonte, Harry. Interview with the author. 18 December 2001.
- Bop Girl Goes Calypso* [a/k/a *Bop Girl*]. Pressbook. United Artists, 1957.
- Bowles, Paul. "Calypso—Music of the Antilles." *Modern Music* 17:5 (Apr.-May 1940): 154-59.
- Brown, Les. "The Mighty Panther Tells Roots, Meanings of Calypso." *Down Beat* 30 May 1956: 42.
- Brown, Tony. "Will Calypso Knock the Rock?: The stars answer your question." *Melody Maker* 16 March 1957: 3.
- "Calypso, American Style." *Calypso Album*. Ed. Arthur Unger. New York: Modern Music Publications, 1957. 50-53.
- "Calypso Can't Displace R&R as Teenage Box-Office Draw." [Un sourced newspaper story, datelined (erroneously?) "New York, Apr. 20 [1957]."] *First Pressings: The History of Rhythm & Blues*. Vol. 7: 1957. Comp. and ed. Galen Gart. Milford, NH: Big Nickel, 1993.
- Calypso Heat Wave*. Dir. Fred Sears. Perf. Johnny Desmond and Merry Anders. Columbia, 1957.
- "The Calypso Craze." *Newsweek* 49:8 (25 February 1957): 72.
- "Calypso Fad Returns Home." *Chicago Daily Defender* 21 May 1957: 17.
- "Calypso Here I Come—Maybe: Can Kids Dance to Caribe Beat?" *Variety* 23 January 1957: 41+.
- "Calypso Hits Hollywood With Bang: Allied Artist's [sic] First Is Called Greatest So Far." *Chicago Defender* 11 May 1957: 29.
- "Calypso Is Stone Cold Dead." *Variety* 22 May 1957: 41+.
- "Calypsomania." *Time* 25 March 1957: 55-56.

“The Caribbean, Ho! U.S. Tourists in Record Rush to the Indies.” *Life* 42:6 [11 February 1957]: 24-33.

Castagne, Pat and Lu. *Trinidad’s Sensational Calypso Dance*. [Port of Spain, Trinidad]: Guardian Commercial Printery, 1957. Abbr. and rpt. as “Trinidad’s Sensational Calypso Dance Instructions.” *Leeds Calypso is like so: Authentic Calypso Songs with Words and Music including Ukulele Diagrams and Guitar Chords, plus dance instructions with Diagrams*. New York: Leeds Music Corp., 1957. 41-48.

Castagne, Patrick S. “This Is Calypso.” *Music Journal* January 1958: 32-33+.

“Could Calypso Go Into Collapso By Too Rapid Rise in Salaries?” *Variety* 6 February 1957: 58.

Dana, Robert W. “The Big City Is Stomping to Calypso!: The Primitive Rhythm Was Slow to Catch On, But Now It Has the Night Clubs in a Tizzy.” [New York] *World-Telegram and Sun Saturday Magazine* 2 March 1957: 10-12.

DeVore, Jesse. “‘Mighty Dictator’—A True Calypsonian.” *New York Amsterdam News* 27 April 1957: 12.

“Duke of Iron.” *Calypso Album*. Ed. Arthur Unger. New York: Modern Music Publications, 1957. 54-55.

Ellin, Mary and Marvin Bennett. “Trend: Up from Trinidad.” “On Our List: A monthly report on what the intelligent American may want to read, see, hear, and talk about.” *Good Housekeeping* May 1957: 8.

Elliot, Ann. “Real, Real Calypso: How It Is Sung and Danced in Trinidad.” *Dance* July 1957: 30-33+ and August 1957: 36-37+.

Escott, Colin. “Harry Belafonte: Island in the Sun.” *Harry Belafonte: Island in the Sun* [book accompanying CD boxed set of the same name]. Hambergen, Germany: Bear Family Records, 2002. 1-37.

“The Fad from Trinidad: Sassy, syncopated calypso is hottest craze in entertainment world.” *Ebony* June 1957: 48-52.

Feather, Leonard. “Feather’s Nest.” *Down Beat* 13 July 1955: 4.

Funk, Ray. “The Calypso Recording Craze of 1957.” *Harry Belafonte: Island in the Sun* [book accompanying CD boxed set of the same name]. Ed. Colin Escott. Hambergen, Germany: Bear Family Records, 2002. 92-94.

Funk, Ray and Donald R. Hill. “‘Will Calypso Doom Rock ‘n’ Roll’?: The Calypso Craze of 1957.” *Harry Belafonte: Island in the Sun*.

- “The Girls Are Wild About Harry.” *Harry Belafonte: His Complete Life Story*. Ed. Hy Steirman. New York: Hillman Publications, 1957. 44-50.
- Gleason, Ralph J. “The Music’s Got to Have Truth Or Belafonte Won’t Sing.” *San Francisco Chronicle* 23 June 1957: “This World” 10+.
- Green, Leonard. “Calypso sweeps the nation ...” *Calypso* 1 (1957): 16-24.
- Holder, Geoffrey. “That Fad From Trinidad.” *New York Times Magazine* 21 April 1957: 14+.
- Jones, Leroi [Amiri Baraka]. *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music that Developed From It*. New York: Morrow, 1963.
- Kavaler, Lucy. “Where go calypso? We’ve given Manhattan back to the (West) Indians. When will it be ours again?” *New York Herald-Tribune* 26 May 1957: “Today’s Living” 4+.
- Kennedy, William. “Calypso Rhythms Are Here to Stay.” *Miami Herald* 21 April 1957: 3B.
- Lankford, Ronnie D., Jr. “The Tarriers.” *All-Music Guide*. 2005. 16 September 2005. <<http://www.allmusic.com>>.
- “Life and Love.” “Talk of the Town.” *The New Yorker* 13 April 1957: 34-35.
- “Loew’s Musical Rhythm Battle.” *What’s Cookin’ in New York* April 1957: 10-11. Abbr. and rpt. as “Rock ‘N Roll Vs. Calypso At Loew’s.” *New York Amsterdam News* 30 March 1957: 11.
- Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.
- Luis, Robert. *Authentic Calypso: the Song, the Music, the Dance*. New York: Aloha Printing Company/Latin American Press, 1957.
- “Mardi Gras.” “The Talk of the Town.” *The New Yorker* September 1956: 35-36.
- May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. Rev. and updated ed. New York: Basic Books, 1999 [1988].
- Mead, Rebecca. “Endless Spring.” *The New Yorker* 1 April 2002: 50-55.
- Metz, Robert. “‘Calypso Is A Thing I’m Telling You’: New music craze edging rock ‘n’ roll.” [Allentown, Penn.] *Sunday Call-Chronicle* 3 Feb. 1957: 6. Abbr. and rpt. as “Will Calypso Give Heave-Ho to Rock ‘n’ Roll?: GI Oil Drums in West Indies Help Spark New Dance Craze.” *Miami Herald* 3 March 1957: 12B. Also abbr. and rpt. as “Crazy For Calypso.” *Harry Belafonte: His Complete Life Story*. Ed. Hy Steirman. New York: Hillman Periodicals, 1957. 37.

- Mighty Panther [Vernon Roberts], "Songs of Dynamite." 12" LP. Chicago: Drum Boy Records DBLM-1000, n.d. [1956].
- "Mighty Panther and 'The Big Bamboo.'" *Calypso* 1 (1957): 25.
- Murray, Arthur. "Arthur Murray Tells How to Dance the Calypso." *Calypso Album*. Ed. Arthur Unger. New York: Modern Music Publications, 1957. 10-15.
- Nadel, Alan. *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke UP, 1995.
- "Natural Death or Murder?" *Variety* 12 June 1957: 61.
- "New Acts." Reviews of King Caribe & His Steel Bandits and Lord Lance Trio. *Variety* 2 January 1957: 55.
- "New Calypso Room Opens." *New York Amsterdam News* 9 February 1957: 12.
- "Non-Trinidadians' Calypso Clicks." *Variety* 27 February 1957: 1.
- "Pearl Primus Brings Calypso Show Uptown." *New York Amsterdam News* 25 May 1957: 16.
- Ross, Alex. "Rock 101." *The New Yorker* 14 & 21 July 2003: 87-93.
- Ross, Andrew. *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Santoro, Gene. "Folk's Missing Link." *The Nation* 22 April 2002: 32-37.
- Sasso, Arthur J. "They're Going Crazy for Calypso!" *Real: The Exciting Magazine for Men* 10:2 (June 1957). 23+.
- Schallert, Edwin. "Calypso Craze Inspires Tide of New Films." *Los Angeles Times* 14 April 1957: V1+.
- Scott, A. O. Review of *Down With Love*. *New York Times* (Nat'l Ed.) 9 May 2003: B1.
- Shaw, Arnold. *Harry Belafonte: An Unauthorized Biography*. Philadelphia: Chilton, 1960.
- Sheller, Mimi. *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Strassberg, Phil. "Calypso Out, Tina In, at Le Cupidon." *New York Sunday Mirror* 23 June 1957: 55.
- Thirer, Irene. "Calypso Takes Over Stage Of Loew's Met for 10 Days." *New York Post* 21 April 1957: 15.
- Thorne, Harcourt. "Calypso and Calypsonians." *The Crisis* October 1957: 479-482+.

“Tornado From Trinidad.” *Time* 6 May 1957: 43-44.

“‘Trinidad Time’ Up In N.Y.; Hub’s 1st.” *Variety* 6 February 1957: 58.

Unterberger, Richie. “Bob Gibson.” *All-Music Guide*. 2005. 16 September 2005.
<<http://www.allmusic.com>>.

Walker, Jesse H. “Theatricals.” *New York Amsterdam News* 4 May 1957: 14.

“What Is Exotica?: Some Definitions.” *The Space Age Pop Music Page*. 2002. 1 April 2002.
<<http://www.spaceagepop.com/whatis.htm>>.

“Warning: Calypso Next New Beat; R.I.P. for R’n’R?” *Variety* 12 December 1957: 1+.

“Will Calypso Craze Doom Rock ‘N’ Roll.” *Hue* April 1957: 22-25.

Wilson, John S. “Belafonte and Others in Calypso Variety.” *New York Times* 5 May 1957: X15.