Lovey’s Original Trinidad String Band and the Pan-American Currents That Shaped Early Calypso

Columbia’s 1912 recordings of the string band directed by George “Lovey” Bailey are the first documented musical sounds from the island of Trinidad, famous today for its spectacular carnival and for the music of calypso, soca and steel pan. They give insight not only to the music of Trinidad and Tobago (the twin-island nation that proclaimed its independence from Great Britain in 1962), but also to the dynamic circulation of musicians and styles throughout the Americas, especially in the circum-Caribbean, whose islands and coasts have been connected by maritime trade and travel for centuries.

Lovey’s journey to New York, where these recordings were made, was one of many made by Caribbean musicians who dreamed of success on the Vaudeville stages of the United States. Just as they brought new musical ideas and energy to those stages, these musicians in turn brought new repertoires and styles back to their home countries. John Cowley’s excellent liner notes to the Lovey recordings (issued by Bear Family in 2012) document examples of this, including an 1899 Port of Spain performance of the New York Boys minstrel group and a local performance of Charles Harris’s landmark 1891 hit, “After the Ball.” Homegrown Caribbean entertainers of the early 20th century such as the Grenadian Phil Madison and the Trinidadian Sam Manning were known as “Vaudeville” entertainers, even as they integrated local songs and styles into their performances (Cowley 1996, Hill 1993).

Musical sharing between different islands and nations began long before the era of Vaudeville. Some of the most widely performed and influential genres of music in the Americas during the 19th century were set dances, such as the contredanse and the quadrille, that originated in European courts of the 18th century and were creolized (localized) in different parts of the...
Americas. The contredanse was the model for the danzón in Cuba and danza in Puerto Rico, for example, both associated with high society. The quadrille, in which four couples dance in changing choreographed figures, took root in working class communities throughout the Caribbean, performed with local inflections of rhythm, movement and instrumentation.

One of the common features of all these set dances was a musical form that paralleled the changing dance figures, each figure introduced by a new melody. This formal idea was reproduced in other genres, including piano ragtime and marches, and is reflected in many of Lovey’s recordings in this collection, including track #16, “Manuelito Vals” (with a form of AABBCCDD), and track #18, “Flores de Trinidad Vals” (AABBCDDDC). Sectional forms like these contrast with the more repetitive verse and chorus form used in song genres such as calypso. It is interesting to note, though, that more sectional musical forms resurfaced in the Trinidad carnival later in the 20th century when calypsonians began to compose “pan tunes” (a good example is the Lord Kitchener’s classic 1987 calypso, “Pan in A Minor”) that were favored by the steel bands for their instrumental arrangements.

The selections labelled “paseo” in this recording have a more repetitive musical form than the valses, alternating between two melodies (AABB repeated). The term paseo refers in other contexts to the opening promenade of a longer dance form, such as the Puerto Rican danza. Lovey, however (and presumably other Trinidadian musicians of his time), uses paseo as a label for duple meter arrangements of popular carnival songs, or numbers that share rhythmic and melodic qualities of such songs. Thus, between the vals’s formal variety and the paseo’s repetitive danceability, we find in Lovey’s repertoire a mixture of influences from high society and the people’s carnival, from the ballroom and the street.

As Cowley observes in his liner notes, by the turn of the century string bands like Lovey’s were playing both in exclusive carnival fetes and for revelers on the public road. The presence of string bands in the public carnival was related in part to late 19th century controversies about the cultural status of the festival. The established French Creole class in Trinidad identified with carnival as their tradition and resented the British colonial administration’s efforts to suppress it, especially in the case of the 1881 Canboulay riots, when mounted police waged a pitched battle to clear the streets of carnival revelers. In the aftermath of this event, one way that middle class defenders of carnival, including both French Creole and colored (mixed race) activists, sought to defend the festival was to rid it of what they perceived to be its more vulgar elements. In this perspective, Venezuelan-style string bands were seen as an improvement over Afro-Trinidadian percussion ensembles such as tamboo bamboo or bottle and spoon. An advertisement for a 1919 calypso competition, for example, stated that, “Those employing the use of bamboo and bottles will not be admitted into the competition” (Rohlehr 1990:96-97).

In such competitions, and in the commercial calypso “tents” that emerged in the 1910s, the call and response songs of the Afro-Trinidadian carnival, known as lawways, were transformed into longer ballad-style songs accompanied by stringed instruments. This changing approach is exemplified in Victor’s 1914 recordings of The Iron Duke (aka Julian Whiterose), the first recordings of a calypso singer made in Trinidad. A key stylistic feature of the Whiterose recordings is the rhythmic strumming of the Venezuelan cuatro, which blends percussive drive with harmonic accompaniment (a role that was transferred to the electric guitar in calypso
recordings of the 1950s). It is notable that Lovey’s band had not one but two cuatro players, whose powerful strumming provides a rhythmic foundation in all these recordings. The cuatro rhythm in the paseos, especially, connects them with the swinging-walking dance style of Trinidad carnival revellers processing down the road (good examples of this are track #8, “Trinidad Paseo,” and track #14, “Tobo Justino Paseo”).

In addition to the strumming of the cuatro, there are other ways that Lovey’s recordings suggest the influence of string bands on early calypso. Harmonic movement from minor mode to the relative major, heard in several of Lovey’s recordings (e.g. track #12, “Alexandrina paseo”), is suggestive of the early calypso form known as sans humanité. This form is named for a recurring refrain (as heard in the 1914 Julian Whiterose recording, “Iron Duke in the Land”) and was common in calypso recordings of the 1920s and 1930s; it is still used today for extempo (improvised) calypso performance. A more general calypso harmonic pattern is tonic-dominant alternation followed by more varied harmonic movement, variations of which can be heard in many of the paseos (examples include track #5, “unidentified paseo,” and track #6, “Sarah paseo”). Another feature of Lovey’s recordings is melodic improvisation, heard especially in later repetitions of the original form (good examples are track #8, “Trinidad paseo,” and track #9, “Mango Vert”). In a parallel example from the circum-Caribbean, Madrid and Moore (2013) identify improvised melodic variation as a 19th century performance practice of the Cuban danzón, and explore its influence on improvisation in New Orleans jazz at the turn of the century.

If jazz and calypso were influenced by Cuban and Venezuelan music, the music of New Orleans and Trinidad also fed back to Latin America. Indeed, the record cover reproduced in the liner notes, titled, “Orquesta Tipica de Trinidad,” suggests that Colombia may have seen Latin America as the primary market for Lovey’s recordings. While the English-language calypso songs of ensuing decades were less marketable to Spanish speakers, Trinidadian musicians didn’t stop borrowing ideas from other places. Just as calypso in its nascent form was influenced by Venezuelan string bands, the genre would continue in later eras to incorporate influences from jazz, mambo, R&B and other styles that were circulated and re-interpreted beyond their places of origin.


References cited:


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