



(LYRCD 7412)

CALYPSOS

Afro-Limonese Music of Costa Rica

The music presented in this recording has been recorded in the city of Puerto Limon, chief town in the Limon province (Costa Rica) during carnival celebrations. This province is situated in the Atlantic region and stretched out for 9221 Kms; it is the poorest and least populated in the whole country. Its relative isolation is the result of a combination of factors such as the humid tropical weather (which causes great adaptation and installation problems), and the geographic features of the land (rich marshes, wild areas and huge rivers) that have hindered the development of effective means of communication.

In the month of September of 1502, during his fourth journey to America, Columbus landed at Carai, close to the actual Puerto Limon. At that time the region was inhabited by different native groups, and it remained isolated from the European colonization process for a long time.

During the seventeenth century the Spanish began to produce cocoa in this region, using local natives and black African slaves as manpower. A few groups of Afro-Caribbeans from the neighboring countries established themselves in this land at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and devoted themselves to the commerce of coconuts, oil, bananas and cocoa.

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the beginning of the construction of the Atlantic railway, which was to link the central part of the country with the Caribbean Sea in order to facilitate the conveyance of coffee, a main export product. The enterprise was financed by the British Empire and was entrusted to a North American company that employed laborers from various countries (Antilleans, Chinese, Italians and Indians).

The biggest group was made of Jamaicans who, upon the works completions, moved to the banana

plantations in the Limon region. But this ethnic group did not identify itself with the dominant Costa Rican culture; they professed a different religion (protestant), and spoke English instead of Spanish. The more affluent sent their children to public schools, where English textbooks from Jamaica were used. The Afro-Caribbean's obstinately maintained their customs and lifestyle and still considered themselves to be subjects of the British Empire. This situation stayed unaltered to the middle of the 20th century when for the first time Costa Rican citizenship was granted to the black people born in the country, too.

Today there are a variety of ethnic groups living in the Limon region: natives, Afro-Caribbeans, Creoles, Mulattoes, Chinese, Jews, Lebanese, etc. In spite of the continuous migrations towards the heart of the country and to the United States, the Afro-Caribbean group still holds the lead representing a third of the total population in the region. With the years this group has settled mainly in the countries on the Caribbean coast and alongside the railway. In their culture roots of African behavior and typical elements of western world live together.

One of the most interesting Afro-Limonese festivals is the carnival. In addition to the powerful impact that the expansion and widening popularity of the carnival has had on the life and culture of local communities since the nineteen fifties, the carnival has more recently become famous throughout Costa Rica and elsewhere, so that it now draws flocks of tourists to this region when it is annually held in October. Calypso is one of the most remarkable musical phenomena to be found in Puerto Limon during the carnival rivalries. This musical form originally from the Caribbean islands, and especially from Trinidad, has been literally stricken by success through recorded versions and commercial elaborations

David Crowley has studied and described the main stages of this kind of music. According to his data the first interpreters of Calypso were wizards and rumor has it that a few of them met violent deaths. The shatwels used to accompany wrestling competitions (kalendas) fighters, armed with wooden clubs and encouraged by a number of supporters, would start a deadly duel.

The shatwels song accompanied the stages of the fight; these songs consisted of short sentences mingled with the supporter's incitement and were backed by a rhythmic background. The sheki-sheki (maracas) and bottles hit with pebbles or spoons added to the musical accompaniment. The kalendas, banned by local authorities, subsequently changed to dances performed during the whole period in which the carnival lasted.

The musical accompaniment to these new dances was produced by the tamboo-tamboo, bamboo canes that were used to hit the group or one another. In the thirties these instruments were banned because they were considered dangerous, and were substituted by tin boxes of different sizes that were hit rhythmically with wooden sticks. During the first period of Calypso diffusion every year the shatwels used to prepare new chants for the carnival, chants which they would then use during the kalendas.

This phenomenon lasted for many years and after the shatwels disappearance it changed, moving from the streets to small tents called marquees. It was in these places that the singers (mainly men) introduced their new songs to the public, during evenings, which often ended with the eruption of a sudden conflict called "war." However, later on, the improvisational traits disappeared and fixed verbal styles that would vary according to the public were developed. Recurrent themes were politics (both the government and eminent political figures were criticized), social problems, sports, and most of all women.

In the forties the American record industry exploited Calypso commercially. Some of the

pervasive effects of this effort were the inevitable dilution and worldwide diffusion of the form into a condensed image of a lifestyle-characteristic, though it did create successful artists. (See Lyricord LYRCD 7406 "The Legendary Sir Lancelot: Calypsos of the West Indies and Ballads of the Caribbean.") In calypso, lyrics are very important; often we find that new lyrics are made on well-known melodies. Each singer has at his disposal many melodic themes, which are typical of the traditional repertoire, and he uses them to improvise and create new songs. (1) This idiomatic structure is enriched with words and verbal expressions, which are typical of calypso, whose meaning cannot be understood by those, who are not part of this cultural microcosm. The language employed is a synthesis of three different languages: English, Spanish, and a few West-African languages. (2) It is often the singer who makes up new words to which he confers special semantic values. Sometimes he uses, instead, words, which have been invented merely because of their voiced function within the framework of the song. Nearly every song in this selection is characterized by an alternation of strophe and refrain (the words change at every strophe but they remain the same in the refrain) the most recurrent poetical structures are quatrains, made of irregular verses.

The refrain is often made from the repetition of particular words or short verses that normally coincide with the title song.

TRACKS

1. Primer Ritmo de Comparsa - 3:59
2. Day by Day - 2:55
3. Trembling - 2:57
4. Calaloo - 3:12
5. Doctor Bombodee - 5:52
6. Carnival Day - 2:49
7. Yuca and Plantin - 1:14
8. My Teacher Never Like Me - 2:37
9. Mother's Love - 2:23
10. Back to My Country - 2:29
11. G.O.O.D. - 2:17
12. Monilia - 2:48
13. Calaloo - 2:53

THE INSTRUMENTS THAT CAN BE FOUND ON THIS RECORDING:

Idiophones

- 1) maracas (pumpkin rattles)
- 2) sheik sheik (tin rattles)
- 3) guiro (rasping instrument)
- 4) cencerro (cow bell)
- 5) compana (external percussion doubles bell)

Membranophones

- 1) tumbas (congas)
- 2) redoblante (snare drum)
- 3) tambor (drum)
- 4) bombo (bass drum)
- 5) timbaletas (cylindrical metal drums having one membrane only)

String instruments

- 1) guitarra (guitar)

2) ukulele (4 string little guitar)

Aerophones

1) harmonica (mouth organ)

2) pito (whistle)

The staple musical element in Calypso is rhythm. It is made of two or four beats per bar (2/4 or 4/8) and its accents lay on the weaker beats. In the instruments backing the vocals the most recurrent configurations are groups of semiquarters alternated with their deviations. The last two values on each bar have a different timbre (i.e. congas would be played on the tauter membrane).

On this regular rhythmic structure, the vocalist is free to move in any direction, as if to oppose the uniformity of the instruments. This trend finds expression through syncopations, irregular values, and counter timing. In the music performed by comparsas (groups of masked people who parade in the carnival processions) the rhythm is produced by all the instruments playing simultaneously (congas, redoblantes, tambores, bombos, timbaletas, campanas, etc.)

During the performance every musician has his own rhythmic configuration. Some repeat it constantly, while others perform a number of variations alternating different rhythmic schemes. The melodies found in this record use the western tonal system major scales. In most cases the melodic circle stretches over a full octave from the lower to the upper dominant.

Sometimes we can also find the sixth grade of the upper scale, which has to be considered as a grace note. We can often find like grades and the syllabic style (every note corresponds to a syllable). In the response forms (alternation of soloist and chorus) the ostinato in the chorus use the tonic and dominant chord notes. The use of the chords in the backing instruments boils down to an alternation in the essential tonal functions:

I-V-I; I-V-I; I-IV-V-I (sometimes the II grade takes the place of the IV).

A formal analysis of the songs has enabled us to find a co-existence inside Calypso repertoires of a few typical structural elements to be found in western music (an alternation of strophe and refrains) together with African elements (response structure where the soloist improvises short verses which alternate the ostinato performed by the chorus). The strophe and the refrains are eight bars long with possible repetitions of half or of the whole structure. In a few cases the phrases sung by the soloist are interpolated by brief exclamations of the chorus (Trembling, Carnival Day).

The musical iteration of the strophe is often varied both rhythmically (here the singer uses his inventiveness constantly). In a few instances there is a development of microvariations (Doctor Bombodee) while in others we find the building of a different melody for each strophe (Back to my Country). The refrain normally does not change (Carnival day, Trembling, Back to My Country) but can undergo slight variations (Dr. Bombodee, My Teacher Never Like Me). Moreover, we can find transition formula that has the task of joining different musical periods.

The before mentioned elements, and many others that spring out from a close listening of the songs in this recording make up an obvious evidence of the varieties and of the richness which can be found today in the calypso repertoire performed in Puerto Limon not only during the Carnival celebrations, but also during other festivals and social gatherings. This recording presents a repertoire of great vitality and widely spread among the communities of African origin who inhabit the Caribbean regions of Costa Rica.

Notes by Enrique Camara and Ambrogio Sparagna

(English language version edited by Nick Fritsch)

CREDITS:

Engineers: Piero Venti, David Petrozino

Photos by Beatrice Kunzi

Licensed by special arrangement with Sud Nord Records, C.I.
Crocevia, Rome, Italy (produced in 1988).

Special thanks to David Petrozino.

Cover design, Duy Ngo

Digital mastering by Digital Sound Works, New York City



Lyrichord Discs Inc.

PO Box 1977 Old Chelsea Station

New York, NY 10011 Ph: 212 404 8290 Fax: 212 404 8291

email: nick@lyrichord.com Web: www.lyrichord.com

© and (P) Lyrichord Discs Inc. These texts (including images) are published under copyright by Lyrichord Discs Inc. All rights are reserved.
The texts, and the music associated, with them, may only be republished, duplicated or sold, with written permission from Lyrichord Discs Inc.