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Small Axe, Number 9 (Volume 5, Number 1), March 2001, pp. 140-158  
(Article)

Published by Duke University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/smx.2001.0006>



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# “Notting Eh Strange”: Black Stalin Speaks!

Winthrop R. Holder

[I]n history, time supplies the continuum but not the principle of change. To discover that principle it is still necessary . . . to seek, beyond the narrative of events, a wider understanding of the thoughts, habits, and institutions of a whole society.

– Elsa V. Goveia, *Historiography of the British West Indies*

## PRELUDE

Although our creative thinkers and artists – novelists, poets, calypsonians, comedians and the like – provide the most telling insight into our sociohistorical reality, too much of their work is overlooked by social scientists. As such, in their quest to shed light on our political and historical essence, these experts provide us with, at best, incomplete “knowledge”. Perhaps, in their estimation, literature – especially the popular – with its immediacy and emotive language usage and appeal lacks the rigour and exactitude that “facts” and statistics embody. Little wonder, then, that in text after text, both the “professional” historians and political scientists employ the calypso (if at all) merely as window dressing.

Indeed, this venerable art form receives steady and serious treatment from analysts of the calypso and researchers in gender studies, yet too many academicians

continuously overlook not only the calypso but also its literature. Would we ever move beyond, what Alister McIntyre refers to as the “parcelization of knowledge” without critically engaging the treasure chest of ideas and images that is encapsulated both in the calypso – the preserver of so much of our indigenous/subjugated knowledge – and the literature that it spawns?

In this conversation, calypsonian Black Stalin (Leroy Calliste) reflects on an entanglement with an expert in the following manner: “Plenty of them tell me what I was thinking! Whey I go do?” His rhetorical question – really a clarion call – compels us to begin the process of re-imagining modes of engaging and understanding “a whole society”. Indeed, now may well be the time to begin the process of contextualizing the popular.

## (VERSE I) THE LANGUAGE OF RESISTANCE

West Indians are English-speaking and, when confronted with the foreigner, display the language arrogance of all English-speaking people.

– V.S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*

If you can't prove what you writing

Then don't write what you writing

– Black Stalin, “Jail”

You have to look at the audience and develop ways and means of getting out what you want to say to them in a language that they would easily understand.

– Black Stalin

Whenever Black Stalin completes a thought there is the temptation to ask him which of his calypsos he is quoting. Not even a thin line separates Stalin's everyday speech from his written songs. Such is the power and reach of his heartfelt and insightful language flowing from total immersion in the art. The raconteur never stops composing. It is no surprise, then, that he has lyrics to take us well into the new millennium.

Coming from any other calypsonian that thought would be depressing, but not Black Stalin. Timeliness and timelessness pervade his work, and prescience animates his vision. He has conclusions about and suggestions for dealing with life's issues and a method for presenting them so that events are not merely chronicled. His is a frame characterized by analysis and inflection.

Stalin's verse encapsulates a critical method while projecting a stance that arouses the unconscious, energizes the progressive, and haunts Babylon. Redemption, regeneration, and reviewing history, all enlivened by a vision of creating a better tomorrow, sustain and inform his work. Usually a man of many words but on the perennially comedic political antics, Stalin is terse, almost to the point of being dismissive of the "Kicksin' in Parliament". Sometimes, less is more. Name the topic – war and peace, progress and stagnation, poverty and profligacy, prejudice and equality, sense and nonsense – each dyad has already been creatively (re)interpreted and explored by Stalin. His insight is awesome.

During the turbulent 1970s when the music of the oppressed was fighting against the Coca-Colonization of the world, reggae music was able to "Rise Up and Live" by "colonizing" the airways and airwaves – if not the very soul – of Europe, the United States and beyond. No wonder that by the late 1970s Stalin was detecting schisms within the oppressed music family. To fight back against this narrow and petty cultural chauvinism – both intra- and international – Stalin penned the classic "Black Man Music". In his search "for an anthem that would lend some vibration to the Blackman revolution", he issued the plaintive though resilient refrain, "Black music is already fighting one big revolution / so me ain't fighting no revolution in no revolution". In no way would Stalin sanction the "revolution" devouring the revolution.

Heartfelt cries for Third World solidarity, like Stalin's, may well have laid the tracks not only for creating the space within which a friendlier dance emerged between the music of the oppressed – rap, merringue, dub, chutney, ragasoca, reggae, kaiso, compa, rhapsody, rumba, high life, rara, ringbang and soca – but on refocusing all energies on the struggle for freedom. Today, the ever-conscious Fugees, with Wyclef Jean's *Carnival* compact disc, extends Stalin's revolutionary anthem by sampling reggae, pan and Sparrow's "Only a Fool Breaks His Heart", thereby moving "Jah People" to embrace each other and continually resist "surrender[ing] to unfreedom".

If in the 1970s Stalin, the linguist of the oppressed, was engaged with "words to refashion futures", today, in considering the Ebonics controversy, he adds his discursive voice to the language debate with the telling assertion: "Africans always resisting European language. Ah mean, we get licks to learn English. So we speech is resistance language." In one swipe, Stalin unites and embraces all "black languages" as Ebonics – the language of resistance?

Regardless of the issue, Stalin continues to make his mark with words that are bullets targeted at the hearts, souls and minds of the world. He welcomes a steady

stream of visitors: musicians, well-wishers, fans, even the curious and, of course, interviewers wanting to understand the man and his music. What is his message? Can it be fully understood without his input? He laughs and shakes his dreadlocks when talking about what is written about kaiso.

Stalin is a busy man on the world stage. For more than thirty-five years he has been using the vehicle of the calypso to tell people what some do not want to hear. In this segment of the conversation he outlines the mode of resistance that energizes and sustains both the language and appeal of the calypso.

## CONVERSATION: WORD FOR WORD

### RESISTANCE ENGLISH

I am interested in [Samuel] Selvon [and] what the colonial writers are going to do to the English language.

– Editor of *London Magazine*

**Winthrop Holder:** Much has been written about the calypso. Is it on the mark?

**Black Stalin:** It's as if nobody, except the kaisonians themselves, wants to take kaiso seriously. In order to properly analyse kaiso you've got to understand that it isn't a three-minute thing. It's hard for some people to connect with the roots of kaiso. When people leave home and they leave as branches, it's very tough to come [to the United States] and find a root.

**WH:** What keeps the spirit going?

**BS:** A kaisonian is always a warrior. The more the odds are against him, the better he works. You've got to understand, kaiso is more than just a music that's passing through. It's a whole way of life. We could do whatever we want and we still can't get away from kaiso . . . It has to get its point across.

**WH:** But does the interest shown by some indicate that they are serious about the calypso?

**BS:** Trinis tend to run from everything that is theirs until our backs are against the wall . . . But, I think, all in all, the interest in kaiso is sort of balanced. It's opening up a whole lot. It mightn't be home but, again, when you consider the amount of calypso communities coming to life around the world, give thanks. I remember when calypso in New York was on Saturdays from 2:00 to 5:00 or 6:00 in the evening with Arnold

Henry . . . Now kaiso is about to flood the airwaves. Although some people still have negative views on the calypso, I think it's opening up nicely.

WH: Is the world ready for kaiso?

**SMALL  
AXE**

BS: We were always out there. Our problem with kaiso is like how to bottle a spirit. How could you do that? That is always the problem, how to bottle a spirit. The problem is how to get it out there. Of course, to get it out you have to pass through all the modern technology. The challenge is to bring kaiso on par – listening-wise – with any other music around the world. This has always been our problem: How to get music – when it's recorded – to match other music? Now that technology has come so cheap I think the quality of our recording has risen a whole lot over the last couple of years. So I think now, more than ever, we just need a little more time. A few years ago we used to have what we call a dominant West Indian interest in calypso. In a sense that's changing. Within the last few years many people are writing about calypso. There has been serious documentation of it. Serious books start showing up. Gradually we taking we rightful place on that world stage and in libraries.

WH: Who is the kaiso audience?

BS: You have different audiences. You don't ever write for yourself. Kaiso is a way of life. You must write for an audience but we try to get our message across, *in our language*, to the whole world. This is how it's done and most of the time it is in our language. When I say our language I mean our *Resistance English* that we use all the time.

WH: What do you mean by Resistance English?

BS: We normal way of speaking. Africans always resisting the European language. Ah mean we get licks to learn English. So we speech is resistance language. How we talking and what the brother in Guadeloupe or Martinique talking, when you look at it is the same thing: Two Africans don't want to talk the colonizer's language so he end up talking patois and we end up talking something that's sounding like English. Ah English fella have to ask we, "What did you say there, young chap?" We always fighting English. (Ah, eh-eh, Whey yo say dey?) That language is the key to kaiso. We have to hope that the world could see our experiences through our language. The moment it cyan happen that way, we in problems, because we wouldn't be ourselves.

## KAISO IS WE ANTHEM

WH: Are you saying that there is a need to hold on to that language of resistance although many people may not be ready for such language?

**BS:** Yes, Yes. It is important to see us through our language. The whole world had to learn what “irie” means. Of course, the music is for the world but, again, through our eyes. As we know, kaiso is more than a music. It’s a way of life. Kaiso is everything: It is how we eat, how we walk. Kaiso is the anthem that things run on. That’s we rhythm, we everything!

Ah mean, if you go into a kaiso community and you look, you would see people walk the road to the beat of the kaiso. The same way as if classic is the order of the day, you won’t get that bounce as it comes from a different space. Classic is from you waist up and kaiso is from you waist down. You could sit down and take in beautiful classics like Haydn’s Symphony in G or Tchaikovsky’s Opus in F Minor or even Handel’s *Messiah* and you could easily sit down in a theatre and listen to them. But when I’m on, it ain’t have no sitting down. You know, it’s strict rhythm we dealing with.

**WH:** What gives calypso its flavour or character?

**BS:** It has always been rebellion. It wasn’t anything else. Kaiso always in a fighting mood. The people were also on a revolution. Always on a change. Just look at the names: Growler, Tiger, Roaring Lion, the Executor and on and on.

**WH:** Do you see the rebellious or warrior spirit in younger calypsonians today?

**BS:** Not much of it. A lot of the younger singers stay into having a good time . . . It’s a phase kaiso passing through. But kaiso always taking care of itself. Whether is too little serious songs or too much smut etcetera, kaiso always takes care of kaiso.

Look at this, in 1957 Blackie was singing “Too Much Smut”:

Sparrow, Sparrow, we decent and clean  
with your marvellous voice you could trap a queen  
but smutty and vile wouldn’t get you nowhere  
It would only leave you as a statue at Woodford Square

Blackie was singing that in ’57. And in ’65 Terror was singing:

They should make songs much cleaner  
we would still be popular  
we could still be jocular  
. . . children growing every day listening to what we say  
so let’s keep kaiso the clean way

And [a few] years ago Shorty was singing “Make them clean . . . that ent good enough”.

## (VERSE II) THE BURDEN OF CONSCIENCE

SMALL  
AXE

They live in a disordered and fast-changing world, and they need help in grasping it, understanding it, controlling it. And that is how the writer will serve them.

– V.S. Naipaul

Ah living in ah yes man society

Where all de no man becomes de enemy

– Black Stalin, “Man out for Change”

[T]he poet appropriates the voice of the people and the full burden of their memory.

– Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*

Uncovering the numerous layers of meaning in Black Stalin’s oeuvre is no easy task. He often locates a complex or vexing issue in its historical context and adds a satirical or disquieting twist in order to interest, instruct and enliven his audiences through dialogue. His approach is more probing than telling, less annalistic than analytic.

Stalin spans centuries, continents and events, uniting them by drawing sharp, stark, images in order to move his audiences to a higher level of consciousness. Guru, folk poet, visionary, educator, griot and even Silenus are all roles Stalin fulfils by singing his “Song for the Land”. Through his verse, he propels his discerning audience beyond the frontiers of possibilities, compelling them to take up issues for contemplation and solution. By voicing the motivations and sustaining frame that fashion and inform his work Stalin not only helps us connect with the roots of calypso but, more importantly, calls attention to the irony of the calypsonians’ stifled voices in the literature on the calypso. Moreover, by speaking out Stalin punctures the cloak of silence and sterility while navigating the shark-infested waters protecting those encased in the false conceit of the arrogance of power. In the process, he enlarges our understanding of the art’s reflections on life and farce.

In the early 1960s V.S. Naipaul “diagnose[d] the sickness . . . of the picaroon society [where] violence and brutality are accepted” and reinforced by systemic corruptive maladministration and the negation of personhood.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in order to bring order to “the disorder that lurks”,<sup>2</sup> Stalin’s trilogy – “Man out for Change”, “Promises” and “Jail” – contests, reinterprets and extends Naipaulian prescience by

1 V.S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage* (London: André Deutsch, 1962), 75–78.

2 See Kenneth Ramchand, “Partial Truths: A Critical Account of V.S. Naipaul’s Later Fiction”, in *Critical Issues In West Indian Literature*, ed. E.S. Smilowitz and R.Q. Knowles (Indiana: Caribbean Books, 1984), 80.



exorcising the spectre of another “sweet-talking” picaroon government haunting “de land”. Stalin extends and reconfigures the *double entendre* – a traditional mode of resistance in social commentary – insisting all the while that today’s conversation is more than “Man Talking to Man”!<sup>3</sup> He maintains, “kaiso isn’t a three-minute thing”. Rather, at its best, kaiso not only advances the language of resistance but also serves as the conscience, bearing the collective burden of the despised, the dispossessed, the dispirited and the downpressed. To Stalin, conscious kaisonians have little choice but to resist the “powerfluff antics of the downpressors and vampires”.

It was from the crucible of suffering and resistance that calypso sprang. Kaisonians not only sang out of their immediate surroundings but attempted to recreate, understand and engage the world while exposing its foibles in order to move a people to transform and transcend social conditions. More than that: By resisting downpression and negating the dogmas of inferiority, the early calypsonians, like their literary counterparts in the *Beacon* and *Trinidad*, affirmed their dignity and laid tracks for future generations of warriors to further the freedom dance.<sup>4</sup> In a harmonious way, kaisonians also vocalized what was on the minds and in the hearts of their audience. That is why the sing-along persists as a key construct in the calypso up to today.

Few calypsonians capture the spirit and sensibilities of our times like Black Stalin. There is a pervasive timelessness in his work. Many calypsonians record events and sing for a judge, “King and Queen Carnival”, the moment, a fête. Not Black Stalin. He operates in the didactic and constructivist moulds not merely to inform and agitate. Rather, his verse nags the conscience and disturbs sensibilities. Undergirding his method, then, is an attempt to cajole his audience both to reconsider life’s travails and, more pointedly, to create possibilities for social transformation.

If, as Gordon Rohlehr argues, “ ‘Rebellion’ . . . is the consciously willed and chosen movement from ‘death’, ‘dumbness’, ‘silence’ and the inability to communicate towards ‘life’, ‘language’, ‘prayer’ ”,<sup>5</sup> then Black Stalin is on target by employing in his calypsos both the language and the mode of resistance in order to excite and anchor our spirit of survival. In “Sing for the Land”, Stalin casts himself in the role of defender of the national interest and patrimony while compelling the audience to follow his

3 See Gordon Rohlehr, “ ‘Man Talking to Man’: Calypso and Social Confrontation in Trinidad, 1970 to 1984”, in his collection *My Strangled City and Other Essays* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: Longman Trinidad, 1992), 324–41.

4 Reinhard Sander, *From Trinidad: An Anthology of Early West Indian Writing* (New York: Africana Publishing, 1978).

5 Gordon Rohlehr, *Pathfinder: Black Awakening in The Arrivants of Edward Kamau Brathwaite* (Tunapuna, Trinidad: Gordon Rohlehr, 1981), 238.

lead. Listen to the visionary: “Anybody that take a chance and interfere with de land / Look, ah want them know I go give up meh life for de land.”

SMALL  
AXE

Standing firmly against all manifestations of injustice, censorship, barbarism, torts and chicanery, Stalin issues a passionate plea for his audience to join him in renewing the commitment to “leave de world better than we find it”. Are Sparrow’s “Good Citizens”, the *opinion shapers*, aware of their true role?<sup>6</sup>

When does someone really become a good citizen  
I’d like to know for sure  
Why when the ordinary man disagrees with the establishment  
They call it treason  
Why should they persecute a brother for seeking Black Power  
Don’t they know a blind man could see  
That this is blatant hypocrisy  
The real traitors and them are all high in society  
Yet the government protecting all of them and penalizing you and me  
. . . And in a million different ways they violate the laws  
It’s these same good no good bastards who oppress the poor  
. . . These good citizens are the architects of economic slavery.

Writing, five months before the “February Revolution”, about the literary revolution – extracting the “literature from the ‘yard’ . . . in the decisive establishment of social realism” – of the 1930s, Kenneth Ramchand noted: “The Trinidad audience was interested in respectability, not in questions of art.”<sup>7</sup>

As we begin the millennium, popular art is misunderstood, undersupported and under attack. Attempts are still made to muzzle not only the calypso but artists such as playwright Tony Hall who dare give voice and a “formal” stage to “ ‘Jean and Dinah’ . . . who have been locked away . . . since 1956”!<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Ramchand’s opinion resonates in Stalin’s repartee: “The characters in the system changed, but the character of the system has not.”

If, as Naipaul writes, “the recording of a life becomes an extension of that life”<sup>9</sup> then the calypso, by functioning as a clearing house of indigenous knowledge, not only affirms our sense of self but, more importantly, serves as a transmitter of culture across

6 Refer to Slinger Francisco’s (The Mighty Sparrow) penetrating commentary of the early 1970s in “Good Citizens”:

7 Kenneth Ramchand, Introduction to *Minty Alley* by C.L.R. James (London: New Beacon Books, 1971), 3–15.

8 Controversy engulfed Tony Hall’s play *Jean and Dinah* over the “obscene” language of the street used to capture the social reality of the “ghetto”.

9 V.S. Naipaul, *Mimic Men* (London: Penguin, 1969), 244.

space and time. In this section Stalin speaks not only of the resistance through renewal but also of the self-corrective process in the calypso and of his revivalist vision.

## KAIISO WATCHDOG

WINTHROP  
R. HOLDER

Rebellion . . . involves the will to create even in the face of ultimate contingency . . . [and]  
commitment to bearing the burden of conscience.

– Gordon Rohlehr, *Pathfinder*

WH: What keeps the calypso going?

BS: Kaiso is always kaiso watchdog. It's a little phase that kaiso going through now with the youth and the branching off to the dancehall thing. Kaiso went through all of that a'ready. Many people try that a'ready; whether it was kaiso rock, kaiso jazz, kaiso cha cha, kaiso twist, kaiso mambo and, today mainstream kaiso still happening! Kaiso happening so much now that people want we to re-record all the old calypsos. But youth always go for something new. We accustomed to this happening to kaiso. I am not disturbed about kaiso at all.

I remember in the early days when it was the Sunday morning show with "shindig" and there were all these groups where you had people like David Rudder singing [rhythm and blues]. Today Rudder is one of our number one kaisonians. Johnny Douglas was in the pop thing too, today he is a major kaiso singer with a popular band. "Stumpy" Olive Chapman of Wildfire is now into kaiso, too. Even Tony Wilson, who used to sing with Hot Chocolate, now singing kaiso too. So leave them alone and they will come home.

As long as we have kaisonians that stay on the road and continue to keep the flag flying, sooner or later those who stray would come back to kaiso. All the other [musical] forms will come and go, but kaiso will stay because it's the way of life of the people. They must hear that commentary and that is the power of the kaiso.

WH: What do you mean by the "kaiso watchdog"?

BS: Kaisonians always watch their art for themselves. Because within the last few years you notice you hear about five or six kaisos dealing with too much waving. Kaisonians coming out and looking over their own thing and saying, "There's too much waving in kaiso." So we decide for we own self to clean up the waving. We don't wait for the radio station or anybody else to tell we that there's too much waving in calypso. There were also times when smut was coming on and kaisonians say "too much smut".

When there were too many calypsongs, and people were going too song-wise and moving away from the authentic calypso progression, Kitch sang

**SMALL  
AXE**

Too much calypsong  
Too much calypsong  
Bring back the old time re-minor  
Too much calypsong.

That was on his '67 album he did with Ron Berridge accompaniment. Kaisonians always try to straighten out the art and take care of the art. So kaiso is kaiso own watchdog!

**WH:** Calypsonians listen to and comment on the work of other calypsonians.

**BS:** Yeah. That's how change comes about. Once I identify a problem in the kaiso and my message go over, you can't come to create that same problem again. Once we agree that there is a problem – as, for example, too much waving – kaisonians know that they can't wave no more. We tired of the waving. A kaisonian say that we tired of the waving. That's that.

**WH:** Do calypsonians merely reflect the public sentiment or do they lead?

**BS:** I think we, the calypsonians, know when it's time for change. We also get hints from the audience; but sometimes some of the audiences may not identify or recognize an issue. So it's our role to speak out.

**WH:** So is the calypso more a vehicle, or is it that very often “the calypso” says what the people want to say but can't say?

**BS:** It goes both ways. I may develop a little more about how they feel about a particular issue. But, sometimes we see things together.

**WH:** Innovations . . .

**BS:** We know that soca come in, so you have to take out two or three chords and don't let the music go too fast . . . The debate in kaiso about soca continues 'til today.

Every kaisonian has a music – a progression – that belongs to him. It's his progression. But what we have now is that you have to wait until the voice come into the music to know who is singing.

**WH:** Formula music?

**BS:** Yeah. Long time, even before you hear the first few bars, you could tell if it's Kitch or Shadow or whoever. [*Stalin scats in order to capture the distinctive Kitch and Shadow sounds.*] Each kaisonian had that character about himself. Now, it's too much formula

music. Now you have a kinda dancehall thing with everybody trying to get their voice to sound like one person – who that person is I don't know. Everybody toning their voice and music into one sound, so we don't have no kaisonian coming forward now! Very soon, though, we all know that form is going to take a back seat since it comes like a fast food kinda thing.

**WINTHROP  
R. HOLDER**

BLACK PRINCE: THE OTHER DIRECTION?

**WH:** How do you view Black Prince and his approach to the calypso?

**BS:** Black Prince is fantastic. I've been listening to him for something like fifteen to twenty years now and I have never heard him sing a bad kaiso. What is so nice about Black Prince is that he is unique in his own way. As I was saying, every kaisonian has his own character. The key in Black Prince is in his writing. He makes the humour on himself. That is the key. He doesn't put it on nobody else. All the problems is on himself – he has the problem. And this is what is so nice and unique about Black Prince – more than any other writer. If you laughing at anybody in his song you laughing at Black Prince – a fantastic writer. But is only recently that the audience is catching up with Black Prince's language and style in kaiso.

**WH:** So he hasn't changed, it's the audience . . .

**BS:** Yeah. That's always the way Black Prince does his thing. He has written some beautiful songs – “Later We Go See 'Bout That”, “Family Complaint”, “Kaiso”, “Dat Is Friend”.

“Dat Is Friend” is a story about how somebody did him something and he went to his friend telling him what happened. And his friend telling him,

Now that is you  
I ain't telling you what to do  
but if it was me  
I woulda break he two foot  
cut off he two hands

So Prince says “That is friend / he couldn't want a better friend”. Ah mean, Black Prince is just way out front.

**WH:** In the era of “jump and wave”, how does the audience respond to his slower approach?

**BS:** Again, that is the power of Black Prince's kaiso that he does go on stage before an audience of ten thousand people and sing with his guitar alone when every other

calypsonian sing with the band. Just a guitar and the audience listen to him the same way they listen to kaisonians with the band. Black Prince is something else.

SMALL  
AXE

Over the years, he used to compose for other people. But what making the people hear him now, more than ever, is because Spektakula Tent give him the opportunity to sing with the guitar and set the stage right, so that more people start to hear him.

WH: So he is more of a folk poet.

BS: Yes, yes. His main thing is the guitar. He don't like too much brass. He just like it cool . . . That's the love with Black Prince. People always say the "best" way to hear a kaiso is to hear it with a guitar alone. That is kaiso. Recently, I was making a tape for a lady and she tell me, "Put 'Man out for Change' on the whole second side of the tape." She wanted it over and over again.

#### SINGING WITH THE AUDIENCE

One day I'll break the fetters  
And then I will be free

– Zennie De Silva, *Moods 2: Poems for the Young*

WH: Indeed, every time you hear "Man out for Change" you discover a new layer of meaning. It also has the flavour of Marley's "Redemption Song". Did anything like that come into play?

BS: Not really. Strange enough, "Man out for Change" was written in 1974. I wrote that song right in the middle of the Black Power Movement . . . when there were even "guerrillas" in the hills like Guy Harewood, Brian Jeffers, Angela Jacobs [of the National Union of Freedom Fighters]. That is why the song begins: "Let we say that when you read your morning newspaper / De headlines say that how they charge Stalin as guerilla". Also the line, "And just play smart and too intelligent / you could die mysteriously in some freak accident", that referred to Dr Camacho from UWI [University of the West Indies] who died in a freak accident the day before he was to go and expose corruption before some commission [of inquiry]. Gene Miles's story is also prominent in the song. So that song was written in those times – the 1970s. But doing it this way, with the guitar alone, I think my voice had more presence for the type of lyrics. I thought about doing "Man out for Change" this way – with guitar alone – for a long time. Not that anything was taken from "Redemption Song", but Marley's idea was a beautiful one. And somehow, we think that most Caribbean music – whether it's reggae or calypso – is really that guitar.

WH: Although “Man out for Change” was written in 1974, it seems valid today.

BS: This is the way I always tend to do my songs. I don’t like to put time on my songs. I always like that they could live on. This song is the favourite of a lot of people.

WH: Are people “right” to read things that are happening now into the song?

BS: Yeah. Because ah mean once you under this system nothing eh strange when you out for change. *Ah mean the characters in the system changed, but the character of the system has not changed.* So, nothing eh strange. This is what we operate under. We’ve been seeing that people who come out and say they want to change it, we see what happen to them. The song is just a warning to people that if you decide to change you have to be prepared to stand the consequence for your actions. It’s not an easy one, but then, you know, everything depends on how much you are committed to change. Because when you attack the system and it returns the attack, is a serious attack it does launch on you. We see it already.

WH: What gives your work its timeless character?

BS: When I sit down to write I look for a topic that’s down the road – for both now and down the road. I’m able to write a song, not for Stalin alone; whatever I write, the man out there is always part of it. He always feels that he is in the song. This is why in my writing the “we” and “them” in my language is important. When I am singing a song, the audience feels is them singing it, because I’m able in my writing to get my brothers and sisters involved in the topic, regardless of what it is. This is my little key that I use. Unlike many artists who sing *to* the audience, I sing *with* the audience. This is why Stalin has so much sing-along. In about ninety percent of my songs, the audience will sing with me because they are involved. Like “Black Man Feeling to Party” wasn’t Stalin singing to anybody in the audience. The entire audience was involved in some way – whether you married, yes or no. That song was your song. After that song, people meet me and tell me that is years they never went out with they wife, but since the song they went out. So it’s having that kind of impact.

WH: So, you do not compose with your back to the audience.

BS: The people are always in my compositions. I never leave them out. Some of the little things I say in the kaiso is to let the audience know that it’s their experience in song.

## A TRIBUTE TO LIFE

**SMALL  
AXE**

Anytime you start talking race  
and between the masses spreading  
dis  
harmony  
The black man jamming  
– Black Stalin, “Nah Ease Up”

**WH:** What was the motivation behind “Sundar”?

**BS:** I was looking at how people in these times started to accept certain stories the way they wanted to hear the stories. Whereas a few years ago you could just get a vehicle and I could carry the story in the vehicle, nowadays everybody into abstract. So I just decide, today – as you know, we have politicians who would like to encourage this racial tension in the country – so I decided to do a song. Not so much to relate the old story but to relate the old story in a new way so that the audience could stay outside and at least what they hear is not what they feel. What you hear in the calypso is not what really coming through on the record.

Well, as you know I am from the Southland which is a predominantly Indian . . . and African area. All the “racial tension” we have in Trinidad is more a politician kinda thing that have nothing to do with the fisherman and the garbage collector. Because the fella I went to school with and he borrow my lead and I borrow he pen, we still meet on the corner and we don’t have a problem.

If you could stay here and hear Stalin asking an Indian fella for a song, what could be so wrong with Trinidad as far as this race war people talking ’bout? That has to be ole talk.

**WH:** Reactions to the song . . .

**BS:** Ah mean the entire Sundar Indian community warmed up to the song.

**WH:** Did you anticipate this outpouring of support when you were writing “Sundar”, or any other song?

**BS:** Yeah. Ah mean, on each song, you feel it going to travel because you have a reason for writing the song. You see somebody or some area when you writing the song where you want it to go. Some songs take time. “Sundar” especially, I knew that the song was going to be accepted but not the way that it went over.

**WH:** The symbolic meaning of the song . . .



**BS:** I feel people are feeling something. I write the song for people to feel something – even though it not in the lyrics. It’s more in the feeling. When a man sings the line “Sundar whey the song?” he know what he saying. He know who he asking for a song. In his vision, when he say Sundar he have to know who he is seeing.

**WH:** Who?

**BS:** When he say Sundar, he is seeing that Indian fella from Barrackpore. He’s seeing that guy. If he don’t want to be associated with him, he wouldn’t sing the song.

**WH:** You mentioned moving away from the “vehicle-carrier form” to a more abstract approach. How does “Sundar” facilitate or capture the movement?

**BS:** I think this generation, more than ever – these kaiso listeners – more into abstract. When I say abstract I mean like how in “Sundar” it’s not really like a flat topic about Afro-Indian unity in Trinidad. It’s a story about I asking a man for a song. I ain’t even say if the music is good music or not. All I say is that I want a song to sing. But the man down the road – the finish to the man down the road – his feeling from the song is Afro-Indian unity. He is not feeling no song. What he getting from that disk when it playing is an Indian fella and an African fella in Trinidad holding on and dancing. But it’s not in the lyrics. What he [the listener] hearing is not what going down at all. His vision of what’s going down is “All’s well in Trinidad, ’cause look Stalin and Sundar dancing. Look dem is friend. Stalin say dem is friend. Stalin asking for a song, look they singing together.” So how much racial tension could there be in Trinidad? The feeling and emotions have nothing to do with the song – the words “Sundar give me a song”, that’s what’s happening, piece of abstract. What you hear is not necessarily what you feel.

**WH:** Is this a new form to get people to relate to your message?

**BS:** This is something I have been looking at. For when you check how people start to deal with certain things – how people answering your questions – when you check them out you see that it’s as if to go through everything now the man taking a little longer to understand it. Like if he could take it in a little less words and not as complicated, or not as flat as it used to be. Somehow, I’m noticing that in just the simple language of the man in the street he rather hear our message a little different from what he has been hearing from us.

Maybe just like how you had this kind of period here [in America] when people preferred to hear the message the way Malcolm X used to present it instead of the way Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, used to say it. Yet they end up as the same thing – It’s the

same thing they on. But it's as if people were saying, "You see this one here we understand it good, but it taking a little too long – the language. We rather hear it this way now because it eh have nothing with the non-violence movement." Some violence already there. From the time you decide to protest you into violence because that's why you protesting because is violence coming down on you so it didn't have no non-violence. It was just that Malcolm X said it differently. I think people, the kaiso audience, starting to like they rap a bit different. I'm still working on it, eh.

**WH:** Do you have more songs in this form?

**BS:** Well the other song like that is "In Times" where it's so hard to explain what "In Times" is about. You just have to say life and leave it there and let people hear the song for themselves and draw their own picture:

We seem to feel that life is over  
just because we throw a few pennies down the gutter  
We seem to feel everything is lost  
So we fighting to get back something at any cost  
While we fighting and we fighting to get back that little something  
We keep forgetting that we know nothing about this world in which we living  
Someone greater put this world together  
So we must remember  
In times of plenty we must be grateful  
In times of sorrow we must be strong  
In times of joy we must be thankful  
Because life really has its ups and its downs  
In times of disaster we must be ready  
To join together and move racism out de way  
And if you listen to this watchword from your lover, Black Stalin  
Tomorrow would be ah better day

When you talk about so many things you could only relate it to "A Better Day Coming" and being humble. So many different messages coming out of one song: All we can really say is that it's a tribute to life.

#### COMPOSING: STALIN'S TIMELESS ART

**WH:** As you say "In Times" is just a level of abstraction, but . . .

**BS:** I'm still looking and I'm feeling whether or not it's true. Maybe, I'd be able to develop it more.

**WH:** But, it appears as if too many “message” songs end up as laundry lists where calypsonians simply list what happened and the songs end up being flat.

**BS:** Again, every day you have to look at the audience and develop ways and means of getting out what you want to say to them in a language that they would easily understand. I’ve been working on that – finding a way to talk to this generation. And so far it’s looking good.

**WH:** Coming back to the notion of the kaiso watchdog, I recall you having said that your “More Come” was a reaction to Duke’s “How Many More Must Die?” In a sense then, one calypsonian trying to correct another’s partial interpretation of reality. Have you found yourself in your own songs going through a self-corrective process by revisiting issues and changing focus or adding a new twist?

**BS:** Whenever I finish a topic, it finish. I don’t like to go back into that space. That’s why I try so much to keep the story as tight as possible and do it in such a way that it would live as long as possible.

**WH:** So there are never any regrets.

**BS:** This is what the whole kaiso thing is about. You can’t build a song today owing to the climate and because it change next week you have regrets about what you say this week. This is how you see things now. Whether or not it relate to next week you can’t do anything about that. But the point about it is that this is how it is now . . . There are people who sing songs a’ready that can’t sing today. They have no meaning today. But for the time it was a beautiful song. Then again, some songs relate everything that happen for a year.

**WH:** True. There is no room for thinking or imagination

**BS:** Well, the calypsonian is also a historian.

**WH:** But you are a historian too, and . . .

**BS:** Well, sometimes I more seem to feel that like some [calypsonians] document it more than interpreting and creating it. Plenty calypsonians, many a time even, when they try to put some ideas into something, ideas are still lacking. What I see in too many calypsos is a lot of documentation: Who was what, when and where she was? Very little why?

**WH:** Do you see yourself as documenting less?

**BS:** I don’t like to state everything. I don’t like that documenting. I don’t do that. This is why you would hear my song that I tell you make in 1975 and . . . I didn’t call

names so I leave the song timeless. But in another sense you could see I was documenting the time, the mood and everything about Trinidad and Tobago in the middle seventies.

**SMALL  
AXE**

**WH:** If your approach isn't strictly documenting, how would you describe it?

**BS:** I does always try that if I have to relate something and it seems as if I would be going to document and it look to me that I going down that space I always like to twist the whole thing around to give it a two face; that double entendre in terms of a word with two meanings. For example, "And just play smart and too intelligent / you could die mysteriously in some freak accident." So what we do is of course we document the Camacho incident but we don't leave it there. We don't isolate it to Camacho.

**WH:** So it could be 1995, 1999 or even 2002 once we are under this system?

**BS:** True. It could be anybody anytime. There are a lot of kaisos that you would hear and there are a lot of things documented in it and you may not even be aware of.

**WH:** Why not?

**BS:** Again once you start to document you put time on the song when I always feel if I have to document something I shouldn't isolate it. I always feel I should put life on it and update it. There are many things that I know happen that we could document and put in song but then it ain't serving no purpose. Sometimes it have no way to put what happen for it to be relevant to somebody today or tomorrow or day after. So we don't go documenting things like that. I am very careful when I am going to draw any examples of something that I think would have to go on forever. I always try to put a little life in it.

**WH:** You mentioned that there are things in calypso that people may not understand. Is part of the reason because researchers don't allow calypsonians the space to shed light on their work?

**BS:** Yes, Yes. That is one. They good with that too bad. I have talked to some of them and they tell me what I was saying! I have to keep quiet because I say these fellas know more than me about what I was composing. Plenty of them tell me what I was thinking. Why I go do?

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am thankful to Dawad Phillip, editor of the *Daily Challenge* (New York) for arranging the interview and to the Black Stalin for the dialogue.