Talking Drums: Soca and Go-Go Music as Grassroots Identity Movements

DEIDRE R. GANTT

INTRODUCTION: THE PEOPLE’S MUSIC

Soca music is a fast-paced derivative of calypso. Its name is derived from Lord Shorty’s self-described mission to find the “soul of calypso.” It was created in the 1970s by the calypsonian Garfield Blackman, better known as Lord Shorty or the “Father of Soca,” who “began experimenting with East Indian rhythms, using instruments such as the dholak, tabla and dhantal and fusing them with the calypso beat.” The Indian influence in soca faded out fairly early in the genre’s development, resurfacing in the last decade as soca gave birth to new forms such as the hybrid chutney-soca.

Like calypso, soca is closely linked to the Trinidadian Carnival, or “mas” (short for masquerade). Other common features between the two genres include a lead singer; sometimes a duet and, more rarely, a group of vocalists; and a lyrical emphasis on sexuality and double entendre. Soca tends to forgo its predecessor’s frequent political commentary in favor of “fete music”—party anthems associated with the annual carnival season. Dudley identifies another distinction between the forms: “The [soca] vocal line is very sparse in comparison with traditional calypso. The denseness of syllables and the storytelling style of text have given way to short, crisp phrases that function more like instrumental riffs than narrative.”

Around the same time that Lord Shorty was experimenting with calypso, Washington, DC–based guitarist and bandleader Chuck Brown was creating another unique sound: go-go music. Go-go historians Kip Lornell and Charles
C. Stephenson, Jr., write that Brown—affectionately known as the “Godfather of Go-Go”—began experimenting with this new sound as early as 1971; however, they consider his 1974 and 1975 live shows as the turning point when the new sound emerged.⁵

Go-go music is distinguished from all other forms by the go-go beat, often called a “pocket.” The beat is described by Lornell and Stephenson as a polyrhythmic, “syncopated, dotted rhythm that consists of a series of quarter and eighth notes . . . which is underscored most dramatically by the bass drum and snare drum, and the hi-hat. This basic rhythmic unit is ornamented by other percussion instruments, especially the conga drums, timbale, and hand-held cowbells.”⁶

The live show environment is a central factor in both the development and naming of go-go. While playing cabarets to predominately African American audiences in Washington, Brown recognized the need to compete with disco DJs, who “could keep the dance floor packed” and led partygoers to dislike the “pause in between songs.”⁷ According to Lornell and Stephenson, “Brown replied in kind, performing non-stop with the percussion section keeping the beat, playing the funk, until the band grooved into the next selection.”⁸ This performance strategy led to the name go-go, derived from the Smokey Robinson song “Going to a Go-Go,” to characterize the sound that goes and goes and goes.⁹

While soca and go-go began as primarily aesthetic movements by individual musicians, both genres were rapidly popularized by working-class and poor Trinidadians and Washingtonians of African descent. Despite differences in location and sound, soca and go-go music share a common project: an attempt by these populations to negotiate and express their African heritage and to revise, affirm, and project their collective cultural identities. The specific nature of each population’s project is closely linked to their historical and contemporary situations—Trinidad’s as an essentially biracial, formerly colonized, developing nation and DC’s as a predominately black nonstate that happens to also be the capital city of the world’s superpower.

A COMMON HERITAGE

Due to the numerical majority of Africans in slavery-era Trinidad and differences between the repressive practices of American and French slaveholders, Africans in Trinidad were much more successful than their American counterparts in preserving connections to African culture. This has resulted in a direct
connection of soca to African music practices. This lineage extends back in time to calypso, cariso, the calenda (drum-based songs and dances that accompanied the stick fights of the nineteenth-century “jamette” Carnival as celebrated by Afro-Trinidadians following emancipation), and earlier genres like the jhoub and belair. When the British banned drumming after seizing control of Trinidad from the Spanish, Trinidadian ingenuity maintained the link through innovations like the tamboo bamboo, a stick drum cut from bamboo canes.

In the United States, including, of course, Washington, DC, along with Virginia and the Carolinas, from which many current black Washingtonians trace their immediate roots, the white establishment stripped the African minority of visible manifestations of African cultural practices. Yet many so-called African music practices clearly survived due to what Olly Wilson calls “shared conceptual approaches to the process of music-making” in the absence of clearly inherited techniques.

The African strategies found in go-go music are also derived from interactions with Caribbean and South American residents of the Washington area, whose cultures had retained African music styles through more concrete methods. Chuck Brown was inspired to add conga drums and timbales to the go-go sound from his stint with Los Latinos, an Afro-Latin band with whom he had played prior to forming the Soul Searchers.

The influences of Afro-Latin and Afro-Cuban music was not, of course, limited to the Washington area but was present throughout American society, particularly in the 1940s through the 1960s.

In the 1970s and 1980s, ideologies of cultural nationalism and Afrocentrism spread throughout Washington’s black population. Go-go musicians, audiences, and students responded to this movement by emphasizing the connection between go-go and African music. This tendency was shown most clearly in Straight Up Go-Go, a 1992 documentary, in which Howard University professor Dr. Elias Jones states, “[Go-go] reminded me of Africa, it reminded me of the Caribbean, and it was one of the strongest elements of African presence that I felt in Washington, DC.” In the same film, go-go drummer Jason Lane describes the sound as “punk, rock, mostly African,” and a fan, Brian Knight, says, “It’s kind of like the original beat from Africa.” Music critic and writer Nelson George compares go-go to the music of Fela Kuti, while music teacher and go-go drummer Mamadi Nyasuma connects the music to the agogo bell and the wa wa ko rhythm of West Africa.

Whether inherited through direct and literal or conceptual and symbolic methods, soca and go-go share three common strategies of African music-
making: polymetric ensemble drumming, call-and-response between performers and the audience, and the use of repetitive lyrics that appear in multiple songs performed by multiple artists over a long period of time (years). These strategies have specific applications in the larger project of communal identity formation and expression that these communities have undertaken.

First, the ensemble drumming embodies the process of negotiating multiple identities that characterize both the Afro-Trinidadian and black Washingtonian experience within their cultures. As Nyasuma notes, “The African rhythm was polyrhythmic: all the drums were saying different things but they had to be in sync with one another.”

Describing the uses of call-and-response, Jeff Pressing states that “where the response does not copy the call, the response typically has an invariant form and involves several to many singers or instruments, whereas the call is often solo and is more likely to feature substantial variation and improvisation.”

This is certainly true of its function in soca and go-go, in which artists employ call-and-response to engender both vocal and physical interplay between the musicians and audience members, transforming the fete and the go-go into sites of co-creation, where all members are united in performing their shared identity. The use of repeated phrases and themes creates a “script” of sorts, a blueprint for transmitting the shared identity through time and space. J. C. Roederer writes,

> Repetition . . . limits the burden on memory, achieves intensification of engagement and attention, and promotes automaticity. This heightens the groove’s potential for emotional impact, reinforcing the power of imposed communal rhythms to establish behavioral coherence in masses of people.

The descendants of African slaves in Trinidad and Washington have inherited and adopted common modes of expression; however, the sociopolitical experiences of working-class Trinidadians and Washingtonians are distinct. Thus, the cultural identities being expressed and defined through these tactics are very different and very specific to members of these groups. This helps to explain why each style is highly popular in its region of origin, while being relatively invisible in the mainstream.

**SOCA AND THE TRINIDADIAN IDENTITY**

It is no accident that soca music emerged from calypso roughly a decade following Trinidad’s independence from Great Britain. Though connected to ear-
lier Afro-Trinidadian music styles, traditional calypso emerged in the wake of the Arouca riots and general repression by the British colonial government at the turn of the twentieth century. Calypso became what the former prime minister Eric Williams termed the “mouthpiece” of Afro-Trinidadian political sentiments.

With the end of British rule over the island, Trinidadians found themselves at a crossroads, having to undertake the formidable task of forming a new national identity. Keith Warner documents extensively the calypsonians’ continued role as social critics during the formative years of the People’s National Movement. But he also demonstrates calypso’s ideological shift toward goals stated in 1962 by Williams, then prime minister: that there could be “no Mother Africa for those of African origin . . . no Mother England, and no dual loyalties,” for “the only Mother we recognise is Mother Trinidad and Tobago.”

Then, as now, this newly independent country was fundamentally biracial. Trinidadians of African and East Indian descent make up nearly equal percentages of the population; together, they form the country’s majority. Cowley documents the long-standing practice of the British to use “divide-and-rule” tactics on the Afro-Trinidadians and the East Indians who had been brought to Trinidad as indentured servants following emancipation. Thus, working out new power relations in the absence of the British became of utmost importance. Lord Shorty’s experimental fusion of calypso and Indian music is an artistic reflection and extension of this project. The drums that talk to one another in soca are polyrhythmic not only in the number of distinct beats being played but in the synthesis of African and Indian culture into one Trinidad.

Today, soca music makes frequent reference to the need for multiethnic unity among Trinidadians. Here, the technique of repetition finds its strength. These appeals crop up in song after song, as if to drum the concept into the minds of listeners. In “Soca or Die,” Destra Garcia, one of Trinidad’s most popular soca artists, sings, “It could be so easy if we were divided / all together as one, but yet we so damn divided,” calling attention to the unfinished nature of Trinidadian unity and, by implication, the need to keep it in the forefront of the people’s minds. Calls for unity permeate Destra’s catalog, but she is far from the only artist to employ this technique. Tribe, one of Trinidad’s largest mas bands (as in a posse of revelers rather than a musical ensemble), bills itself as “all-inclusive.” Iwer George, the 2007 Soca Monarch (champion of the annual Carnival soca competition), titled one of his songs “Time to Unite.” In one performance during 2006 mas, Machel Montano called for everyone to jump: black, white, Indian, or Chinese.
This so-called festival soca has been widely criticized for its lack of socially conscious lyrics and its emphasis on jumping, wining, and waving rag and flag. In the documentary *Calypso at Dirty Jim’s*, the famous calypso pioneer Calypso Rose accuses the modern soca singers of “assassinating calypso,” due to the highly repetitive nature of many soca tunes. (Soca is not without its “message” songs, however, although they are less common and often less direct than those found in traditional calypso.)

However, these seemingly redundant instructions use call-and-response to reinforce the message of unity. Singer after singer instructs the audience to move together as a unit—to jump up, wave, “get on bad.” In the performance of shared activity—particularly within a context of fun—the identity project strives to make the sung unity real, even if only while playing mas. In this way, Trinidadians are once again redefining Carnival. Just as the jamettes overtook the celebration from the French upper classes a century ago, using it to critique their enslavers and, when merged with Canboulay, to celebrate their freedom from bondage, today’s Trinidadians are reinterpreting Carnival as a celebration open to all Trinidadians.

**GO-GO MUSIC AND THE WASHINGTONIAN IDENTITY**

Like soca, go-go music emerged in the wake of Washington, DC’s, acquisition of limited political home rule. Article 1, Section 8, Clause 17 of the U. S. Constitution effectively made Washington a colony of the United States. Until 1961, residents of the capital city did not even have the right to select delegates for the electoral college that elects the president and vice president of the United States. Two years before Chuck Brown and the Soul Searchers developed go-go’s seminal sound, the situation changed somewhat when Congress passed the District of Columbia Home Rule Act of 1973, granting Washington’s residents (eight hundred thousand at the time) the right to elect a mayor and city council representatives.

To this day, however, DC residents do not have a voting member of Congress, nor do they enjoy the same level of self-governance taken for granted by residents in any of the fifty states. Congress must approve the city’s budget and legislation passed by its elected officials; it also has the power to revoke home rule, as it proved in 1995 when it appointed a financial control board to assume responsibility for major decisions that were formerly the province of elected city officials.

This federal-local schism extends beyond governance into the daily lives of
Washington’s residents. As noted in the go-go documentary *The Pocket*, there is, on the one hand, Washington the federal city, which is powerful, wealthy, controlled by whites, and extremely visible around the globe. On the other hand, there is DC, which is politically powerless, economically deprived, predominately black, and utterly invisible to the millions of tourists who flock to the city to see the government buildings, monuments, Smithsonian museums, and cherry blossoms—invisible except, that is, during televised reports of drug trafficking, violence, or other social mayhem.

This aspect of Washington’s history and social conditions played an important role in the rise of go-go music. The liner notes of the early go-go compilation album *Go-Go Crankin: Paint the White House Black* demonstrate the self-awareness of go-go in this regard.

Cut through the razzmatazz—the White House, Lincoln Memorial, a thriving tourist industry—and outside the golden mile the heritage is one of mass unemployment and widespread unrest creating a tension that must be channeled before it explodes. Go Go is the creative force born to absorb the anger. Go Go music is functional. It is a hard-hitting percussion-led punch that reflects the audience’s “say it loud and say it proud” stance.

Thus, the fundamental identity project of go-go music is to affirm the presence of Washington’s invisible black community. Washington Post journalist Jill Nelson calls go-go “Washington’s most unique personality . . . the African American community’s, musically, way of saying ‘this is something that is intrinsically ours.’” Like soca, go-go employs the techniques of polyrhythmic drumming, call-and-response, repetitive themes, and “shout-outs” to achieve its purpose.

A go-go song can last anywhere from five to fifteen minutes and is generally structured in one of three ways: as an original composition, a “go-goized” cover of an existing song, or a “suite” in which the band combines verses and choruses from two or three songs that are similar in theme or genre. Go-go bands’ reliance on popular music subjects them to intense criticism by those in the Washington metropolitan area (and beyond) who consider the majority of go-go bands to lack originality and musicianship. (Like the critiques of soca, this point often overlooks the numerous original compositions performed each year by go-go bands. However, in both cases, repetition and covers tend to dominate the popular play lists.)

The tradition of covering mainstream hits stems from go-go’s origins as Top 40 cabaret music and from Chuck Brown’s own self-described limitations as a
As the genre’s pioneer, his focus on writing hooks rather than narrative-driven lyrics has undoubtedly influenced later bands. Nevertheless, go-go’s heavy use of popular music does not automatically indicate a lack of creativity among band members. Wilson and Alroy’s Record Reviews calls go-go “an extraordinarily supple form: you can play anything from an MOR ballad to a car commercial over a go-go beat and make it danceable.”

In setting popular music to a go-go beat, the polyrhythms—timbales, congas, rollatoms, trap set, and hand percussion in the form of cowbells and tambourines—not only speak to one another but create a space for black Washingtonians within the wider American culture of which they are a part (but not a part, at least politically).

Brown also developed the strategy of revising the lyrics of an existing song to give them a hometown flavor, as demonstrated in his signature renditions of a Duke Ellington classic as “It Don’t Mean a Thing, If It Don’t Have the Go-Go Swing” and of Harry Belafonte’s “Day-O,” which removes listeners from the setting of a banana boat and places them in the nightclub, where “daylight come, we don’t wanna go home.” Go-go bands have followed suit, reinterpreting songs from nearly every American genre: rap, funk, classic R&B, reggae, jazz, rock, alternative, gospel, even TV theme shows and commercials. In 2006, L!ssen Band used this strategy to adapt a Boost Mobile television commercial into a boast of citywide support: “Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, Southwest, Where they at, the whole city behind us.” This is an example of the “display” aspect of go-go music, which will be discussed shortly. Today’s fans come to the go-go expecting to hear their favorite band give popular songs a “DC sound.”

From the beginning, go-go was a participatory form of music. Between sets, Chuck Brown began greeting audience members by name. Soon this became a cornerstone of the go-go experience, and as the music spread through Washington’s black neighborhoods, it came to be known as the “display.” Contemporary go-go songs commonly start or finish with a lead talker greeting members of the audience, often calling out neighborhood crews (mostly males) and “honnie cliques” (groups of females who may or may not be affiliated with the male crews) or interacting with the crowd over a pocket beat. Steven “Bugs” Herrion, the lead talker of Junkyard Band states,

We can live without the call and response, but sooner or later, the crowd’s going get into it, and want to say something. That’s just the energy that comes from them. They wanna say, “Oh say my name. Say my name. Put me on display.” People love to, you know, be known, you see. Let the crowd know they in the house, you know. “I’m over here.” So, that’s going automatically come.
The display strategy is fundamental to go-go’s soaring popularity. The practice places the dispossessed and invisible members of DC’s poorer communities on the map, if only among themselves. Go-go songs are full of names that are intelligible only to people who are knowledgeable about DC street life: Nu Projects, Third World Honeys, E Street Bangers, 14th and Up (short for Uphsur Street), KDY (an abbreviation for Kennedy Street) and 640—the address of a housing project on northwest Hobart Street where the “bad boys of go-go,” Backyard Band, grew up. Eventually, these displays grew to include neighborhoods and crews from bordering Prince George’s County in Maryland as well.

Like soca, go-go music features certain repetitive themes that function as both call-and-response and an in-group script. If you are part of the go-go community, you know that you are supposed to say, “Wind me up, Chuck,” to bring the Godfather on stage. When a band says, “Where y’all from?” you are supposed to scream your sector of the city—Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, or Southwest—or your specific neighborhood or crew. If a band member sings, “I’ve got that feelin, that funky feelin,” and sticks a mike in your face, you know to say, “[insert band name] is in the house and they’re ready to roll.” These and other scripts are recycled from band to band and from generation to generation; they serve to unify and preserve the traditions that have emerged out of go-go’s history of more than thirty years.

**CONCLUSION: IS AH WE TING . . . YOU WOULDN’T UNDERSTAND**

In closing, the Trinidadian identity project as expressed through soca can best be summed up with the common West Indian phrase “Is Ah We Ting.” Soca music’s open-arms stance is a by-product of Afro-Trinidadian security and strength, relatively speaking, as co-creators of a new, independent national identity with a culture worthy of exportation. By contrast, the defensive, self-affirming posture of go-go music can be summarized by a similar African American slogan from the early 1990s: “It’s a Black Thing”—in this case, a black DC thing—“You Wouldn’t Understand.”

Both genres have a long way to go in gaining respectability, both among the upper classes of Trinidad and Washington and in the larger music cultures beyond their regions. Soca—and Carnival—has spread throughout the Lesser Antilles, a fact that makes Trinidadians extremely proud. Carnival, pan, and calypso represent what several writers refer to as the trinity of Trinidadian cultural achievements. As Trinidadians and other eastern Caribbean natives have
immigrated to the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, they have exported Carnival beyond the Caribbean, albeit in a somewhat diluted, Pan-Caribbean fashion. But this, too, is part of the Trinididian project, stretching back to the days of the West Indian Federation on up to CARICOM and attempts to forge a Pan-Caribbean identity. Soca is at the forefront of this movement, with Destra’s appeals to Caribbean “massive,” Nadia Batson’s tune “One Island,” Patrice Roberts’s “Come to the Islands,” and Barbadian Alison Hinds’s song “Wine Meh.”

Yet Trinidad’s soca artists still struggle for regular airplay after Carnival, leading many to tour extensively in the months between the end of Carnival and the beginning of the next season. Critics such as Bukka Rennie accuse fete soca of being one more instance of the commercialization and mass marketing of Carnival as well as a takeover by middle-class interests. In 2005, for example, the Trinidad and Tobago government invested ten million U.S. dollars into Carnival celebrations. This reaped a benefit of $150 million for the economy as a whole, which was estimated at $13–18 billion in 2005. The government naturally seeks to capitalize on Carnival in order to drive tourism to the island and raise its profile among nations. Soca’s “golden child” status is temporary, however, and closely connected to the annual influx of Carnival dollars from December to February into the national income.

Unlike Trinidad, Washington has a natural tourism draw and does not need the go-go economy. Initially, the city’s most popular stations would not play go-go at all. While a few record labels—Sugar Hill, Island, and Def Jam—flirted with the DC sound in the early 1980s, go-go has yet to break out of the Washington area in any substantial way. Additionally, as DC leaders seek to eliminate the city’s old “murder capital” image and attract more affluent development and residents, go-go’s close relationship with DC’s ghettos and projects has made the genre an easy target for the news, city administrators who want to appear tough on crime, and the white and black middle class who make up their primary audience and constituent base. Certain fans have made it harder for go-go music to survive by starting fights or worse—wounding or killing people in or near go-go clubs. Lornell and Stephenson and many other defenders of go-go emphatically point out that this violence usually does not take place inside the clubs. But when a police officer was killed inside the IBEX nightclub in 1997, the city shut the club down, starting a trend that has pitted city officials against the go-go community.

Two grassroots organizations, the Go-Go Coalition and Peaceoholics, have successfully mobilized band members, industry staff, and go-go supporters to
protest club closings. They have also organized community conferences on public safety at go-go clubs and pro-peace go-go concerts and have advocated special security measures, including ID cards, to track attendees and remove troublemakers from the premises.\textsuperscript{41} As go-go music matures, it is slowly breaking out of the “local hood flavor” box it has been trapped in. Go-go bands have been used at health fairs, HIV awareness events, and fund-raisers for Hurricane Katrina victims. Gospel go-go has also begun to grow in popularity. In the last five years, Chuck Brown has been embraced as a hometown hero by local leaders, and mainstream urban-format radio stations have created evening go-go programming. True to its name, DC’s homegrown music keeps going and going and going.

Pressing notes, “Once musical effects attain a certain currency, they form part of a cultural evolution, which proceeds nongenomically from generation to generation.”\textsuperscript{42} Through the use of polyrhythmic drumming, call-and-response, repetition, and display, both soca and go-go seek to make this evolution real in the lives of its listeners and the cultures to which they belong. In this respect, soca and go-go are included in what Pressing calls “relatively complex creative adaptations of traditional African and African diasporic rhythmic techniques [which] are a natural consequence of a culture of questioning and reflection that encompasses maintenance of historical reference and accommodation to innovation.”\textsuperscript{43} Using this framework, I have sought to rescue both genres from their stigmatization as mindless party music or uninspired bucket beating.

\textbf{Notes}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Warner, \textit{Kaiso! The Trinidad Calypso}, 21.
\item National Library, “Calypso: Subject Guide.”
\item Dudley, “Judging by ‘The Beat,’” 287.
\item Ibid., 294.
\item Lornell and Stephenson, \textit{The Beat}, 23.
\item Ibid., 12.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\item Cowley, \textit{Carnival, Canboulay, and Calypso}, 14.
\item \textit{Inside Trinidad and Tobago Carnival}.
\item Wilson, “It Don’t Mean a Thing,” 154.
\item Lornell and Stephenson, \textit{The Beat}, 25.
\item Ibid., 12.
\end{enumerate}
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
18. Quoted in ibid., 290.
21. Quoted in ibid., 82.
23. Cowley, Carnival, Canboulay, and Calypso, 56.
24. Inside Trinidad and Tobago Carnival.
25. Ibid.
27. “DC Voting Rights Historical Timeline.”
28. Ibid.
30. Straight Up Go-Go.
31. Chuck Brown, interview on Kato and the TMOTTGoGo Morning Show.
33. Chuck Brown, Go-Go Live at the Capital Centre.
34. Ibid.
35. The Music District.
37. Warner, Kaiso! The Trinidad Calypso, 70.
39. Ibid.
40. Lornell and Stephenson, The Beat, 43–44.
43. Ibid., 285.

Bibliography


*Inside Trinidad and Tobago Carnival 2006 in Xcess.* Advanced Dynamics, 2006. DVD.


