

Conversation with the Scholar.

BIGDRUMNATION (BDN) - C. Taylor and M. Felix: Is there a story behind the name Scholar?

Scholar: Yes, there is. I had been writing calypsoes since I was twelve but all my efforts to sing in a calypso tent proved futile. I told myself that I was not good enough then. One day I was teaching in school [McDonald's College, Sauteurs] when I heard an advertisement asking for calypsonians to write songs and send them in for an independence competition, taped in a cassette.

Well I wrote a song, taped it but did not want to put my correct name on the cassette lest I be ridiculed by those judging it. I did not think that I was good enough and so I did not want them to know who had written and sent this NONSENSE. So without thinking, I guess maybe because I had taped the song in a room at school, I wrote Scholar on the tape and gave a friend of mine to drop it off. About two weeks after they announced the names of the finalists for the competition and the name Scholar was called. I did not even remember what I had written on the tape so I never recognized the soubriquet as me. I did not expect to make it in any event so I did not even try to remember what I had written. It was about one week after that the guy who I had given the cassette to hand in came up to me and congratulated me. He remembered that the name I had written was Scholar. Even then I still doubted him. I had to actually go down to the calypso association to see the cassette myself and it was only when I recognized the hand writing as my own that I believed. I have used that soubriquet since.

BDN: When did you make your first appearance as a calypsonian?

Scholar: I made my debut in 1993 in the independence competition in February. I won the independence title singing before an audience that might have numbered about ten persons and even that might be an exaggeration. One of the songs was a song called "Sad Memories". It was a tale of the Cotton Baille accident when the huge stone fell on the bus.

I have heard of the strange things that would never change
I have heard of the old and mysterious stories
Like men that disappear from the sea and the air
The Bermuda triangle leaves vivid memories
While the nation looked to the east fingers crossed with much interest
This story am going to tell suddenly became unveiled
It was strange as strange can be I know you'll agree with me
Like another of life's unsolved mysteries
Chorus- It was a day a sorrowful day
Many people died big men broke down and cried
While women and the children fainted away
It was a day a sorrowful day
Not a silver line behind that cloud this time
None was saved every man Jack go to the grave
It was a day a sorrowful day
Three less than a dozen souls past away

BDN: Did /do you have a calypso idol?

Scholar: Yes, Chalkdust of course. Not just because he was a teacher which I am also, but because of his style of writing and delivery. However, my biggest influences in calypso would have come from first Praying Mantis because he lived only a stone's throw from where I lived. Thus I grew up idolizing him and saw him as the person that I wanted to become. Secondly "Inspector" was also my idol simply because we were around the same age and even went to the same school at one point in time. I saw him as doing what I dearly wanted to do, which was singing calypso and thrilling audiences, but I felt then that I was not good enough and would never have the courage to do it anyway.

BDN: What is it like to be both teacher and calypsonian?

Scholar: It is very convenient to be both in Grenada. Carnival is held in August when teachers are on holidays. Thus that leaves me with much more time to finish up studio work, rehearse, sing in shows etc. It would be difficult and rather hectic to cope if we are not on break. Also, because writing and composing are literary arts and teachers are for the most part involved in researching and imparting knowledge from day to day, the two marry well. As a matter of fact seven teachers were involved in this year's [2006] calypso monarch finals. It seems, therefore, that calypso is attracting teachers and invariably, for some reason they are good at it.

BDN: Do you ever ketch kids singing your songs in the schoolyard?

Scholar: Kids sing my song not just in the school yard but even in the classroom as well. Sometimes they do it just to make fun of me. After such a long time of hearing kids sing my song it has become quite a normal thing these days. Sometimes it amuses me especially when the words that they are singing are wrong words. This year, they have been having a ball of a time with well hold him. Whenever they see me you can bet that they will greet me with a few lines of the song.

BDN: Brother Valentino characterizes the calypsonian as "the only true opposition". Do you agree?

Scholar: I agree totally. Newspapers and opposition political parties do champion and expose issues that affect the grassroots man. However, when the same issues are championed within the bars of a kaiso, it has a much more dramatic effect. People take notice. I know at times that I have sang almost the same thing that was written in the newspapers or that was broadcasted in the radio and TV news and people all over claim that it is the first time that they have heard about that. There is just something about calypso that highlights the issues a bit more. Calypso as we know originated from struggle and oppression on the plantations long ago. Its genesis was for opposing wrongs and bringing them to the fore. It is therefore the duty of the calypsonian to continue the tradition and to highlight the wrongs that are going on in the society. In short, to be an opposition, to bring about social and political reform. People depend on the calypsonian year after year to illumine issues that affect them. This is why I totally agree with Brother Valentino.

BDN: Women are still a small minority in calypso. Is this because calypso is too mannish and too sexist for the sistahs?

Scholar: This might be a possible reason. I must admit though that especially from a soca standpoint we are seeing more and more females getting into the fray. However the percentage of women to men still remains almost the same; drastically low. I do not know if the ladies are too busy doing other things that we men have and still are neglecting to do or if the rigors of being a calypsonian are scaring them away. I really do not know.

BDN: One of the tracks on your 2006 CD celebrates/serenades the Grenadian women. What inspired you to pen this tribute?

Scholar: I have noticed over the years that women have taken a pounding from calypsonians and soca artists alike. Songs have been sung about women doing all sorts of nasty things to keep their man. I wanted to write a song in defence of the ladies and to pay them a tribute at the same time. Then one night I gave a young man a lift from Gouyave and he was explaining to me that he had fallen out of grace with his parents because he got married to a girl that they detested. He said to me that there are some bad things about his wife that they are seeing and he is seeing them too. However there are a host of wonderful things about her that he is seeing that they just cannot see. That was the birth of the song, Hold What? After that the rest was easy.

BDN: Now Soca: is it merely a change in the sound and rhythmic texture of the traditional calypso, or is a brand new musical genre?

Scholar: It must be understood that soca has evolved from calypso and is still evolving even today. When one listens to our contemporary soca it makes one wonder if Ras Shorty had ever sang a soca. The fact is that what Ras Shorty and Maestro invented a long time ago as soca has and will continue to undergo changes. Soca in its early form was a simple upbeat tempo and rhythm with shorter melodic lines than calypso. For instance: A car crash/A hard lash/A next calypsonian gone!
The lines here are noticeably very short. However soca in its early form has been influenced by other genres of music, most noticeably the dub, rap and rapso chants. As a matter of fact the majority of the successful soca artists today started out as dubmen and rap singers. Bunji Garlin, Maximus, Tallpre, General Pepe and Baby Killer just to name a few. They have carried over that dub style and have incorporated it into the soca to give it a completely different flavour. Of course we know that Barbados also invented a new version of the soca known as Ring Bang which is basically soca with only drums and percussion instrumentations.

BDN: Is it true to say that the traditional calypso emphasized narrative while soca is mostly about a catchy hook?

Scholar: Quite true, especially today and with the influx of so many soca artists coming on the scene. The majority of them make songs geared towards a soca monarch performance. Therefore they have a nice hook line in their chorus which is where they will give the crowd the opportunity to 'get on bad'. A song must have verses however. So they make 'verses' but the main intention of the whole song is to get to the chorus as quickly as possible. As a result you do not find a well developed story line in the verses at all. It is worth noting though that Grenada especially has had a tradition of story telling soca. In fact that was one way of easily recognizing a Grenadian soca. Inspector, Squeezy, Ajamu and others came up with some wonderfully

written stories to complement the nice hook lines in their choruses. Today we still see some of the guys in Grenada like Tallpreé Four Brass and General Pepe still having well written stories. But well written stories in soca are quickly becoming the exception rather than the rule.

BDN: What would you say are the main ingredients of a good calypso?

Scholar: There are several qualities that constitute a well written calypso. It is quite easy sometimes to figure out what it is about a calypso that has held you from the moment you heard it. It might be that the melody was just out of this world that it stuck in your head and just would not go away. In short, you came from a show and that is the one song that you sing or even whistle all the way home. It may also be that the lyrics were dynamic with really good storytelling that rang every intellectual bell in your brain. In essence, a really intellectually stimulating piece. All of these are the hallmarks of a well written calypso. Of course the writer who can be very creative and even incorporate humour into his composition must be rewarded.

BDN: What is your assessment of the current state of calypso in Grenada?

Scholar: I am not satisfied that the calypso aspect of it is where it should be. Every year you hear more or less the same names in the Big Yard and there are very few emerging stars. IN the last decade young Biko Lewis and Sour Serpent are the only ones to have emerged. The point is that we have an excellent Junior programme with many talented youngsters at that level. However, they hardly seem to make the transition from junior to senior. They get lost somewhere along the way and fade off into obscurity. The quality of calypsos in Grenada though has maintained a high standard for the last decade or so and this year was really no exception. So, in terms of the quality of songs we are up there with some of the best calypso nations but in terms of attracting young blood into the business who can maintain a high standard over time I think there in lies the crux of the problem. In terms of the soca, Grenada is growing from strength to strength both in the quality of the music and in the quantity of artists who have emerged over the last five years.

BDN: You won the crown in 2005 and you put up a successful defence in 2006. Are you on the way to a 'threepeat' in 2007?

Scholar: Not really. It is at the back of my mind but I will not waste time thinking too much about it. Of course if the opportunity presents itself then I will not relent. I will grab it with open arms. As for now I am involved in higher studies in pursuit of a degree and this is taking almost all of my time. As it stands I am not even certain if I would be defending my crown next year. I am playing it as it comes. If I have a hectic summer session next year then I definitely will not defend. If not then who knows. Maybe I will return with all my cylinders blazing. Once I am at my best then of course the hat trick is quite possible.