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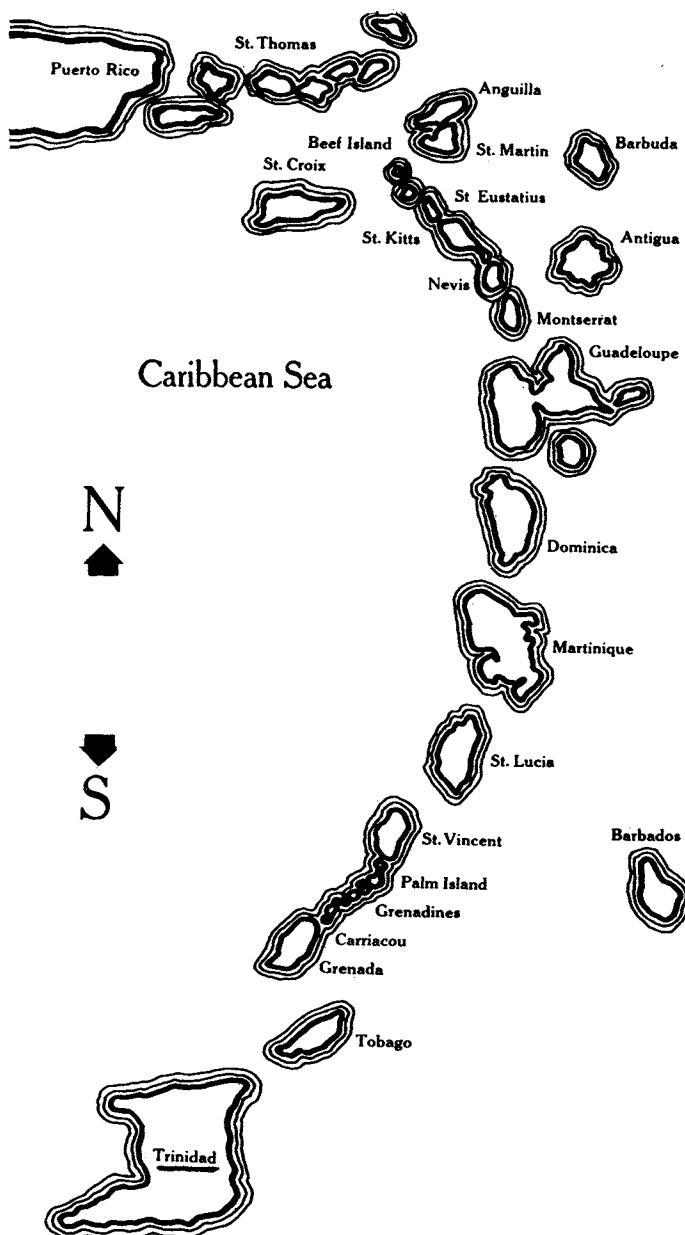
Trinidad: Steelbands, Calypso and Carnival 1969

Chaconia Inn
Saddle Road
Maraval
Trinidad

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535 Fifth Avenue
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March 15, 1969

Dear Mr Nolte:



"Jump-up" is not in your dictionary, but here it's the Trinidadian's way of expressing the way of dancing during Carnival time. When you "Play Mas" ("Mas" is a shorter form for 'mask') you are participating even more fully in Carnival, simply because playing mas' is the time when you become anything you want to be, the time when you follow a steelband down the streets of Port Of Spain, the time when you masquerade. However, you don't simply "follow" a steelband through the streets in Trinidad - you "chip" your way along. "Chipping" is a short, shuffle step such that your feet never leave the ground. There is good reason for this: if you lift your feet you would never last more than a few hours. Chipping enables one to move without really getting tired. Of course, a little rum helps along the way.

"J'Ouvert" is the start of Carnival proper and precisely at 5.00a.m. on Monday morning, steelbands from all over Port Of Spain begin to move toward the center of the city, Independence Square.

"Sparrow" of course, is the number-one Calypsonian of Trinidad. His full title is



Above: Mr. Karl T. Hudson-Phillips, Deputy Leader of the People's National Movement (PNM), greets Prime Minister, Dr. Eric Williams at the PNM Jump-Up during Carnival. Hudson-Phillips won the prize for his colourful costume at the ball. Dr. Williams, as always, dresses as himself.



bestowed on him by his Calypsonian peers for the quality of his "sweet sound". This year, as in five others, Sparrow has been named the "Road March King", the man whose calypsoes were played more than any other. A "sweet tune" is, as everyone knows, Sparrow's way of describing his own compositions.

These, basically, are the simple semantics of Carnival time in Trinidad. However, to describe it is another matter. As many have said, Carnival cannot be described, it must be experienced. This is true. To appreciate this most unique fete one must "play mas" oneself. One must witness the color, whimsy, music and masquerade through the streets, following the whirling, unbroken spectacle moving on for days. Time becomes irrelevant, and those four official days seemed at least like eight to me.

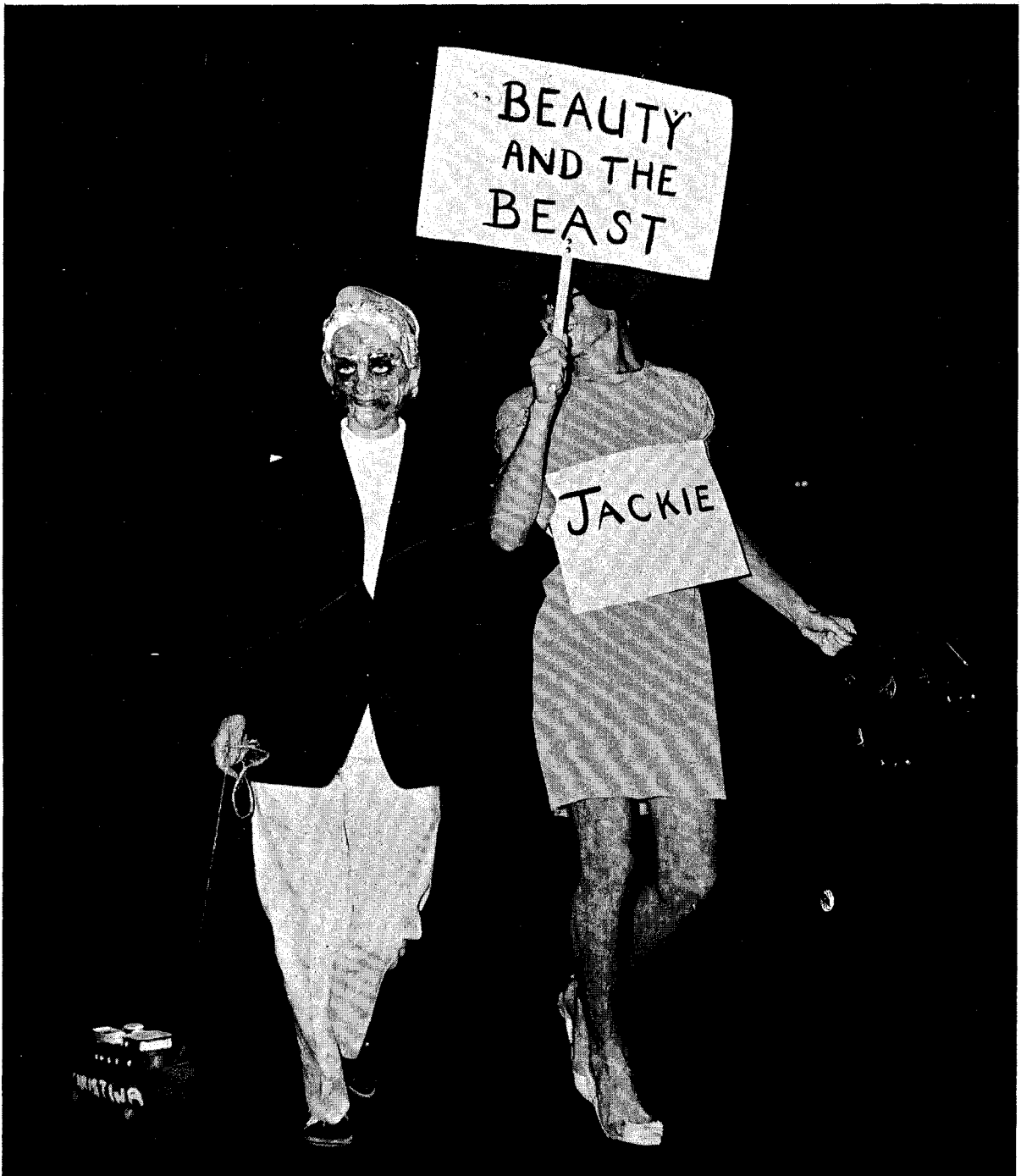
Carnival in Trinidad has a history which extends back nearly two hundred years, to early Spanish Festivals celebrating the season between Christmas and the coming of Lent. By 1783, French influence began to dominate these celebrations and from that time until the Abolition of Slavery in 1833 it was essentially the French, as a result of their large numbers (in 1797 British migrants numbered only 150 to the 2250 French colonialists), who developed Carnival into a national fete. And it was the French love for gay fete and parties in addition to the masquerade (disguised and masked, accompanied by musicians playing the violin, quatro, bandol and maracas, going on foot or by horseback to visit their friends) which made this form of merriment the mark of Trinidad's Carnival today.

At the same time, prior to the Abolition of Slavery, the Amerindian and African elements of the population were prohibited by law from taking part in these celebrations except by special favour of the land owners. Only under certain restrictions could Free Coloured participate.

When Emancipation came in 1833, the exclusive aristocratic character of Carnival naturally disappeared. Then, all elements of the population participated in their own way. Reading about Carnival in 1847, one discovers the masquerade in which bands of ten to twenty played mas' with masks which were of white flesh colour which the writer said "contrasted with the colour of the bosom and arms...droll in the extreme". At the same time the whites who participated often wore black flesh-coloured masks.

By this time, Carnival was what one British writer describes as "a noisy and disorderly amusement for the lower classes." An editorial in the Port Of Spain Gazette of 1838 described Carnival in these terms: "We will not dwell on the disgusting and indecent scenes that were enacted in our streets. We will not describe the ferocious fighting. But we will say at once that the custom of keeping Carnival by allowing the lower orders to run about the streets in wretched masquerade belongs to other days and ought to be abolished".

As time went on however, the masquerade became an opportunity for the "lower orders" to "picong" (make fun of) the higher strata of the colony. The Europeans became the object of ridicule and backyard court scenes developed in which the "aristocracy" was mimicked. This mock element in Carnival has never disappeared and today, Government is often the butt of the picong.



Above: What is called Ole Mas' or playing Mas'— when signs and costume tell a story or criticize recent social or political events—in this instance the recent marriage of Mrs Onassis.

By the 1890's, the Carnival began to take on more middle class characteristics. Merchants began to participate, appreciating the economic value of stimulating bigger and better Carnivals and they introduced competitions into Carnival. Prizes were offered for the best band, the best dressed masquerader and in 1910 a "painted clown suit" brought a prize of \$2.40.

During World War I, Carnival was dull and uninspiring, but the Carnival of 1919 was "rich and varied" and according to all reports more than made up for the "restricted merriment of the war years".

Since that time, Carnival has become Trinidad's "greatest show on earth". The two official Carnival days are preceded by months of preparation. Each major band (band of people who masquerade as a unit) has a committee which studies its Carnival "strategy" -- its music and dress. Research is sometimes done as far away as France or England so that there is faithful reproduction of period costumes. After this, the women begin to stitch and sew while the musicians work on their "bomb" - the tune they will "explode" on Carnival Monday morning. These musicians practice their tunes in secret, unleashing them as surprises for the judgement of the people. Thus this tune has become known in local slang as "the bomb". Compositions range from new tunes composed for the occasion to classical works adapted to the steelband. To hear Mozart or Strauss on a steelband is to hear a remarkable sound.

The steelbands are bands of musicians playing on what were once 44 gallon oil drums which, when cut to various sizes and tuned, are known as pans. These pans can be tenor, alto, second and guitar pans, cellos or bass drums. All types of sound can be produced by very carefully "tuning" these drums by pounding them into specific shapes and sizes. To be in the midst of a 400 member steelband group practicing for the big Carnival competitions is one of the happiest musical experiences I have ever had. The practice sessions are long and hard; the young men beat their pans for hours just to get the precision and pace they require. They move and dance while they play, becoming as caught up in their own music as are the fortunate spectators. Usually these steelbands practice in some hidden backyard in the side streets of Port Of Spain. Driving through the city the nights before Carnival begins, one can come upon dozens of groups playing the night through -- after having been working most of the day as well. Standing there watching these boys play is one of the fine moments of Carnival.

From the beginning of January, Port Of Spain begins to sway gently to the first Carnival tunes. The pace increases over the weeks as groups of Calypsonians, as distinct from the steelbands, open their "tents" in the city. These were once literally tents which were set up in different parts of the city, but now they are usually halls rented out for the same purpose. Sparrow's tent is actually an open air meeting hall for one of Trinidad's Trade Unions.



Above: Sparrow moves into the audience with obvious results
Below: "Play Mas', Mas' in your Mas'" sings Sparrow in his latest Calypso...which is what these Trinidadians are doing as Carnival nears its peak.



Each opening is an event. Newspapers carry the headlines and articles are written on the various calypsoes presented. These are sung by such illustrious names as Lord Inventor, Mighty Duke, Lord Brynner, Blakie and of course the two Kings of Calypso, Lord Kitchener and the Mighty Sparrow.

The origins of Calypso is a much debated subject. Surisma, a well known Carib singer of the nineteenth century, claimed that it once began with the Carieto, a Carib Indian song chanted as men went to war. There are, of course, elements of African rhythm with what one writer called "Spanish overtones". Above all, however, Calypso is uniquely Trinidadian and the life blood of Carnival.

Calypso, however, first started as a song of protest and this is still essentially what it is today. First sung by the slaves as a means of ridiculing "Massa", it was nurtured in an atmosphere of protest against the system. Though time has passed it is still the mark of a Calypsonian to seek out and "picong" the current leaders, fashions or even one another. (Today for example, Sparrow takes great delight in mocking his fellow Calypsonians, particularly his strongest competition, Lord Kitchener).

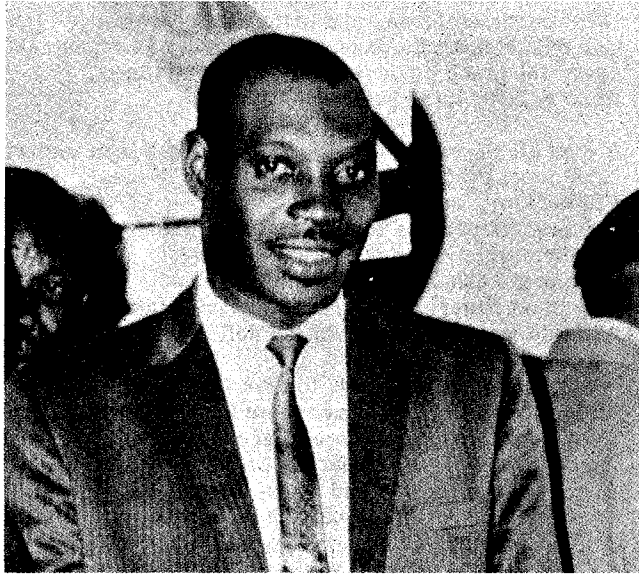
Traditionally, the Calypsonian was an authentic "hippie" -- remaining outside the system, calling attention to its discrepancies and living a flamboyant way of life. The Calypsonian dressed and lived without regard to conventional attitudes. Day-to-day, a libertine, he had no home nor roots and often he died without enough money to be properly buried. Usually he lived in a "batchy", a little one room hide-away, perhaps in someone else's backyard. He slept on a bench or boards. Unwashed and unshaven, "decent" people had no part of him.

Nevertheless, he had talent and he lived by his wits, taking delight and delighting others with his picong of the people who patronized him. Until a few years ago, the calypsonian sang under bamboo-constructed, flambeau-lit tents, competing in hastily arranged competitions for a few dollars offered by delighted patrons. In 1969 however, Calypso has become "accepted" though happily still not too commercialized.

There are disturbing signs however that over-organization may do damage to the spontaneity of the Calypsonian's art. An example of this was the recent King of Calypso competitions engineered by the Government's Carnival Development Committee.

The Carnival Development Committee (CDC) is a ten year old committee established to "develop" every aspect of Carnival. It has organized the several competitions for Steelband of the Year, for King and Queen of Carnival, for the King of Calypso and so on. Many "purists" regret the intrusion of such organizational tactics which they sense destroy the spontaneity of Carnival. There is the feeling that the "theater of streets" and the qualities of intimacy and freedom have been sacrificed for too much commercialization and gimmickry. Many regret the increasing "Americanization" of the Carnival-Calypso complex, the sort of hollywoodian spectacular, the heavily-financed 'grand production'. For example, this year's winner of the mas' competitions was George Bailey who spends as much as

With regard to the future of Calypso, it is feared that with the economics of success, the Calypsonian will become a performer rather than "a wandering troubadour, licensed by popular will to comment as he pleases" on the socio-political life of Trinidad. Perhaps Sparrow, more than any other Calypsonian has cause to consider these charges.



LORD KITCHINER

(courtesy: Calypso 69 Magazine)

Sparrow dominates Trinidad's entertainment world much in the same way as Dr. Eric Williams, the Prime Minister, dominates its political life; and if Williams is the most celebrated Trinidadian during most of the year, at Carnival time he must take second place to Sparrow. In fact Sparrow is so popular that he has withdrawn his name from the CDC sponsored Calypso Competitions because he has been winning these competitions so consistently in past years that to call them competitions was a joke. (Lord Kitchener followed Sparrow's lead, since by remaining in the Competitions would have acknowledged him to be inferior to Sparrow).

The Mighty Sparrow, born Francisco Slinger, is 34 and a Grenadian by birth. He acquired his name because he sang like a bird when he first began to perform over a decade ago. In fact often in newspaper headlines he is called "Birdie". Sparrow has his own tent, called the Original Young Brigade which is the most professional tent of all. This year Sparrow produced at least half a dozen "sweet tunes" which were certainly most popular with the steelbands and people of Port Of Spain.

Sparrow's tunes are beautifully bawdy and I am waiting for the day his songs are played over New York radio stations. The reactions should be amusing. It was interesting to see Sparrow perform outside his tent and in what could only be described as an American environment -- the night he sang for the guests at the Trinidad Hilton. Throughout that show, it was most interesting to watch the reaction of the audience as they heard Sparrow's rendition of "Sixty Million Frenchmen" or "Lizard": the crowd didn't know whether to laugh or to frown. Concluding, Sparrow simply commented that he hoped that the audience had enjoyed his tunes; but that if he had offended them with his songs or his jokeshe frankly, 'didn't give a damn'.



Left: Sparrow in his Tent at his best while on the right, Lord Kitchener is spotted totalling up his score for "Road March King" (which Sparrow actually finally won this year) along with Mr. Andrew Carr, Public Relations Officer of the Carnival Development Committee.

Sparrow is often quoted, not only with regard to the subject of Calypsoes but also on political matters as well. Last week, Mighty Sparrow called on the students at the University of the West Indies to "start displaying the education they are supposed to have". He was commenting on the recent student demonstrations against racial discrimination of West Indian students in Canada -- a major issue this month for both general public and students alike. Sparrow was referring specifically to a demonstration staged by students of the University against the Governor General of Canada, Mr Roland Michener, who was visiting Trinidad at the time.

"I would have picketed myself in support, but it isn't what you do but how you do it." He continued: "If we want to stamp out discrimination, let's start right here at home...there are a lot of things that need straightening right here, even at the University where they discriminate against brother students from other lands. These fellas getting confused with too much studying", Sparrow said, adding, "they studying the wrong thing".

Sparrow has also been recently quoted by Dr Eric Williams in Williams' autobiography, Inward Hunger, where the author is referring to the problems of Federation and the fact that Jamaica played a major role in its failure. Summing up his section on the Federation, Williams employs Sparrow's genius for getting to the point:

'But if they know they didn't want Federation
And if they know they didn't want to unite as one
Independence was at their door, why didn't they speak before
This is no time to say you ain't Federating no more'

Incidentally, "Federation" was a prize winning Calypso for Sparrow in 1962.

Sparrow's future is perhaps best summed up by himself:

'My ambitions remain the same, that is to remain
on top, to sing and experiment, to look for
changes, to try to get a better sound, to make
the Calypso acceptable in all possible circles
at home and abroad. I am fully aware that it
not an easy task. After you have reached the
peak, if you don't go any higher then the next
move is down. And who the hell wants to go down?
Certainly not the Sparrow, boy.'

He responds quickly and with typical heat to the charge that he is corrupting the art of the Calypso:

'Look man, anybody who wants anything to remain
one way through life has got to be mad. I
mean completely mad! The world does not stand
still. A man give you his word now and change
it later on. No matter what you do you grow
old. Change is inevitable, it is part of life.'

In the West Indies, Sparrow's name is magic and his tunes are played on every island. Few West Indians, however, know much about

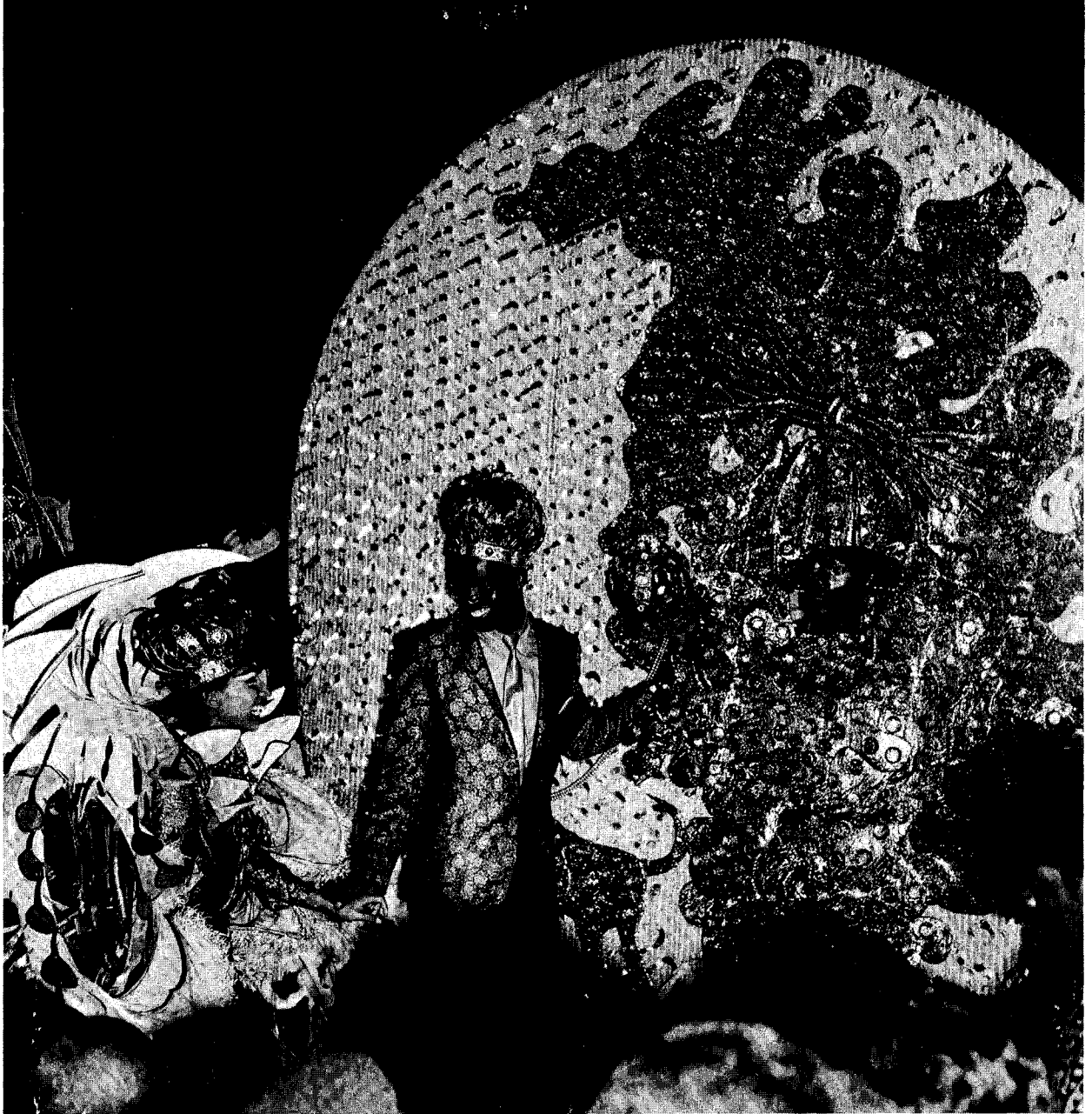
him; few know Sparrow's real name, or where he came from, or the fact that he was married, once, to an American. They are more interested in his music and don't spend much time in delving into the personal life of the entertainer. It's a curious but healthy reaction to personality, I think.

Outside of Sparrow, the most interesting work done this year by other Calypsonians was performed by three "second ranked" (Sparrow is alone among the stars) singers.

The first of these was the King of Calypso and the winner of the CDC competitions this year, The Mighty Duke. Duke is a rising star, quite professional and for the second straight year has taken the top prizes for his tunes. The favorite this year was his musical comment on being black. Titled 'Black is Beautiful', one verse and a chorus demonstrate Duke's ability:

'Black is beautiful
 Look at the gloss
 Black is beautiful
 It's the texture of course
 Lift your head like me
 Wear your colour with dignity
 Black is beautiful
 Sing it out loud
 Black is beautiful
 Say I'm black and proud
 Its time that we
 Get rid of this slave mentality

We have achieved
 What once was just a dream
 We have been imitating in the past
 Now we have found our very own at last
 No more hot comb to press the hair
 No more bleach creams to make us clear
 Proudly I say without pretext
 No more inferiority complex
 Because we know that...black is beautiful'



Above: Calypso King crowned, the Mighty Duke with the King of Carnival, The Man in the Moon, along with Queen of Carnival who looks on. Duke won the crown for his rendition of 'Black is Beautiful'.

MIGHTY STALIN



Another favorite with the people of Trinidad was the Mighty Stalin's rendition of 'Martin Luther King'. Stalin placed second to Duke in the Competitions.

(courtesy: Calypso 69)

'Never lived by a gun, yet he died by one,
 This man Martin Luther King senior son,
 A gentleman of high capability,
 Who never knew the meaning of the word enemy,
 But a man that devoted his life to fight,
 That all American negroes must have civil rights,
 His works must be remembered although he's dead,
 So negroes don't forget the great things that Martin said.

Like leave your guns at home, don't walk with weapons,
 For violence cannot solve the situation,
 We want the whites to know and believe whole-heartedly,
 We want them as friends and not enemies,
 For as enemies would bring riot in this land,
 And that won't be good for no American,
 Call him a genius, a messiah, or different things,
 But I say Martin was a King of all Kings.

From Texas to Florida, New York City or even Georgia,
 The entire negro population, had Martin Luther King as
 their champion,

A man who stood tall and had no fear,
 And gave more than 350 speeches a year,
 But how can we forget this blessed day,
 In the civil rights march listen what he say.

I have a dream, I have a vision, and this is what he made
 them to understand,
 And in his vision this is what he see,

Black and white would be living so happy,
 Little black children, and little white children,
 One day walking the streets of America as friends,
 From the black hills of Dakota to Mississippi,
 Hand in hand with racial equality.

A man all the world considered as wise a man who was awarded
 the nobel peace prize,
 Violence was never his way to fight,
 But several prisons term for civil rights,
 I remembered oneday in Mississippi,
 A reporter ask a question to he,
 Why must American negroes get civil rights?
 And this was his answer to my delight.

We till their cotton fields to give their pockets more wealth,
 Mind their babies and have them in the best of health,
 Took part in Olympics don't care if we die,
 Just to keep the stars and stripes flying high,
 Uphold democracy in and out of this land,
 From Germany to the foxholes in Vietnam,
 All this we did for America faithful and true,
 So tell me why we can't eat in the same place with you.

Now Martin Luther is dead and gone,
 But I say his good works must still go on,
 For now it is left entirely in the hands of his wife and
 Rev. Abernathy,
 These two must now fight whole heartedly,
 To make Martin's dream a reality,
 If not the whole but a part a least,
 Show the world that black and white could live in peace.

So good luck Mrs King, good luck I say to you,
 We all wish you luck in anything you do,
 Though it may take some time, but you must keep asking,
That they should judge a man by his heart and not his skin,
 For Martin once said that time is nothing,
 But only how one use time then time can be something,
 So in the words of your dear husband,
 We shall overcome, We shall overcome.'

The third runner-up in this year's competitions was the
 Mighty Chalkdust, so named because he was a former teacher-turned-
 Calypsonian. The subject of his Calypso was a well publicized
 controversy over the Government's ban of Stokely Carmichael from
 Trinidad. Chalkdust wonders why the Government is so concerned about
 Carmichael and yet seems to disregard so many other abuses at home.
 In letter form, Chalkdust musically expresses this to the Minister of
 Home Affairs:

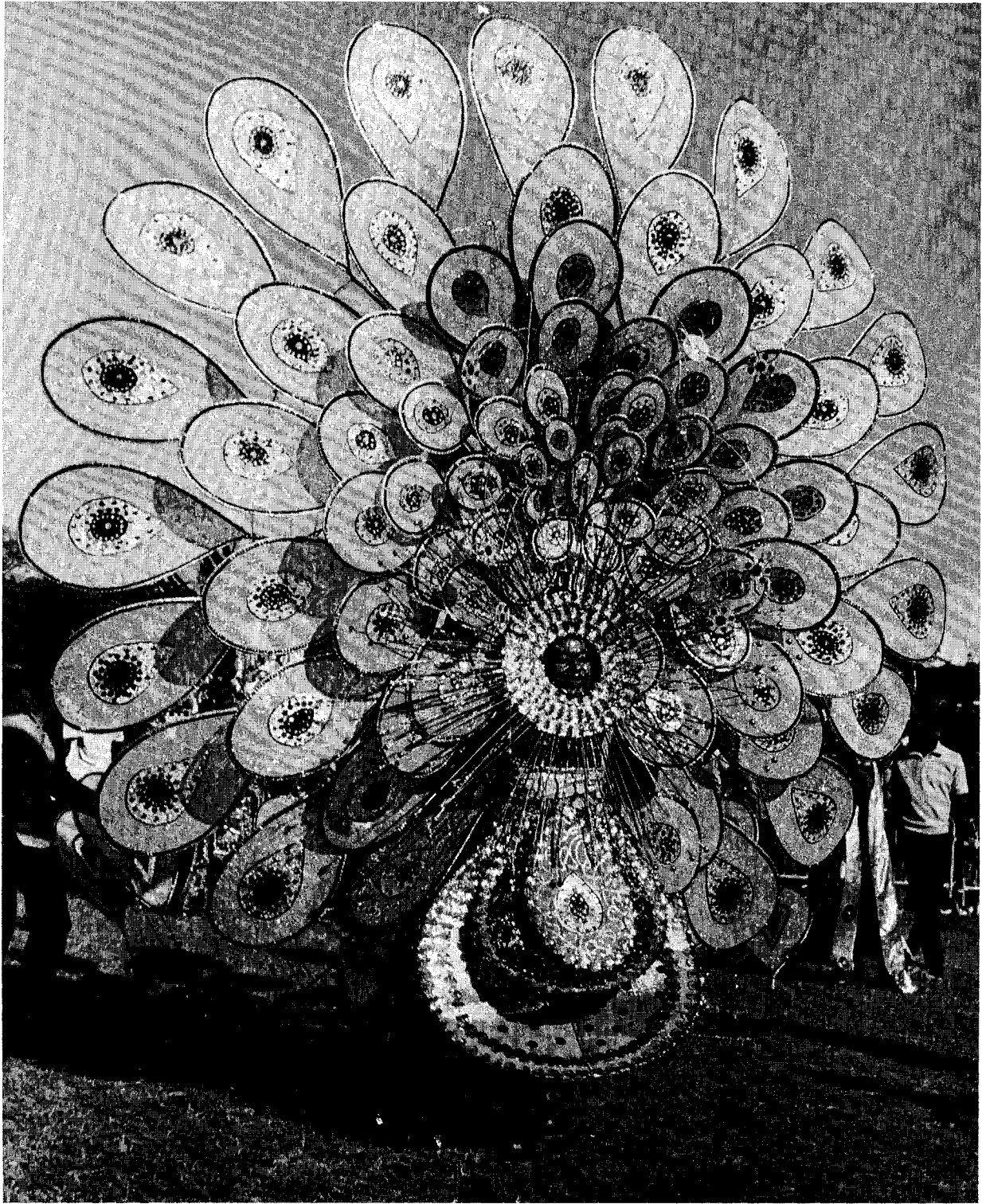
'Dear Mr Minister of Home Affairs,
 In good Faith please accept my Letter,
 I see you are protecting our dear Nation,
 From communist and subversion,
 So you ban Carmichael from our homeland,
 I am not saying you're wrong -
 Please understand,
 But I feel there are Mr Minister,
 More dangerous enemies here.

Like men who join parties to get power,
 And give their friends big work after,
 Employers who force our girls on dates,
 Or else the young girls must leave their place,
 And restaurants who mark up on walls,
 No calypso singing at all,
 Mr Minister, these men are our enemies,
 Give Carmichael a ease,
 Mr Minister, these men are our enemies.

Our soldiers practising war games daily,
 In case we are attacked from over sea,
 But please let us turn our attention,
 To racketeers in our nation,
 Like those who selling their goods black market price,
 And encouraging our youths in vice,
 Who charge for their homes big rent and reward,
 These enemies we can't afford.

And those who peddle ganga and opium,
 Quacks who perform abortion,
 Business men who don't want Trade Unions,
 And rob workers of wages and funds,
 And we have people who preach race,
 Police who take bribes to make up case,
 Mr Minister all these men are our enemies,
 Leave Carmichael please - Mr Minister these men are the
 enemies,

Dear Mr Minister at Piarco,
 Whilst you search men who go to see Castro,
 Enemies at the hospital right here,
 Stole 2 million dollars in food last year,
 High School Principals who charge high fees,
 Robbing the parents of hard earned monies,
 If our nation you are safeguarding,
 These men want a good licking.'



Above: One of the most beautiful of the costumes worn this year nearly a full story high



Above: The Minister of Home Affairs, A.N.R. Robinson (center) caught in a light moment during Carnival with two friends
Below: Late Monday morning this Trinidadian just couldn't keep up the pace and so sleeps it off in Independence Square



Trinidadians take Carnival time very seriously. They are proud of their national fete, and enjoy it even more than most aliens do. For months prior to Carnival, one listens to them say that there is nothing else like it, that maybe if there were a Carnival in Vietnam the war would be over in no time at all. After having experienced it, I cannot help but agree.

No one however, experiences the same Carnival; for it is, above all else, a very spontaneous, personal sort of thing. The scene is set in the streets of the city, in the many clubs which sponsor local jump-ups, in vacant lots where scores of steelbands practice night after night and in the Calypso tents where the sweet tunes of the year are presented to an admiring public.

The participants, however, the actors in this theater of the streets, are the people themselves; and Trinidadians along with those who are fortunate enough to share Carnival with them know that it is essentially a time when people simply enjoy other people having fun. In this respect, no people are better at this than Trinidadians.

Yours,

Frank Mc Donald

Received in New York March 17, 1969.

Photographs not otherwise credited
courtesy Trinidad Express

Wednesday morning: Lent begins today

