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Movie Review

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Celebrating the Culture of Calypso

By John Anderson

Quite often, the best films are the ones that leave you with more questions than answers. Take *One Hand Don't Clap*, for instance.

You might ask yourself halfway through the film why calypso music hasn't become a bigger part of the American musical culture. When it's over, you might ask yourself how your concept of the American musical culture could have been so narrow.

Kavery Dutta's celebration of calypso and soca music turns out to be not just a documentary about music and musicians, but an examination of cultures co-existing as if in parallel universes. One of the opening shots shows the streets of Brooklyn, full of people of color, a variegated crowd of pedestrians going about its business as a voice-over from a calypso club queries an unseen audience. How many of you are here from Barbados? The voice asks, to applause. How about Jamaica? Grenada? Trinidad and Tobago? The applause mounts and with it a sense of both the cultural diversity that exists around us and the exclusionary attitudes that keep much of it separate. How much do non-Caribbeans know about Caribbean culture? Not enough, one admits after *One Hand Don't Clap* which is a credit to the film and its creators.

Most of *One Hand Don't Clap*, a Trinidadian phrase akin in spirit to no man is an island takes place in Trinidad, and much of its focus is on Lord Kitchener, the grandfather of calypso who remains an athletic performer and an avid ambassador of his music.

At home, away from the stage show and full band with whom he normally performs, Kitchener uses just a guitar and his voice to try to dissect his music for the camera. It's an elusive quality. "It's kind of a Latin rhythm", he says, "The foreigner might like it, but he can't get into it because when he was born, he was born in four-four time." Kitchener then shifts into 4/4 time, effectively deflating the song he'd been singing.

No, many of us perhaps won't get it, but we can certainly enjoy it: that the movie makes abundantly clear. The performances, by Kitchener, Calypso Rose --- the first female to win the coveted Monarch Crown at the annual Carnival celebration in Port of Spain --- and those who sing during the actual competition that the film documents are seductively rhythmic, as well as poetic. It's more of a film for converts, perhaps, than for born calypsonians (as Kitchener calls himself) and this is partly because the history and the social culture of calypso are given as much weight as the sheer entertainment value of the music.

Calypso's origins were as music of the lower classes, an outlaw art form. People looked down on calypso and steelband, says Kitchener, who is also a noted composer for steelbands. Today, you have the school teaching calypsos. Calypso is a recognized culture, so calypso has come a far, far way really.

Not so far, however, that some of the stigma doesn't still stick. In a conversation between Calypso Rose and her mother, the latter admits that she still regrets her daughter's choice of career. "It's not one of the best but I have to cope with it", she says. Calypso Rose, as well as the audience, is taken aback by this admission, from a woman who would have preferred her daughter be a wife, mother and good Christian, rather than one of the premiere calypso performers in the world.

Calypso Rose demonstrates one of the great paradoxes of the music, the bizarre ability to combine serious lyrics with buoyant rhythms without trivializing the subject at hand. In her song *Terrorism Gone Wild*, Rose sings about hijackings, bombings and assassinations, all to the calypso beat but it works. Rose's singing emphasizes other qualities in the music, such as the sort of floating meter in calypso that provides for a freedom of emphasis, as well as a flexibility in word play and hence wit. "Get out me house. You're a stinking louse" may not be the best example of this (the lyrics are from Rose's song *Solomon* but they're a good example of the uninhibited treatment she gives women's issues.

The film gives us performances by three main competitors for the Monarch Crown --- Black Stalin, David Rudder and Mighty Duke, all of whom demonstrate the various directions calypso and soca (described by Kitchener as less words, more music) may take in the future. Kitchener remains a stirring performer, but he also represents the music's past, something you see in his eyes as he watches the competitors, three stars of calypso's future. It might have been an effective closing shot to the movie, which goes on past the competition to a performance by Rose. It's the one that echoes in the memory.