

Existing for centuries in the western hemisphere, Calypso became a popular music genre in the early half of the twentieth century. This style of music originated in Trinidad, although popular songs were present in countries like Jamaica. To some listeners, the melodies had a very lively feeling. American tourists enjoyed taking breaks in the Caribbean region during the Prohibition days and heard the music. Popular performers included American singer Harry Belafonte and Eddic Connor from Trinidad. Some listeners found the music genre pleasing to the ear, but buried under the lovely music, some lyrics revealed some hardship or agony. There were songs with theme of slave labor, abandonment, loneliness, spousal abuse, and even murder.

Labor songs were sung in South America and Caribbean Islands when the slave trade was practiced and numerous people of African descent were shipped through the Middle Passage. Slaves were not allowed to have conversations during working hours, but they were allowed to sing. [1] Decades or even a century after the abolishment of slavery, labor songs were still popular among the masses (or working class) that performed under long and harsh working conditions.

Songs of heartbreak were created in relations to women socializing with foreign servicemen. *"Brown Skin Girl," "Her Reputation,"* and *"Cordelia Brown"* were a few of the songs. *"Brown Skin Girl"* had some sad lyrics about a Jamaican female left behind after becoming close or intimate with an American sailor in the mid-twentieth century. The lyrics were bitter. In one version of the song the singer had suggested to the girl to throw away the baby if he did not come back. Milly, the girl mentioned in the song, had a blue-eyed baby. [1]

In the Harry Belafonte version, with slightly less profanity, he sang:

*Brown skin girl stay home and mind baby, Brown skin girl stay home and mind baby  
I'm goin away, in a sailing boat  
And if I don't come back  
Stay home and mind baby*

In this piece (both versions), these visits in the Caribbean islands were compared to both vacations and invasions. [1]

The song “Man Smart, Woman Smarter,” also had a reference to blue eyed babies. But this baby was a sign of infidelity since the mother was already together with a committed local.

There was more bitterness towards women than towards American servicemen in that song. A Biblical reference to Sampson and Delilah was also made. [1]

“*Cordelia Brown*” also involved a similar conflict with foreign parent abandonment. Through both the musical style of the blues and historical events, this Jamaican song had American influences. [1] The lyrics included “*Cordelia Brown... What makes your head so red?*” In one version of the song (arranged by William Attaway), the indirect answers to this question involved her mother loving a sailor named Ned from a far off land, and waiting for him to return. Towards the end of the song:

*Mother waited for Yankee Ned, till the sunshine dyed her head red.*

The red hair could be a genetic inheritance or a figurative emotion.

In the Harry Belafonte cover of the song, there seemed to be a change in Cordelia’s backstory.

In the American singer’s cover, it was Cordelia that fell in love with a man named Ned. And

when he left, her head turned red. It was also implied by the singer that Ned *never would wed*.

In Belafonte's version, the singer had interest in Cordelia and yearned for her caress, but he sang:

*Since your head so red  
I think I'll marry Mabel instead.*

This could be because of Cordelia's ruined reputation. Or perhaps her face looked red when she was angry and felt abandoned. Perhaps Cordelia and her mother were a lot alike in this version of the song.

In both versions of the song, listeners hear:

*Oh, Cordelia Brown, what make your head so red  
Oh, Cordelia Brown, what make your head so red  
You say you come out in the sunshine  
With nothing on your head  
Oh, Cordelia Brown, what make your head so red? [7], [8]*

There were also songs involving interactions with local couples; their relationships were not always better and they had not so mild mishaps. The lyrics for "Matilda," "Big Bamboo" and "Lemme Go, Melda Marcy," were not romantic or peaceful. [1]

"Matilda" is a very upbeat song about man who was singing:

*Matilda, Matilda, she take me money and run Venezuela.*

For the song "Lemme Go, Melda Marcy," A name like Melda Marcy was meaningful since Melda (or Imelda) means "universal battle" [5] and Marcy is a feminine name derived from Mars, the Roman God of War. [6] The singer, a male companion of sorts, complained how he was facing brutal abuse from Melda Marcy.

*Well I cried all night, and not a policeman in site*

After he hit her on the head with a cross, she bit the male's finger and she talked down to him; she eventually bit it off when the fireman arrived. For a few measures:

*She said, "Boy I don't care how groan,  
This teach you not hit a lady in the home."*

In the chorus he repeatedly sang "*Lem-me go Melda Marcy... You bitin' me finger.*" In the preface in *Calypso Song Book*, William Attaway (a music arranger) implied that the original version of the song to had a suggestive meaning or a double entendre. [1]

Edric Connor's song "*Murder in De Market*" was about a murder committed by the wife of the victim. Betsy Thomas, the character featured in the piece, saw nothing to fear and claimed, "*Oh, I ain't kill nobody but me husband.*" [2]

Some songs, however, did reflect some more romantic situations, such as Norman Luboff's cover of "*The Proposal.*" The song of the "*Lovely Cricket*" was less violent and had an affectionate meaning; the cricket was a popular symbol of good fortune. [1]

Along with hardship, religions prayers and fables from both Europe and Africa also influenced the lyrics. Songs included such as a folk song about Anansi the Spider, Virgin Mary, and the Shango cult (inspired by the legends of Egyptian gods and the belief that God is everywhere). [2]

Some older songs inspired newer songs with different lyrics. "*Choucounne*" was originally a Haitian song composed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but was later rewritten into the song "*Yellow Bird*" in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Norman Luboff Choir first released a recording, and Arthur Lyman made the song a hit a few years later (both American). Others recreated the song for releases in the

United States and Jamaica. [3] The melody was very gentle but revealed some loneliness and hardship. The singer related to a bird that was flying alone:

*Yellow bird, Up high in banana tree,  
Yellow bird, You sit all alone like me.*

Some birds in the wild are monogamous creatures that mate for life and some have the ability to fly away. The instrumental music could resemble the flapping of a little bird's wings. This bird was yellow like a banana, and the singer expressed abandonment by a former lover. The singer felt bad for the yellow bird all alone but he also sang, *You're more lucky dan me.* [4]

Calypso can be a positive or lively music genre. *However, the style can resemble someone smiling even when he or she wants to cry.* Some songs are catchy, even when the lyrics are dark and violent. One has to listen to the words closely or know the language well enough to understand the meaning of a Calypso song.

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