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Keeping Up with Culture

The Caribbean has for a while now faced the challenge of its academic criticism keeping pace with cutting edge developments in popular culture. At the end of the twentieth century culture reveals itself as an important entry point for gaining a fuller understanding of Caribbean society. Like economic data, cultural data is similarly loaded with information that can reveal the present and future condition of the Caribbean. But many of the recent texts that engage the subject of calypso in the Caribbean hardly give sufficient focus to the dynamic musical and technological shifts in calypso's dance music, soca, during the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, recent works have stayed away from the very important subject of the present evolution of calypso into other hardcore styles, such as ringbang. In effect, this important cultural indicator has not come in for serious scrutiny, and this absence of discourse represents a gap in the region's knowledge about the transformation of its calypso culture in the late twentieth century. Some of the major works published in this field stay clear of soca and post-soca developments, for example, Peter Manuel et al., *Caribbean Currents;* John

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Cowley, *Calypso Canboulay and Carnival;* Peter von Koningsbruggen, *The Trinidad Carnival;* Michael Erlewine et al., *All Music Guide;* and Louis Regis, *The Political Calypso,* among other works.[1]

Mike Alleyne's doctoral dissertation, "The Transnationalization of Caribbean Music: Capitalism and Cultural Intertextuality" (1996), comes closest to a studied analysis of the musical, cultural and technological dynamics in Caribbean society during the 1980s and 1990s.[2] There he argues that analyses of Caribbean culture at the end of the twentieth century must be carried out by engaging with the technologies that drive and, in effect, create Caribbean cultures at this juncture of Caribbean development. The thrust of his thesis is that academic writings on Caribbean music tend to privilege a sociohistorical focus, an emphasis on lyrics, or a theory-ridden discourse. Relatively little academic writing on regional musics engages the music at a deeper level, from the standpoint of production, in the domain of the technology that drives the music. This paper in some ways responds to the necessity to interpret our music and culture from fresh standpoints.

It is true to say that the technological evolution of reggae into raggamuffin and dancehall are better covered in published literature than are similar developments within calypso. A number of scholars have attempted to demystify the evolution of reggae's sub/co-genres, dancehall and raggamuffin. Major work in this area has been done by Dick Hebdige, *Cut 'n Mix;* Christian Habekost, *Verbal Riddim;* Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood;* Kwame Dawes, *Natural Mysticism* and *Wheel and Come Again;* Kevin Chang and Wayne Chen, *Reggae Routes;* and *The Guinness Who's Who of Reggae Music,* among others.[3]

1 See Hollis Liverpool, *Kaiso and Society* (Diego Martin: Juba Publications, 1990); Gene Scaramuzzo provides an overview called "Calypso and Steelband Music of the Caribbean" (p. 1161) and other shorter reviews of Caribbean calypso and soca, but these are highly descriptive, terse and somewhat detached (pp. 1153–63), in *All Music Guide* edited by Michael Erlewine, with Chris Woodstra and Vladimir Bogdanov (San Francisco: Miller Freeman Books, 1994); John Patton, "Communication and Cultural Identity", *Bulletin of Eastern Carribean Affairs* vol. 19 no. 3 (September 1994): 53–68; Peter Manuel with Kenneth Bilby and Michael Largey, *Caribbean Currents* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); Stephen Stuempfle, *The Steelband Movement* (Kingston, Jamaica: The Press, University of the West Indies, 1995); John Cowley, *Carnival Canboulay and Calypso* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Peter van Koningsbruggen, *Trinidad Carnival* (London: Macmillan Education, 1997); Louis Regis, *The Political Calypso* (Kingston, Jamaica: The Press, University of the West Indies, 1999).

2 See Mike Alleyne, "The Transnationalization of Caribbean Music: Capitalism and Cultural Intertextuality", University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, Barbados, 1996.

3 Dick Hebdige, *Cut N' Mix* (London: Comedia Books, 1987); Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood* (London: Macmillan Educational Books, 1993); Colin Larkin, ed., *The Guinness Who's Who of Reggae* (Middlesex: Guinness Publishing, 1994); Geoff Small, *Ruthless* (London: Warner Books, 1995); Kwame Dawes *Wheel and Come Again* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1998) and *Natural Mysticism* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1999); Nathaniel Samuel

The same is not true for soca discourse. Soca discourse has mostly been carried on in the informal and public domains, and among "casual observers". The recent publication of the music magazine *Ringbang* has sent a wave of fresh discussion throughout the music culture of the southern and eastern Caribbean. *Ringbang* has begun to discuss recent trends in calypso and reggae, presented articles on new Trinidadian stars and on the calypso-chutney interface, and examined new musical styles in Antigua, among other concerns (see 1, no. 2 and 2, no. 1, in particular). However, these articles are journalistic in their focus and hence highly descriptive rather than analytical or theory engaging. But *Ringbang* provides a clearer understanding of soca and post-soca developments than most other recent publications. Many of the scholars who have published on mainstream traditional calypso have not made the transition to engaging newer hardcore calypso styles. That the evolution of reggae has attracted more cultural critics and critiques might have to do with the higher profile of reggae worldwide; but it cannot be implied that soca's developments in recent history are tame in comparison with reggae's dynamism. In fact, I would suggest that, like reggae, calypso has undergone many changes throughout the 1980s and 1990s, inspired by developments in music technology. It should be said that the same technological instruments and musical applications that influenced reggae as it evolved into dancehall around the early 1980s were also impacting on calypso. Programmable drums and synthesizers have had an equally significant effect on calypso as they have had on reggae. There are few recording artists in the Caribbean in the 1980s and 1990s whose works have not been affected by new music technologies of the period. The current wave of high-tech synthesizer, bass and drum–driven musical styles which have taken over the calypso domain have their beginnings in the 1980s when they came into contact with the new power of music technologies.

There has been a marked shift in the calypso-oriented musical styles performed and recorded within the Caribbean during the decades of the 1980s and 1990s. Academic criticism has not engaged meaningfully with a number of transgressive practices that throughout this period expanded the boundary of calypso. Because of the sustained silence concerning cutting edge musical developments of the 1980s and

Murrell, William David Spencer and Adrian Anthony McFarlane, *Chanting Down Babylon* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1998); Kevin Chang and Wayne Chen, *Reggae Routes* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1998); Norman Stolzoff, *Wake the Town and Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

1990s in the Caribbean, the music of the region continues to be mislabelled and misunderstood at the beginning of the new millennium. The casual labelling of calypso's dance music as soca, for example, masks the truly explosive evolutionary process that the region's culture experienced in the 1980s and continues to undergo into the new millennium. Whereas reggae's evolution has been acknowledged by the naming of its derivatives, calypso discourse has been reluctant to identify and categorize calypso's derivatives. This article is built on the suggestion that calypso's co-genre, the dance music called soca, which was replacing calypso in popularity by the early 1980s, was itself being transformed by the mid-1980s. Certainly by the mid-1990s soca would begin to be replaced by yet newer hardcore styles, such as ringbang. By the mid-1990s ringbang was the preferred musical style of most leading calypso dance artists, like Machel Montano in Trinidad; Invader in St Lucia; Square One in Barbados; Touch and The Man C.P. in St Vincent and the Grenadines; Dread and the Baldhead in Antigua–Barbuda, and, to a lesser extent, Byron Lee and the Dragonnaires in Jamaica. This article therefore devotes itself to locating (in the 1980s) the roots of a new technology-driven (1990s) music style in order to illustrate how and when Caribbean music began to gesture to post-soca styles.

The Value of Reading Multitracked

In 1995 a major debate in Caribbean music surfaced surrounding the creation of a "new" musical phenomenon called ringbang. Although this phenomenon claimed to have surfaced by name around 1993, it was in 1995 during Barbados's Crop Over Festival and then in 1996 during Trinidad's Carnival (when there was talk of a "Bajan invasion") that there was much debate surrounding the autonomy and validity of a musical style called ringbang. In the book *Barbadian Popular Music and the Politics of Caribbean Culture*, I addressed a number of issues surrounding this new phenomenon,[4] including the ideology that informs the creation of ringbang. I relied heavily on materials drawn from interviews with ringbang's creator, the Guyanese international artist Eddy Grant, as well as on interviews in the media. I also considered the viability of ringbang as a new musical style, by examining its relationships with other Caribbean music forms such as soca and reggae. But that text made only passing reference to the earliest musical trends that anticipated the birth of this particular

4 Curwen Best, *Barbadian Popular Music* (Vermont: Schenkman Books, 1999), 102–18.

hardcore musical style of the 1990s. While popular informal debates at the end of the 1990s now recognize that there are major transformations in the musical styling of calypso, it seems even more imperative to discover and disclose the route of genesis of the new styles back to the early years of the 1980s. I want to carry out this assessment through a close discussion of a few innovative tracks which began to redefine the boundaries of soca music in the early to mid-1980s. This close assessment is based on the multitrack reading procedure and practice which has been developed in a number of other works.[5] Much of the impetus for reading multitracked derives from sound engineering, recording and production texts such as *The Musician's Home Recording Handbook* and other music industry magazines devoted to production.[6]

This multitrack reading practice is based on music, sound and film production technology. It considers the ways in which technology constructs and produces its finished products for consumption. It recognizes that these products (like a recorded song) are constituted by a series of separate though related parts which have been fine-tuned and streamlined during the process of construction. In the recording studio, the music engineer sits before a state-of-the-art sound mixing console. The engineer receives and controls individual parts of a song on independent channels. Each part is treated to an unlimited amount of technological processing before it is combined with the others in the final mix-down, for consumption. A multitracked reading is cognizant of this process and seeks to engage cultural phenomena by reading them backwards, if you may, interrogating the production process, de-scribing, un-mixing the cultural product. It therefore concerns itself with analysing individual tracks of cultural data to come to terms with the ideology that is built into the production process. A multitracked reading can therefore slow down the moving picture or break down a recorded song to analyse minute technological practices, which can then open up the perception to radical ways of understanding cultural products and phenomena. The practice of un-mixing does not signify a process of playful indulgence; rather, it represents an act of constructing a fuller knowledge of cultural tracks. Again, this method is firmly rooted in production practices of the 1980s, as it was only then that this technology came into wide usage. Later in this article I will perform such a reading

5 Curwen Best, "Culture-thru-Technology" (Paper presented at the conference in honour of Rex Nettleford University of the West Indies, Jamaica 1996).

6 Ted Greenwald, *The Musician's Home Recording Handbook* (San Francisco: Miller Freeman, 1992). Other important magazines include: *EQ; Project Recording and Sound Techniques; DB Magazine; Keyboard: Making Music – Technique and Technology.*

of an innovative soca song, in order to demonstrate how Caribbean music was being reconfigured by technology, indeed, how Caribbean culture is presently being co-constructed by technology.

What Is this Hardcore Style Called Ringbang?

What is ringbang? Although this question was addressed before in the book *Barbadian Popular Music*, it is important here to provide a working description. Examples of songs that are considered ringbang are SuperBlue's "Jab Molassie" (*c.* 1993) and Gabby's "Dr Cassandra" (1994). The term ringbang began to be used by Eddy Grant around 1993 to identify a new set of music performance and production techniques which he pioneered and applied to the calypso genre. By 1995 it was evident to most that there existed, indeed, a new style of soca which was difficult to categorize. For some this style was ringbang, for others it was techno-soca, but everyone agreed that it represented a hardcore style of soca. Its hardcoreness stemmed from a new overall aggression which possessed this music. Ringbang is not a beat, per se. It is not an autonomous rhythm with specific inflectional, metrical traits. Since ringbang seems to rely on extant rhythms for its own existence and sense of presence, it is therefore better to speak of it as a style rather than a rhythm. Presently it is best recognized in the context of soca. It has embellished and reworked a number of musical features and motifs inherent within soca. Ringbang is characterized by a greater emphasis (than usual) on the rhythmic constituents of the musical composition. A ringbang performance or recording therefore tends to highlight and foreground accentuated drums, active percussion instruments, and a punctuated bass line. Other instruments, such as live horns, integral to the soundscape of calypso, become subordinated or disappear completely in the application of ringbang. Overall, there is much more vocal and musical aggression in ringbang than in soca. The former is also marked by its more blatant utilization of music technology in its construction.

Back in 1967 Kamau Brathwaite sought to differentiate between North American jazz and selected Caribbean musics. He made the suggestion, in his essay "Jazz and the West Indian Novel", that unlike jazz, there is "no note of chaos in calypso".[7] I do not want to discuss the specifics of that particular essay's argument here, but I make reference to it since that essay recognized that there are indeed a set of sound

7 Kamau Brathwaite, *Roots* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press), 59.

qualities/features associated with Caribbean music. This is an area of great complexity, once you begin to identify the specific constituents of Caribbean music. Yet, when most Caribbean people hear a song or a sound, they usually can say what type of music it signals. We know, because of our close relationship with the music in everyday life. We know because of familiarity. But familiarity also desensitizes the listener. Partly because we experience the music at the disseminative stage, when it has already been put together, we do not concern ourselves with how the final mix is built. But sound is created in the context of silence. Sound is marked by its relationship to silence. When a painter begins to paint, the canvas in empty. Then splashes are added, and built up until the entire canvas explodes with a collage of interrelated colours and strokes. Its impact is felt. The sum effect is therefore a result of the finer strokes and splashes. Caribbean music can similarly be interrogated as a canvas of sound. The individual instruments and their interplay are important. In the book *The Art of Mixing,* David Gibson agrees that most people do not differentiate between the individual parts that make up a piece of music, and he goes on to posit a range of considerations that come into play once you begin to talk of soundscape and imaging.[8] Imaging refers to our perception of a sound field/canvas, as when a pair of headphones are put on in stereophonic mode; when we close our eyes, we begin to hear distinctive instruments as though they were playing around within the hollow space of the head. Gibson lists lyrics, melody, rhythm, performance, instrumentation, harmony, song structure, quality of equipment and arrangement as integral to a final mix which we hear when we experience a song in its fullness. I do not deal with these aspects individually here, but these do begin to come into sharper focus as this essay interrogates the play of instruments (and, consequently, sound imaging) in Caribbean music.

Cultural spaces are defined by their distinctive musics and sounds. Sound theorist Rick Altman refers to the sounds that fill these spaces as defining *their* soundscape. In the chapter "Afterword: A Baker's Dozen Terms for Sound Analysis" in *Sound Theory/Sound Practice*, Altman defines "soundscape" as "the characteristic types of sound commonly heard in a given period or location"; he concludes that "Third World soundscapes of course offer their own particularities."[9] I want to build on this definition, for application to the Caribbean context. I want to suggest, further, that the musics/sounds that constitute the noise within Caribbean cultural space are themselves

8 David Gibson, *The Art of Mixing* (Emeryville: Mix Books, 1997), 1–20.
9 Rick Altman, *Sound Theory/Sound Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 252.

made up of smaller scapes-of-sound. So it is possible to talk of the characteristic types of sound commonly heard in a given music, or art form. Reggae possesses its characteristic types of sound. Calypso also possesses its own. These characteristic types of musical sound are created by instruments and voices. Over time, these musical genres have established their identity by privileging certain instruments over others. The application of these instruments in song creation and production is also critical to the construction of soundscapes within music genres. New subgenres of music are therefore created by altering the characteristic soundscape of more established music genres.

As reggae's raggamuffin is differentiated from earlier styles of reggae on account of raggamuffin's greater utilization of music technology, technology similarly marks off ringbang from its predecessor, soca. The central positioning of drums and percussions in ringbang music connects this style of music to some African forms wherein rhythm and the drum play a vital part in music construction.[10] Ringbang therefore, because it seeks to make this connection, immerses itself within a wider African aesthetic. I now want to go on to examine much more closely the early evolution of this technology-driven style, ringbang.

Reading/Tracking the Hardcore Routes

Calypso began to evolve into another music form by the mid- to late 1970s. By the early 1980s soca had become entrenched as an accepted subgenre of calypso. Arrow's "Hot Hot Hot" (1983) had made its great impact on the international music world by the mid-1980s. But even as soca was usurping calypso's popularity, there was already in existence the seeds of yet another new dance music. I want to show one path to development of this new style of music which in the late 1990s experiences much popularity, especially within the Eastern Caribbean and Trinidad and Tobago.

Earlier signs of 1990s hardcore styles are to be found in a number of tracks, many of them recorded by Eddy Grant in the 1980s. Indeed, hints of ringbang might also be traced to his pre-1980s recordings. This suggestion becomes more plausible, when one recalls the difficulties posed to critics over time when they have attempted to categorize Grant's music. It has been called reggae/soul/pop/world music/progressive soca among other labels. In *The Guinness Who's Who of Reggae,* for example, his music is described

10 See J.H. Kwabena Nketia's *The Music of Africa* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1974), especially see chapter 7, 85–91.

as "his own sound . . . part reggae part funk strong musical motifs, strong melodies – pop with credibility".[11] I will not go back to his pre-1980s days with the Equals, however; I intend to focus on the early 1980s period and his experiments within the calypso domain. I believe it is much more practical to begin from around 1982 in order to locate the genesis of this new hardcore style in its soca application to a phase of Grant recordings. I am prepared at this point to suggest that ringbang surfaced as both a cultural imperative and a technological necessity. By this suggestion I mean that Caribbean culture is never static, it has always been dynamic; it is this dynamism that drives Caribbean music. In addition to this influence, I am also suggesting that developments in music technology have propelled developments within the music. Throughout the 1980s, transforming cultures in the Caribbean interfaced with the revolution in digitized music technology to produce a highly streamlined dance music, ringbang.

When Eddy Grant recorded his first Barbadian calypso in the early 1980s, his recordings signalled a transformation in the production of calypso-oriented music in the Caribbean. Grant was bringing to the finished musical product an enhanced quality of sound. When many of his productions are compared with other calypsos of this period, one notices the enhanced track-to-track clarity of Grant's recordings, produced on his Ice label. The Ice recordings of this period call greater attention to the process of their construction, on account of their improved recording quality. The power of multitrack recording was becoming more pronounced in Ice productions. Multitrack recording was based on the then new practice in the recording studio where individual instruments were recorded separately on independent tracks of a recording machine before being played back together in real time to constitute a song. This meant that the engineer could now have greater control in manipulating each minute component of the overall sound of the record. Ice Records employed these techniques, and some commentators on the music of the period were beginning to express admiration for its output sound quality, while others had doubts about the bold utilization of the electronic drum machine and synthesized brass (which were not yet widely accepted as desirable constituents of the calypso idiom).

The calypso "Jack" (1982) by Gabby, recorded with Ice, was beginning to reposition and re-place the centrality of live horns. It featured extended measures of the song's "band chorus", wherein rhythmic keyboard strumming was up-front in the

11 Larkin, *The Guinness Who's Who of Reggae,* 104.

mix. Live horns were not now major voices within the song's open vocal spaces. In fact, it featured live horns that entered and left the mix with little fanfare. The recording "Jack" also revealed the early tendency by Grant and Ice to streamline the finished product. By this I mean that the final recording is well-mastered, its overall "feel" is carefully honed at the postproduction stage. This carefully engineered finished product calls attention to the technological process which gave birth to the song. Almost in the same way that raggamuffin's first major release – Wayne Smith's "Under Me Sleng Teng" (1985) – calls attention to the mechanized synthesizer technology upon which it is built. Such sound-processing gadgets as reverb and delay processors, compressor-limiters, and expanders, are all alluded to within the final mix of many tracks that were coming out of Grant's Blue Wave studios in the early and mid-1980s.

Raggamuffin's "Under Me Sleng Ting" is said to have been created on an inexpensive home keyboard. This electronic keyboard had been bought from the electronics company, Casio. Since its entry into the category of musical keyboards, Casio has appealed to the lower end of the market in pricing its products. Its greatest claims to impacting on the music industry have to do with its entry-level keyboards. Indeed, by the year 2000, Casio's most significant contribution to the synthesizer market is still its mid-1980s miniature-key synthesizer called the Casio CZ101. The attractiveness of Casio's products is not only built on their competitive prices but also on the functionality and easy operation of their music-producing systems. Prior to the early 1980s, programmable keyboards tended to be stationary, bulky instruments in the tonnage of the Hammond organ. However, Casio and other companies began to mass produce lighter keyboards. These instruments now contained built-in drums and accompanying bass patterns that could be triggered by simply touching a single note in the lower registers of the keyboard. Many Caribbean musicians, professional and non-professional, were immediately sold on the idea of the new technologies which were coming predominantly from Japan but also from the United States, England and other parts of Europe. The major manufacturing companies of "serious" instruments were giants such as Yamaha, Korg, Oberheim, Moog and Roland. Smaller players in the professional market were emerging in EMU, Akai, Ensoniq and Casio.

Whereas raggamuffin's musical beginnings are traced to that Casio moment of crude discovery, the early evolution of ringbang is rooted in the higher end of the music industry's technology. In the early 1980s Eddy Grant and his studio had access to such instruments as the New England Digital's Synclavier. Whereas a simple Casio factory-programmed keyboard in their "MT series" retailed for US$250 in 1982, the Synclavier was priced around US$50,000. Technology has therefore presented itself as

an important catalyst in the construction of two Caribbean music forms in the 1980s. These technologies were at different ends of music technology's pricing scale, but both technologies were offering quite similar functionalities. They offered programmability and pre-set, factory built-in drums, accessible at the press of a button. It is intriguing that two Caribbean styles are born of this technological digitization, which itself has its origins in engineering labs in distant lands, far removed from the cultural and social realities of the Caribbean. Whereas most readings of Caribbean culture are inclined to locate the roots and routes of new Caribbean musics in cultural and social phenomena, I would suggest that music technology has an equal claim to the birthing of these styles.

It is widely felt that a new era in Caribbean music began around 1982. But no critical academic study of soca has attempted to locate this moment of change at the level of sound and production. Ice embarked on a process of pruning its recorded products, reducing musically "complex" progressions and ornamentals. This appeared to be a reaction against the then current mainstream soca methods which glorified horns and seemed to sacrifice quality for energy. Though 1982 marked the new phase of production for Ice records, it was in 1983 that one began to identify more clearly a set of recording practices that were being inscribed at Blue Wave studios and in another ten years would give form to the new techno-driven style of ringbang.

Blue Wave studios began to challenge aspects of the recording and production process. Other sound and recording engineers, musicians, and producers were forced to come to terms with new approaches to the construction of the sound text. By 1984 Blue Wave was creating the benchmark by which other soca sounds were assessed. But equally as significant was the impact that Blue Wave created through its daring innovations and experimentations.

Contrary to popular perception, all of the early Blue Wave innovations were not carried out on Gabby recordings but on those of Grynner as well, in such tracks as "Mr T" (1982) and then "Stinging Bees" (1983) and "Gabby Controversy" (1984). Blue Wave began to alter musical features that had become entrenched by the early 1980s as formulaic features of soca. When one listens to some Gabby and Grynner tracks at a deeper level, the trained ear can detect that the producer was uneasy within the confines of the soca genre and was attempting to forge a new style. This new style would not become full-blown and given a label until the 1990s when better sense could be made of the power of technology. It was only in the 1990s that producers of post-soca music began to connect an ideology to the powerful technology they were utilizing in their creation of music and culture. In the 1990s some post-soca producers

became aware that technologies (like the synthesizer and multitracking) were not necessarily neutral, and that it was possible to seize control of the ideologically charged digital domain. The sound theory text *Sound Theory/Sound Practice* explores some intriguing debates in this regard.

One way in which it was possible to seize control of technology's power was through greater access to and understanding and manipulation of the very technology. Generally, within the Caribbean in the 1980s, the technology of the global music industry led the region, in many cases, blindly. Hence the proliferation of unimaginative formulaic musical texts within this period in the dancehall and soca genres.[12] The minimalist application of the drum machine and sequencer within the dancehall context is the best example of what I call the "technological loop" in Caribbean music in this period. Simply put, a "sound loop" refers to continuous repetition of that sound. In the 1980s for the first time it was possible on a commercial musical instrument to have a sequence of pre-programmed sounds repeat themselves endlessly with the press of a single button. The dancehall phenomenon in the 1980s revolved around this sound loop technology. Soca texts were also stuck in this technological loop. This was most obvious in the application of drum, percussion and bass programming. Blue Wave was a pioneering studio in the Caribbean in the use of music technology; so it might be said to also have been a part of the sequencing, programming and multitrack craze.

An important point which should be made, though, is that Blue Wave seemed to be more in control of the technology than most other production houses in the region. This had to do with the financial might of Ice Records, but it also stemmed from the fact that Blue Wave studios experimented freely with the technology. Not all of its experiments featured Barbadian artists. Blue Wave also recorded the likes of Carl and Carol Jacobs and Machel Montano from Trinidad, and the progressive Vincentian band, Touch. Indeed, when Blue Wave began to experiment with the use of synthesized horns in some of its songs, there was both consternation and derision. The movement towards heavy programming, which was led by the synthesizer, began to create a subtextual trend in the soca music domain. This school of musicians and producers sought a break from mainstream soca. They advocated the further reduction of "live" instrumentation. By the late 1980s most producers of dance calypso were adherents to this practice.

12 See Alleyne, "Transnationalization of Caribbean Music".

Blue Wave was also actively engaged in the practice of altering drum patterns within the soca genre. Songs such as Gabby's "One Day Coming Soon" (1984) and Grynner's "Gabby Controversy" (1984) were presenting a drum pattern that was much closer to a techno-styled disco than calypso proper. Bass patterns were also being altered from the normal beat around on the tonic and dominant notes, which characterizes the soca bass line. Blue Wave began to stipulate the use of much sparser bass patterns. (In a song such as "Gabby Controversy", staccato bass pulses are played primarily on the first beat at the beginning of each bar in 4/4 time.) By the mid-1980s other soca acts within the region were also utilizing these "innovations" to some degree. In St Vincent, Beckett's "Stranger Man" (*c.* 1985) and in Trinidad, Gypsy's "Song of Me Land" (*c.* 1987) and Natasha's "Mass in We" (*c.* 1987) are three such examples.

The handling of drums has been the single most important practice marking the transformation of Caribbean culture from soca to post-soca. When one returns to 1983 tracks by Grynner, and to Gabby's "One Day Coming Soon" in particular, it is clear that Blue Wave was embarking on a project to create a new sound by utilizing drums. The stark realization of this new style is best evident in Gabby's "One Day Coming Soon" where the producer further centralizes the drums by removing other active polyrhythmic percussive and stringed instruments and then counterposes these drums with a harsh piano and a recurring conga drum pattern. This production looks forward to ringbang in its aggressive drum applications. The snare drum is militant, almost explosive, in the mix. It is a mid-pitched snare, tightly tuned, yet slightly gated to achieve atomic ends. The snare drum in "One Day Coming Soon" envelops the entire mix in a way that other calypso/soca drum tracks of the time do not. This explosive treatment becomes more widespread by the end of the 1990s.

I want to better illustrate what I am saying by making a simple yet representative comparison between this Blue Wave recording and a few songs on the Montserratian Arrow's 1983 album *Heat*. I have opted to use Arrow as a critical comparison because he has in many respects been a leader and innovator in the soca domain during the 1980s. Albums such as his *Soca Savage* (1984) and *Deadly* (1985) were pointing the way towards greater fusion of soca and funk and other urban street music trends in rap. Whereas Arrow and Planet Sound Studios have never overtly contested the placing and labelling of their music as soca (in the sense that Arrow has always accepted and promoted himself as being the soca king of the world), Grant and Blue Wave have appeared uneasy when categorized as producers of soca proper.

Significantly, therefore, Arrow's many avant-garde excursions into new territory (as in his 1984 song "Party Mix" which sings of and suggests "crossing over") are counterbalanced by a conscious reverting to traditional soca (as in his 1985 "Hot Mix"). Overall, Blue Wave has been more blatantly experimental, daring and unapologetic in its recordings. Throughout the 1980s the studio persisted with a series of experiments which it has not simply tried and discarded but has continued to build. These might be traced through three stages: the subordinating of horns; the foregrounding of (the) bass; and the experimentation with and foregrounding of drums. The wide range of Blue Wave experiments in the 1980s can be summed up neatly under these three recording and production tendencies. By citing Arrow in this comparison I am also suggesting that Blue Wave was not the only studio engaged in experiments at this time. Grant was not the only producer who was trying new things with soca. But a comparison of Gabby's "One Day Coming Soon" with selected Arrow tracks of the same period also illustrates the distance that Blue Wave was placing between itself and other production houses within the Caribbean and the extent to which Blue Wave was moving away from soca's mainstream and creating early post-soca music.

In Arrow's "Rush Hour" (1983) he deals with the madness of rush hours in the metropolis. This is good enough reason for employing a reference from the music of North America. His song begins with "samples" of street noises and sirens and with pop-styled snare drums. In the song's chorus, the inflectional character of the composition changes into a much more traditional soca groove before it again returns to the initial pop-styled drums. Through these rhythmic shifts this composition is at once experimental and yet rooted in its association with the soca genre. But in the composition there seems some kind of uncertainty with its own transgressive practices. It seems to vacillate between styles.

The Blue Wave productions of this period are equally self-conscious in their creation. But they seem less apologetic of their transgressive applications. "One Day Coming Soon" begins with extended bars of outspoken pop-styled drums. Unlike Arrow's song, this drum pattern and its aggressive attitude are not altered at all throughout the entire production. The song's intensity, which Gabby augments through a vocal clarity and forthright aggression, is strongly supported by a recurring insistent up-frontness of drums. The song's musical tension is created primarily by the interplay between its bass line and horns in the band chorus. This tension is released somewhat abruptly, deliberately, but momentarily at the beginnings of verses where the bass and horns are "drop-out". But the song falls back on ever-explosive drums that

are laid on top of an aggressive piano. Indeed, it is this overall aggression in many early Blue Wave songs that comes to characterize its hardcore music of the 1990s.

Arrow's "Rush Hour", even his 1984 "Party Mix", does not assign this same aggression to the drum mix. It can be summarized that the Arrow recordings reveal a greater overall balance between the range of instruments in the mix: horns, bass, guitars, keyboards, percussions, drums and vocals. Although the Ice recordings are very good overall in recorded quality, they do not possess this same "balance" of individual recorded instruments. By the mid-1980s soca music became characterized by this balance. The Trinidadian Leston Paul is arguably the foremost producer of this texture of balanced recordings; Byron Lee and the Dragonnaires and Ed Watson and the Brass Circle are also noted for this method. Within most of the Arrow mixes the instruments seem to know their pre-assigned mix levels. They also seem to fit easily, comfortably, within the total sound (dynamic) spectrum. This is not so in the Gabby mix.

There are several (soca) mixing indiscretions within Gabby's "One Day Coming Soon". By this I mean that the recording reveals the presence of uncharacteristic mixing features, those not then common in soca. The drums sit unapologetically up front in Gabby's song. They call attention to their full presence, to their new position within the mix. They assume a new position of power, subordinating other characteristic components of soca, such as horns, guitar and bass. They struggle to situate their –db– reading in the mix as being on level with the vocals. If I seem to be speaking of the play of instruments as though these instruments are engaged in a struggle, then they are. Or at least they begin so to appear in the calypso genre when one listens to innovative soca tracks from the 1980s. It is evident that Blue Wave was constantly engaged in a struggle with the art form and with music technologies. Its producers gazed at and wrestled with the unlimited potentialities augured by the increasing digitization of music. Blue Wave recordings of the period reveal a rabid preoccupation to come to terms with, and gain power over, its own technologies. The struggle took place with hardware and software applications, at the mixing board, with its unlimited multitrack and interface facilities. It was through this state-of-the-art console, with more than twenty-four channels, that Blue Wave embarked on a series of experiments that, on the one hand, were a celebration of the power of technology but, on the other, highlighted the dialogic tensions of sound production in the Caribbean. Whereas there was a perceived format for soca recordings, with the complementary mixing and assigning of relatively "equal" status to a number of instruments, there began to be an increased "de-equalizing" of musical constituents in Blue Wave productions.

Gabby's "One Day Coming Soon" locates an important site for the kinds of struggles to which I refer. The drums in this song assume their enhanced position of power through significant readjustment of their tracks within the song. First, the drum voices utilized are carefully chosen, then they are laid down with methodical insistence and astuteness. The foot kick is particularly pronounced. It is punctuated and enhanced by the accompanying congas which when sounded together with it create a fuller presence for the kick. The kick therefore appears to have presence not only down-centre of the mix (as most kicks do) but also a pan-left and pan-right assignment. This effect is also created for the snare drum. There are two congas, one panned left, the other panned right. One is tuned higher than the other. They are second only to the drums in the overall mix presence of the song. They have been passed through various effects and processors which create for them an enhanced ambience. They have been given what musicians might describe as a "dry-echo" in a "large hall" environment. They are outstanding.

The snare drum operates within this enhanced highly "effected" domain. It resonates as a heavily gated snare which is carried pan-left and pan-right throughout the parameters of the stereophonic spectrum. The gated echo is not sustained for too long but is cut off. It decays through what seems to be an inscribed compressor/limiter. The overall effect is an aggressive snare drum that leaps out of the mix, is sustained momentarily, but abruptly fades before it is sounded again. The drums in the calypso domain were not by 1983 accustomed to this type of application, this type of aggression. This was more so the drum application of the rock genre. The accompanying aggressive piano of "One Day Coming Soon" was also an innovation. Its only parallel at the time might be found, again, outside of the calypso genre and in rock, in a song such as Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger" (*c.* 1982). Gabby's "One Day Coming Soon" utilizes the piano as a harshly present constituent, which adds to the overall aggressive timbre of the sound. This hardcore attitude and application are the substance of ringbang, I would suggest. Ringbang is not only identifiable in the "up-frontness" of the drums, but also by an overriding attitude of vocal and instrumental aggression. This vocal aggression has its roots not in the calypso idiom but in rock and the chanting tradition of dub. The fact that Eddy Grant was a major force in bringing vocal aggression to the fore in the calypso domain is no surprise. He has, of course, performed reggae for many years. He has also performed many reggae-rock fusions.

A study of greater length could indeed go on to trace the progression of soca into ringbang through a series of further experimentations, again, not all featuring

Barbadian artists. It should be documented that Machel Montano's "Too Young to Soca" (*c.* 1987), was re-recorded by Ice with a more commercial-oriented sound. This sound was achieved through the reprogramming of the soca drum and bass patterns on the original recording, giving it a more pop-oriented flavour, and the addition of more aggressive drum tracks. The Trinidadians Carl and Carol Jacobs's songs "I Want to Live" and more so their "Savage" (both 1988) represent further divergences from soca proper. In the latter the drums threaten to take over throughout the song's engagement with the theme of mankind's savagery.

The real explosive songs of that early post-soca, pre-hardcore era were other experiments with drums, percussion and bass in songs such as Grynner's "Gabby Controversy", "Three G's", and "Bajan Yankees", and in Gabby's "De List", "Ms. Barbados", "Cadavers", "Swim", "Ballroom", "Rambo: Gabbo is Rambo", "Jimmy Swaggart". Any exploration of the roots of the styles that inspired the new trends in calypso-oriented dance musics at the end of the twentieth century must revisit these songs of the 1980s. I dare say that Gabby's CD *One in the Eye* is the best representative collection of early post-soca trends in Caribbean music.

Caribbean culture increasingly interfaced with technology at the end of the 1990s. The new millennium promises further interface and contestation. A major challenge for Caribbean musicians, artists and producers will not be accessing technologies but rather understanding and controlling these technologies. In the ideologically charged domain of technological construction, a new site of contestation is being fought. Technology does come to the Caribbean with an attendant bias and ideology in terms of its functionalities, and Caribbean culturalists must be aware of this. For instance, a major sales pitch for drum programming technology surrounded a feature called quantization. This feature offered the exciting possibility of regulating the metrical pattern of all instruments and sounds within musical instruments. The popularity of this feature discouraged free-hand programming and experiments with poly-rhythms.

It is clear, where Caribbean music is concerned, that there is a marked shift at the level of production, technology and musical application. In Caribbean music discourse, there is not nearly enough focus on these aspects. Caribbean societies are becoming increasingly concerned with acquiring and mastering new cutting edge technologies. As Caribbean culture evolves, academic criticism is also faced with the challenge of keeping up, of finding the language with which to critique new developments.