



Richard Holder

# Calypso Rose

The septuagenarian queen of Trinidadian calypso is back with a new album. **Nigel Williamson** looks back over the singer's remarkable career to date

**N**o man alive or dead could take the crown off mi head,' Calypso Rose sings in typically sassy and emphatic fashion on her new album, *Far From Home*. But it's a crown for which she had to fight against fierce male prejudice and jealousy. In the macho world of the Caribbean, there were only 'calypso kings,' and when Rose emerged triumphant at Trinidad's annual carnival in 1978 with her song 'Come Leh We Jam', the organisers were reluctantly forced to change the title to 'calypso monarch.'

Her victory was the culmination of a long battle with the male-dominated ethos of calypso culture. When her 1975 calypso 'Do Dem Back' won the annual Trinidad Road March – the top honour awarded to the song played most often at the judging points along the parade route during carnival – the title was taken from her and given to the veteran Lord Kitchener instead. She won the Road March again two years later with 'Give Me More Tempo' but this time they didn't dare interfere and she was allowed to keep the prize. The

following year she added the 'calypso monarch' crown to her trophy cabinet – and went on to win it for five successive years.

Satisfied that she had made her point and won a historic victory for female calypsonians, in 1983 she moved to Queens in New York City, where there is a large Trinidadian population and where she has lived ever since, although she returns to Port of Spain every year for the annual carnival.

She met Manu Chao in Trinidad shortly before the 2015 carnival. "He came to my hotel with that little guitar of his and we played for three hours. He loved the tunes," Rose recalls.

When she told him that she was recording a new album, Chao asked if he could assist. The record – produced by Ivan Duran at his Stonetree studio in Belize with major contributions from Drew Gonsalves of Kobo Town – was more or less finished. Nonetheless, Chao's offer was eagerly accepted, and he took the tapes home to

Barcelona and sprinkled his unmistakable touches all over the dozen tracks, much as he had done previously with Amadou & Mariam.

"I like his style. He's not fussy and he's down to earth. He's very cool and takes everything very laid back," she says of Chao. "If he wasn't already taken I could marry Mr Manu Chao!"

Rose was born McArtha Linda Sandy-Lewis on the Caribbean island of Tobago in 1940. One of 11 children, she remembers her great-grandmother Martha Paul, who came from Guinea as a slave, kneeling every evening at sunset towards the sea and praying to her African ancestors. 'I Am African' on her new album is an homage to the ancient matriarch. "The calypso beat originates out of West Africa and the rhythm of the drums," she says. "I went crazy with the rhythm of those drums."

At the age of nine she was sent to live with relatives on the neighbouring island of Trinidad and she was soon spending her time in the calypso tents and following the carnival parades. "I did not become a singer of calypso; I was born into calypso," she says.

Her father, a Baptist minister, did not agree; he felt calypso music "belonged to the devil" and she also faced opposition from female church groups. "They felt that calypso was a man's domain, and calypso was not good for a woman to sing because of the rhythm of the beat," she says. "So, I told them, 'God has given me the talent to compose, to create, and I will not be like the foolish virgin and bury my talent in the soil.'" By the age of 15 she had written her first hit song, 'Glass Thief', after witnessing a man stealing from a woman in a market. It was said to be the first calypso denouncing inequality between the sexes.

A turning point in her career came in 1963 after Hurricane Flora had hit Tobago, leaving death and destruction in its wake. "I composed a song about the hurricane for the calypso tent and after every verse, I sang 'Abide With Me,'" she recalls. "The same church women who a few months earlier had said that I did not belong in the calypso arena were now saying I was doing something good."

She turned professional in 1964 and, after performing in her early years as 'the Crusoe Kid', she reinvented herself as Calypso Rose, taking her place alongside top calypsonians such as Lord Kitchener to the Mighty Sparrow – and ruffling a few male feathers along the way. Among her early hits were the suggestive 'Fire in Me Wire' and 1970's 'No Madame', which generated political furore

by criticising the treatment of domestic servants in Trinidad. "From there the law was changed and domestic servants got a fair wage," she says proudly.

On one of her first trips outside Trinidad in 1967 she shared a stage in New York with a little-known Jamaican act called Bob Marley and the Wailers and as her reputation spread beyond the islands of the Caribbean, Bonnie Raitt covered her 'Wah She Go Do' on her 1973 album *Takin' My Time*.

With the rise of *soca* in the 1970s Rose updated her style and she often performs with a sound system, although her preference is for live musicians. But while soca puts the

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emphasis on partying rather than social commentary, traditional calypsonian virtues remain at the core of her music and she insists the two can readily co-exist. "Calypso is for dancing and partying but it's also for storytelling, like being a reporter," she

says. "You can dance but you must also listen. You can't have one without the other."

In 2011 her life was the subject of an acclaimed feature-length documentary, *Calypso Rose: The Lioness of the Jungle*, directed by Pascale Obolo and which was shown at the Cannes Film Festival.

She has survived cancer twice but, apart from the occasional attack of gout, is in good health again and has recently been the support act on the Buena Vista Social Club 'Adios' tour.

*'I've been breaking down walls ever since I was small,'* she sings on her new album. At 75, she still reigns with as much regal gusto as ever. ♦

+ **MORE** See p98 for our list of the *Essential Ten calypso albums*



## BEST ALBUMS

**Soca Diva** (Ice, 1993)  
*'I am back and hot like fire,'* she sings on a no-holds-barred party album of calypso/soca anthems such as 'Ju Ju Warrior' and 'Pump Up the Bass.' Not that Calypso Rose ever went away...

**The Best of Calypso Rose: Calypso Queen of the World Part One** (VP Records, 2009)  
This Best Of includes all of Calypso Rose's early local hits, including 'Fire in Me Wire', 'Give Me More Tempo' and 'No Madam'. Physical discs may be hard to find.

**Calypso Rose** (World Village, 2009)  
The irrepressible 'Israel by Bus' track on this album was featured on the *Songlines* Top of the World covermount CD in #59, but there are ten more equally fine tracks here, including spirited remakes of some of her best-known songs such as 'Rum & Coca Cola'.

**Far from Home** (Because, 2016)  
And at 75 years young, Calypso Rose goes and makes the most expansive and most rocking album of her long career with invaluable assistance from Ivan Duran and Manu Chao, who features on three of the tracks... This album will be reviewed in the next issue (#120), on sale July 15.

## IF YOU LIKE CALYPSO ROSE, THEN TRY...

**Various Artists**  
**Calypso Soundsystem** (Because, 2016) DIGITAL ONLY  
This is a fine introduction to the Caribbean musical style that includes two tracks from the inimitable Calypso Rose herself, 'No Madam' and 'Abatina', plus ten more classic calypso/soca hits spanning some of the earliest recorded examples by the likes of Lord Beginner and Atilla the Hun to later takes by Maestro and Blue Boy.