

The Art of Calypso for Public Health in Caribbean Culture

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Learning Objectives

At the conclusion of this session, you will be able to;

1. Understand the use of calypso in Caribbean society and culture
2. Analyse and critique the public health messages hidden in Caribbean calypso songs
3. Write your own stories, poems or songs

Agenda

1. Introduction
 - What is Calypso?
 - What is the role of calypso in Caribbean society and culture?
 - What is the importance of calypso in public health?
2. Case Studies and Discussion
 - Watch Out My Children – Ras Shorty I
 - Soucouyant – Mighty Shadow
 - Check Up (Ah Brush) – Lord Funny
3. Workshop

Introduction

What is Calypso?

Calypso is a type of folk music originating from the Caribbean. It can also be thought of as a unique form of creative writing. Creative writing can be defined as, “writing that expresses ideas and thoughts in an imaginative way [allowing the writer]... to express feeling and emotions instead of just presenting the facts”.

Calypso, similar to other forms of creative writing, is influenced by culture and often captures and reflects the opinions of a society.

What is the role of calypso in Caribbean society and culture?

It was originally used as a method for slaves during the Transatlantic slave trade to communicate and pass on information at a time when open communication was forbidden. Calypso has maintained this function and is now used as a method of social commentary often touching on issues of politics, relationships and of course health issues.

I have found it useful to explore linkages among the content, the social and performance contexts, and the form and function of the music. Of these elements, **function is the one that has changed least over time**. This is probably because function has always been multifaceted. Calypso music today still performs most of the functions of its ancestor musics: celebration, censure, praise, blame, social control, worship, moralizing, affirmation, confrontation, exhortation, warning, scandal-mongering, ridicule, the generation of laughter, verbal warfare, satire. – Gordon Rohlehr, “The Calypsonian as Artist: Freedom and Responsibility”

Rohlehr goes on to say that calypso “reminds people of their humanity, often through wit and humour. It helps remove stigma by ‘saying what we’re all thinking’”. As a result, Calypso performances often become an open forum for an audience to discuss issues pointed out by the performing calypsonian that may previously not have been open to discussion.

What is the importance of Calypso to public health?

This ability for Calypso to move beyond the stigma that surrounds certain topics in ordinary conversation makes it a useful tool for promoting the discussion of difficult-to-discuss issues. As one calypsonian, Mighty Chalkdust puts it, calypso is “a reflection in song of our way of life”. It was born out of Caribbean history, culture, way of life and so calypso presents the thoughts and concerns of a society in a way that that society can understand, using its own words and style.

The case studies below demonstrate how calypsonians use this art form as a commentary on society particularly when it comes to health issues.

Case Studies

1. Watch Out My Children – Ras Shorty I

My sons and my daughter, to you I plead
Take just a minute and listen to me
I know you don't want no sermon
But my admonition is to guide you against
all the evils of life
That create strife and destroy life, oh

Walk cautiously, children be alert, oh
You have an enemy, that is roaming Jah
earth
I know that you are young and restless
But you don't have to be careless
Sober thinking leads on to righteousness
And happiness, spiritual bless - so let me
tell you this

Watch out my children, watch out my
children

You have a fellow called Lucifer with a bag
of white powder
And he don't want to powder your face
But to bring shame and disgrace to the
human race

Walk on and your future is ahead of you
Right or wrong, sweet or sour depends on
what you do
What you feed your mind with, forms your
characteristic
And shapes the path that you must lead
tomorrow
Darkness or glow, joy or sorrow and so I
want you to know

Discussion 1

2. Soucouyant – Mighty Shadow

Soucouyant in trouble

Vampire in trouble

Slim thick girl with mini-mini dress

A whole lot a blood but no blood test

Soucouyant used to suck in the night

Soucouyant like they drop outta sight

Soucouyant drinkin' whisky and beer

Soucouyant sayin' this is unfair

If Dracula should come into town,

Dracos is going to say "this is wrong"

Dracos will have to practice to eat a
chicken and chips and a patty wit' meat

A glass full a milk an' a half of a bread

And after that he fall down and dead

Soucouyant in trouble

Vampire in trouble

Slim thick girl with mini-mini dress

A whole lot a blood but no blood test

Soucouyant want to suck out their blood

Soucouyant love blood like piggy love mud

Soucouyant catchin' their (linen) now

They suckin' de goat, they suckin' de cow

Watchin' at all them nice little girl,

Tellin' they self if I catch you you bawl

Watchin' in de night with their vampire
eyes

Brother if you think they go suck you you
lie

Fly in your house in de middle of de night

Fly out your window gone like a kite

Tellin' they friends you easy to suck

Don't take chances better try a duck

Soucouyant...

Yes Soucouyant in trouble

Vampire in trouble

Slim thick girl with mini-mini dress

A whole lot a blood but no blood test

Somebody tell me soucouyant rough

When they are thirsty soucouyant tough

They come in your house and they buss'
up your eye

Suck out your blood and they tell you don't
cry

Twist 'round your neck and they give you
a bite

You lookin' to fight, they hit you a right

Then you get stupid, like somebody
boobooly

Soucouyant nowadays playin' smart

Soucouyant nowadays not doing that

Soucouyant nowadays checkin' ya first

Fly in your house and they searching ya
purse

They want to know if you check out the
doc

They want to know if ya solid like rock

They want to know if ya skin smelling
good

They want to know if ya eating junk food

Fly in your house in the middle of the night

Fly out your window gone like a kite

Tellin they friends ya easy to take

But don't take chances better fry a bake

Soucouyant

Discussion 2

3. Check up (Ah Brush) – Lord Funny

Yuh eat and yuh drink and how life is
sweet

But when last did you check up on your
teeth

Yuh eat up yuh drink up you say life sweet

But when last did you check up on your
teeth

Your teeth is ah thing must clean every
day

If you don't your teeth will decay

Just look at my teeth so clean and white
too

So why don't you try and do as I do

Chorus:

Ah get up in the morning, Ah brush

After ah have mah lunch, Ah brush

If ah eat between meals, Ah brush

After mah dinner time ,Ah brush

If ah happen to just drink whiskey or gin

Before ah go to sleep ah go brush again

Check up yes friends check up on your teeth

And try to avoid eating plenty sweets
Yuh better check before it's too late
for bad teeth will sure give you toothache
and while yuh brushin' please get in
between

After yuh brush yuh must wash out clean
now I clean and check mine in every way
so ah proud to say look ah mine today.

Chorus

And if there's anybody who don't believe
what I say,

Their wife could tell you I don' brush less
than three times a day

Check up yes friends, check up while you
young

And be the best teeth man in de town

If you don't keep check then you will regret

For rotten teeth surely give you bad breath

Discussion 3

So brush in de front, brush in de back

Brush up and down, get inside de cracks

You just keep brushing and you will see

So now I want you to take example from
me

CHORUS

Ah yes I hear my granny say son this is
true

Grandpa still brush for a second or two

CHORUS

And all you macho men who like to eat all
about

Remember you mus' brush jus' don't rinse
ya mouth

CHORUS

All you town men who eat saltfish and find
it sweet

To get rid of the scent you must brush
your teeth

Workshop

Break into small groups, pick a health topic that is prevalent in your area, try to write a few lines about it.

References and Further Reading

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