

Calipso Venezolano

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Calipso venezolano is a style of music used for the Carnival celebrations in Venezuela. The name *calipso* principally indicates the music that originated from the town of El Callao in the state of Bolívar in the south-east of the country – hence its other name, ‘*calipso de El Callao*’ - but which also appears in two cities on the eastern coast, Güiría in the state of Sucre and Tucupita in the state of Delta Amacuro. In Güiría, the *calipso* is performed with steel bands as in Trinidad, but in Tucupita the *cuatro* (a small, four-string, strummed chordophone), long bamboo tubes and triangles are added and the mixture of these instruments with steelband *calipso* is called the *cambulé* (Alemán 1998, 255).

Carnival is celebrated throughout the country as a national holiday, and major cities organize the *carnavales turísticos* (tourist Carnivals) on a short-term basis through local government or private initiatives. These celebrations are culturally heterogeneous and the music includes Brazilian samba, Trinidadian calypso, *calipso venezolano* and any type of dance music that may be in fashion at the time.

In El Callao, by contrast, the *calipso* is part of a strong tradition of Carnival celebrations that developed with a certain degree of isolation from the mainstream of Venezuelan musical culture, partly as a consequence of the long distances between the town and the main inhabited regions, and partly because the *calipso* is differentiated from most Venezuelan traditional music: the latter is in ternary-subdivided rhythms, whereas the *calipso de El Callao* is a binary-subdivided rhythm and is sung mainly in English. From the middle of the nineteenth century, migratory waves from Caribbean French and English-speaking

islands, especially from Trinidad, arrived in the region around the Yuruari River - where El Callao was a growing town - thanks to the attraction of gold mining in the area (García 1993, 19).

A cultural tradition developed, characterized by a collection of specific, interrelated expressions, forming the context to which El Callao *calipso* music belongs and in which it continues to function. Prominent in this tradition are the *comparsas* (carnival associations which march and dance in the streets of the town, identified by their costumes, each representing a wide variety of themes), in particular the recurring-theme *comparsas* which appear every year, such as *Agricultura* (a *comparsa* which comes out only at the break of dawn with its members carrying parts of plants, trees, vegetables and fruits, singing the *calipso* of the same name), the *Madamas* (women dressed in nineteenth-century Creole apparel), the Miners, and the *Diablos* (devils), with elaborate, fire-spitting masks and whips, who keep order in the streets. Local people and the crowds of visitors who come to El Callao for the Carnival season happily and freely join in participative and collective but still individual street marching/dancing behind the moving *comparsas*, with or without the thematic disguise. Important personalities from *calipso* history, such as the Negra Isidora, are persistently treated as figures of remembrance in the *comparsas* themes and/or in the *calipso* lyrics. The festivities are also characterized by particular foods: *acrá* (small cod pancakes), *kalalú* (goat meat, ham, coconut milk preparation); and drinks: ginger beer (cocktail with lemon and maize seeds), *monky pi* (lemon, white rum eggnog). During the weeks preceding the Carnival as well as during the festivities, a calendar-administered program may include the Thanksgiving Mass, the coronation of the queens of the music groups, and children's *calipso* singing/performing competitions. During the night, dancing continues despite the threat of the *Mediopintos*, black-painted, half-naked children and teenagers who tar people on the streets with a charcoal-syrup mix when their demands for a small tip is not fulfilled.

The *calipso venezolano* has a distinctive four-beat, binary-subdivided syncopated music (see Example 1). It is performed at a moderate walking/dance speed (124-148 bpm). Usually structured into alternating solo and chorus (verse and refrain respectively), it uses tonal harmony mostly in the major mode and parallel-third harmonization in the voices. It is preferably sung in English and/or more recently in Spanish, and includes some words in the hybrid *patois* of the town (now largely out of use, except for traces in song lyrics) which incorporates variants of words from French and English (Barreto 1994, 116-17). For example:

The Dusty Band coming down (x3)
 Clear the way
 let them pass down there
 Uay ay ay ay Cecilia
 Uay ay ay ay Cecilia
 Si ue me me mue
 puma ie mande mama mue
 Ue sau fe, see what you do
 you put under your bed
 you make your mako
 cut off my head
 Mama mue ce sen lucien
 papa mue ce marticien
 Si ue me me mue puma ie
 mande mama mue

(1940 *calipso* by Luis Giraud for the Dusty Band *comparsa*) (Garcia 1993, 187).

Instrumentation has changed gradually over the years. According to Carlos Small and Kenton St. Bernard (Barreto 1994, 91), *calipso* was initially played with acoustic guitar, *cuatro*, *rallo* (large metal rasp), triangle and a single-skin, open-ended drum called the *bumbac*. A *tambor largo* (larger drum) was added to the *bumbac*, forming the ensemble *tambores de calipso*. The performers of these latter instruments walk with them on their sides, held in place by a shoulder strap, playing them with both hands on the skin. Also integrated into the ensemble are two metal maracas, a *campana* (a metal bell usually made from the lid of a vertical domestic gas tank), a cowbell, and a police whistle (Barreto 1994,

90). The ensemble produces the catchy, dancing rhythm for which the *calipso venezolano* has gained its reputation. Although the rhythmic patterns are closely related to those of its Caribbean cousins, the sound of the fast-strummed *cuatro* gives the music its distinctive Venezuelan quality, since this instrument is a trademark of Venezuelan music. In a parallel sense, it may be said that the *cuatro* also gives the *calipso* a Brazilian touch when it is coupled rhythmically with the triangle, since it reminds the ear of the fast playing *cavaquinho* of the samba ensemble.

$\text{♩} = 124-148+$

The musical score consists of eight staves, each representing a different instrument. The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = 124-148+$. The instruments and their parts are:

- Triangle:** A series of eighth notes, starting with a half note followed by a quarter note, then a series of eighth notes.
- Metal Maracas:** A series of eighth notes, starting with a half note followed by a quarter note, then a series of eighth notes.
- Campana:** A series of eighth notes, starting with a half note followed by a quarter note, then a series of eighth notes.
- Cowbell:** A series of eighth notes, starting with a half note followed by a quarter note, then a series of eighth notes.
- Rallo:** A series of eighth notes, starting with a half note followed by a quarter note, then a series of eighth notes.
- Tambor de Calipso:** A series of eighth notes, starting with a half note followed by a quarter note, then a series of eighth notes.
- Cuatro:** A series of eighth notes, starting with a half note followed by a quarter note, then a series of eighth notes. The part is marked with "+ improv." and includes accents (>) under some notes.
- Electric Bass:** A series of eighth notes, starting with a half note followed by a quarter note, then a series of eighth notes.

Example 1. Simplified rhythmic base of *calipso venezolano* (transcription: E. Mendoza, 2006), showing instrumental roles.

The preferred themes of *calipso* lyrics are descriptions of El Callao, the Carnival and the *calipso* itself, as well as phrases inviting the people to participate, sing, dance and have fun (Barreto 1994, 128). Less often, *calipsos* are devoted to special persons related to the Carnival, and topics such as friendship, political and economical problems or the town's

history are always focused through the Carnival theme. Love is treated from a sexual, rather than romantic point of view, with irony and phrases with hidden meanings. *Comparsas* and music groups usually sing *calipsos* describing the theme of their disguise or band's name (Barreto 1994, 131-132).

The gold mining town of El Callao has suffered a typical succession of financial peaks and troughs - the last crest occurred around the 1940s - and has declined without a break since the 1970s (García 1993, 184). With the exodus created by the waning of the gold mining industry, the attraction of the Carnival festivities for tourism represented the only option for the town's survival, and an updating of the tradition was brought about through a renovation initiative on the part of various cultural leaders of the town. Pressure for change to add to the tourist appeal of the event resulted in a series of appropriations from the pop music culture of the late 1960s and 1970s, which was then extending its mass-media reach. The direction was set for the traditional Carnivals in El Callao to become, at the same time, a *carnaval turístico*.

Although two types of Carnival celebrations, traditional and *turístico*, can be found in El Callao in the early twenty-first century, both have the same entertainment function and do not come into conflict with each other; however, the negotiation between them is in constant redefinition and in a larger sense, the reconfiguration that is occurring in the traditional elements, brought about by the needs of the tourist industry, is not yet being reflected in the way the town's services and facilities cater for the massive invasion of tourists in the few days of Carnival, thus creating an urban chaos (Rosas 2009, 15). Since the 1970s, a major change has consciously been engineered in the process of 'popularizing' the *calipso* tradition, as new instruments such as electric bass, electric guitar and keyboards have been added to the acoustic ones, and amplification has then become necessary for the voice and *cuatro* (with contact microphone). Up to 2012 (the last Carnival visited by the author), percussion

instruments had not been amplified but some instruments, such as the metal maracas, the triangle and, as Lulú Basanta (a *calipso* singer and composer) confirms, even the short drum *bumbac* (Barreto 1994, 93) have been dropped. Wind instruments such as saxophone, trumpet and trombone are also occasionally included, an influence from the *salsa* boom in Venezuela of the mid-1970s. Despite all these changes, the *calipso de El Callao* does not as yet include steel bands, as other *calipsos venezolanos* may do (see above), contrary to what has been stated (Hill 2007).

The integration of sound amplification for the *comparsas* created a new element, the *carrito*: tall, mobile, self-contained amplification equipment, including an electric generator, mixing console, amplifiers and speaker cabinets. The *carrito* has to be pushed around the streets followed by the acoustic instruments and dancers. The top of the four-meter tall cabinets usually accommodates the bass player, singer, *cuatro* player, and a boy who takes care to lift the street cables with a stick to avoid the risk of electrical shock.

Bands were established searching for a new sound, in many cases imitating Caribbean pop, with the result that the tempo increased, up to 148-152 bpm. Names emphasizing renewal were popular among the new groups, for example ‘Nueva Onda’ (New Wave), ‘Nueva Generación,’ ‘Renovación.’ A call to tradition was also present in group names such as ‘The Same People,’ ‘The Young People,’ as well as ‘Family Ground,’ ‘Cuatro y Bumbac’ and ‘Raíces Callaoenses.’ (Callao Roots). These groups formed *comparsas* that included their names, adding to those with the traditional allegoric themes. The influence of the live pop music concerts of the late 1960s and 1970s can be seen in the adoption of presentations of live or recorded, highly amplified music on *ad hoc* open-air stages (*tarimas*) at street-ends or in plazas, which became at the same time the headquarters for each *calipso* group.

Two types of *calipso* coexist in the early twenty-first century: the *calipso comparsero*, the more traditional version, performed in the *comparsas*, and the *calipso de tarima*, more

mixed in nature, and performed on stage. The use of the *tarimas*, more typical of the *turístico* Carnival, encourages heterogeneous show culture with its audience-performer relationship and contrasts with the all-inclusive dancing of the traditional *comparsas*. The music groups generate hit singles every year, performed on their own *tarimas* and by their own *comparsas*, distributed through the local mass-media and sold by informal copied-CD vendors. For this purpose, the new *calipsos* are increasingly sung in Spanish. A competition aspect has been introduced, making music groups rival each other, thus dismembering the previously existing music community of El Callao. The music group *comparsas*, together with the music group *tarimas* and any other *tarimas* built by the beer companies or the local government, all amplify their music at the same time, competing in size and power. The *carritos* provide amplification for some instruments (voice, *cuatro*, bass and keyboards) but not for the percussion instruments, producing an unbalanced sound where the drums, bells and rasps are only heard by the performers. There is no monitoring of the amplified instruments in the *carritos*, so there is a marked difference between what is heard in front or behind the *carrito*, and musicians and dancers often move in time with the louder plaza *tarima* sound system rather than with its own *comparsa* music from the *carrito*. A sonic chaos in the festivities ensues and the speeding up of the *calipso* makes it harder for the dancers to be able to follow behind the *comparsas*.

Negotiation is ongoing in the performance of *calipso* music in El Callao between divergent practices: acoustic versus electric instruments, amplification and sound chaos; live versus recorded music; *comparsa* versus *tarima* performance; belonging to local tradition versus wide-spread national reach. *Calipso* groups are trying to escape the seasonal limitation on the number of performances, arranging concerts outside the Carnival dates, mixing the music with temporary external influences, but *calipso* has not yet become an all-year round pop music for Venezuelans, or one that is internationally known. Nevertheless, some

neofolklore groups or solo artists not directly identified with El Callao have included *calipso venezolano* in their mixed repertoire, such as Serenata Guayanesa in their second album (1974), with the hit ‘Calypso del Callao,’ and Carlos Baute in his two first albums (1994 and 1997), both produced in Venezuela. *Fusión* music has modestly worked around the *calipso*; for example, jazz pianist Ernesto García and the group Patas Jazz in García’s ‘Calipsofacto,’ and the jazz group Akurima with a *calipso* insert in its track ‘Campanelas.’ *Grupos de proyección* such as Convencuela and Yurauri in Caracas have devoted their concerts and recordings to the traditional *calipso*. The Bigott Foundation, one of the main private supporters of folk music in the country, has produced a CD with traditional *calipso* music by Yuruari, which this institution supported until 2002.

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