

# DUELS WITH WORDS

## Calypso: The Sung Poetry of the Trinidad Carnival

According to legend, calypso was introduced in Trinidad in the late 18th century, when French colonizers asked their most talented slaves to entertain them in song. Early on, these songs became associated with the Shrovetide carnival season. At first they were sung in French and Creole, but by the end of the 19th century, with British colonial rule firmly established, a Trinidadian English became the language of calypso. By the turn of the century, masquerade bands with their own calypso singers rehearsed in tents and paraded through the streets in the carnival season. By 1919 calypso songs were judged in formal events, with awards for the Calypso King and Roadmarch King.

Calypso garnered an international reputation as early as 1914 when the Victor Gramophone Company of New York issued the first recordings. It enjoyed unprecedented vogue during and after WWII when servicemen were stationed in Trinidad. Great practitioners like the Mighty Sparrow chronicled the events of the day: “Yankees gone, and Sparrow take over / ... Not a sailor in town, the nightclubs dry / Only West Indians like me or you / Going to get a drink or two.”

Throughout the diaspora, African American “men of words” exchange insults in poetry and songs — in the U.S. this tradition of verbal dueling has been seen in the “playing the dozens” and in the free style cipher circles of rappers. Calypso developed its own brand of sung insults, often sung to what was called a relatively constant Picong melody, the barbs varying according to circumstance. Sparrow taunts his rival, Lord Melody, in 1957, “Well, Melody, come close to me / I will tell you plain and candidly / don’t stop in the back and smile / Because you have a face like a crocodile.” Then Melody retorts in kind....

In my home town in the Philippines, a fiesta was not complete without a *balagtasan*. Fiestas would start at 7:00 with a short jamboree and the fight — the debate — would last for two or three hours and people simply would not leave until it ended. And I was so short I had my chair and I stood up on my chair, and sometimes I had to sit on my grandfather’s shoulders to see what was happening.

— Frances Dominguez

## Philippine *Balagtasan*

Named after a famous poet, *balagtasan* is a poetry debate from the Philippines in which teams of two poets debate a particular issue in verse. With origins in the province of Bulacan, the tradition is staged during town fiestas, mostly in rural areas, and lasts two or three hours, after which the audience selects the winner (although many contests end in a tie). The debates are waged with one- or two-person teams on each side of the issue, along with a moderator. Generally, men are on one side, women on the other. In the U.S., *balagtasan* is performed during Philippine Independence Day on June 12. A recent topic for the debates have included where Filipino immigrants should retire, New York or the Philippines.

“When you debate,” says Frances Legaspi Dominguez, who organizes these events in New York, “you really have to be forceful. You need to use phrases like ‘you will be burned, you are fried.’ You battle with gestures.” The debate on where to retire, for example, would have the side defending America, deliver in rhyme:

*In the Philippines, there is no Medicare, Medicaid.  
If your money is not enough, you will stay sick in bed.*

The team defending the Philippines would answer:

*Yes, there is no 911 in the Philippines,  
but you have good neighbors around  
Just a call away, they will run and give you their hand.*