

Sparrow and De Girls

“Jean Marabunta, nobody wants her
Jean Marabunta, nobody wants her...”

So begins one of Sparrow’s several ditties in which he names the girls in town. Sometimes his approach is political as in, “Ah hear they have a new campaign, cleaning Port of Spain” in which Jean comes in for a second mention- “They should hold Marabunta Jean, and then hold pickyhead Eileen...”. I imagine Jean saying, in the quiet of her room after some hard night, “Buh what it is this man have wid me!?” What it is he had with them in truth, that, beginning with Jean and Dinah, he called them out, the female always holding tenuous position in his calypsos.

The setting is Port of Spain, that port of call that was once the center of excitement and intrigue in the Caribbean. The Yankees were down on the base in Chaguaramas, and town, as they say, was hot. In Barbadian George Lamming’s novel, *In The Castle of My Skin*, the young protagonist’s mother pins a note to his shirt as he’s about to leave for Trinidad to try to better his lot in life. Stay away from places like Miramar, the note warns. It goes on to name several places in the city that might lead to the downfall of an innocent young man. Growing up, the name Miramar held magic and awe for me too, and I was right there in Belmont, a minute away. But ‘town’ was a magical word, conjuring images of nightlife, and barrack yards, and ladies with red, red lipstick, and heady perfume.

Sparrow brought them closer, gave them names, describing their doings and undoings, making their beauty, for those who were so blessed, a dangerous thing-

*Monica doux-doux, no woman in the world sweeter than you
(repeat)*

You sweeter than Madeline, yuh sweeter than Gwendolyn

*You sweet like a honeycomb, gyul ah wonder why
yuh husband don’t stay home*

Me en know meh dear

Like de man en care

Dis mister does leave meh here alone

For weeks he don’t come home

I have to depend on meh seaman friend

When meh seaman friend bring a friend

Is then ah have cash to spend.

Their stories are stories of excess, of indulgence, of survival taken to a glamorous level, albeit frayed and flawed. They were different from the aunts and mothers closer to us, whose only adornment ‘going out’ might have been a little rouge, whose everyday wear a dress they throw on to run to the parlour, a husband hat, sometimes shoe. They may have had their own form of intrigue, their own outside romances, but they were mostly hidden. Looking back we wonder how and when they made love, which they must have, children filling up the lanes. But not a peep from those rooms, except for the whispered ‘bigpeople talk’ at five in the morning, concerning rent, and food, and school uniform. I remember tailor Mackie describing his mother as a ‘matador’, a woman of questionable repute, in the days before they moved from town to Belmont, a step-up in respectability, to a place of tradesmen and tradeswomen, that the poet Walcott described as ‘the city of tailors’.

The one glamour girl in my neighborhood was Hedy Lamarr, shape like a coca cola, who lived in a back house, and kept strange hours, going out late afternoon, her one companion gay Freddie as they walked and giggled out to the Savannah and then who knows where. She left a scented trail that we captured and took home and dreamed when sleep took over. But town was full of Hedy's, and Sparrow loved, and chastised them-

Since ah married Dorothy

She have meh going crazy

(repeat)

She have a sailor man

She have a chinee man

Leggo de steelband man

Come running back to dis calypso man

In the heart of town, on Charlotte Street, was my Uncle Syl's famous Maple Leaf Club (Sylvester Taylor, creator of the Young Brigade Calypso Tent, who was among the foremost early promoters of the artform). In the garret upstairs, made legendary in Nelson's calypso Garret Bounce, the steelband All Stars practiced, reputedly playing their bomb tunes with fingernails to keep them secret, while below, all the characters needed for the play came and went. Sparrow in his inimitable way tells the tale-

Darlin ah cyah remain/in New York again

Ah got to go back for Jouvert darling

Pick me up Ash Wednesday morning

Charlotte Street, where de boys does meet

Guabine and grog and pan beatin fine

All that way on meh mind

Miramar shows up again, in one of Birdie's best known tunes. Under attack by a gang, he reflects,

Ah remember ah had a chicken at Miramar

Ah say to mehself that was meh last supper..

And with that twist of irony of which he is master, he quips,

They say ah push deh gyul from Grenada.

In town or elsewhere, Sparrow's ladies are never quite the victims they at first seem to be. At every turn they outsmart and outplay those (usually men) bent on taking advantage. A young girl turns the tables on an amorous Sparrow-

Go ahead and take your advantage

Go ahead ah give you privilege

Doh worry to have no sympathy

This is between you and me

Sparrow darling bring de whisky from de shelf

Sparrow darling ah could take care of mehself

Only give meh one or two, yuh go see

Who taking advantage on who.

In Thirteen-year old Mabel, Sparrow again gets put in his place by the female-

Don't worry your head over me

Study for yourself, not for me

From the young to the old, on subjects ranging from child abuse to aging, through women Sparrow spotlights the attitudes and shortcomings of our society. In Jack Palance, he sings

*And if yuh see the woman
Brother she more than sixty
Ah sure without any doubt she could be meh granny...*

No wonder another Jean protested, *Ah afraid yuh make a calypso on meh!*

That women are mostly in charge, Birdie leaves little doubt. In The Governor's Ball, a madwoman takes over-

*The governor had a ball, never see nothing so yet
A madwoman climb the wall and invade the fete...
Prospect with he baton in hand conducting the police band
Dey say de woman shake she waist
In de governor face*

Through the persona of women, Sparrow takes aim at the old colonial status quo. The governor warns, *Hands off, don't touch*, concerning a young woman he loves to see "in her short little shorts". The Queen's Canary is a metaphoric take upon our own attitude regarding royalty. And the narrative, complaining voice is that of the queen herself, in the scandalous, sexy Philip, My Dear-Philip my dear, last night I thought was you in here
Where did you go, looking for good ole England
My dear do you know, there was a man in meh bedroom...

I inquired of a female friend who had lived in England for a while, what she thought the queen's attitude to such a calypso might be. "Oh, she loved it," was her answer. I wondered how could she possibly know this. Extending the conversation, I asked what she thought of Sparrow's attitude toward women in his songs, whether she minded some of his descriptions, like 'spotty foot Pearl', or 'stinkin toe Sheila'. "Not for the most part, no," she said. "His songs are so well crafted that, by the time you think to object, you are caught up in the rhythm and construction, and before you know it you are taken in by the story itself. That's what good calypso does, it makes you forgive almost anything."

Time and again, the macho man meets his match. In Doctor Bird, after Sparrow receives his degree from UWI, he tells a female fan, who won't take no for an answer,

*Darling my degree's just honorary
Ah can't give you what you want
She say that doesn't matter
You still a doctor
And I'm going to be your first patient*

Under the stern gaze of the woman in Lying Excuses, Sparrow's preposterous reasons again makes the Trinidad male ego look shaky, and when she gives her own version of lying excuses, then, all seems lost. So much for who can give, and can't take. The Trini woman can take it. She has to be able to, given the penchant of the men for giving fatigue, for telling true-true joke. A man's wife is unfaithful, he is fair game when the picong start. Sparrow understands this. Sometimes the man has to beg-

*Been to doctors all about
east, west, north and south, but Sandra,
only your medicine could straighten me out.*

That he could love, pure and simple, and feel loneliness, he showed in song when in New York he received a Christmas greeting from his girlfriend in Trinidad. He sang, "With card in meh hand, ah cry more than Alice in Wonderland."

With age, Birdie's picong begins to turn inward. In Willie Dead, he brilliantly laments the fact that 'his boy' is failing him, that he's no longer the Village Ram, no longer the only man on that island that was 'pack wid woman'

Last night I had Mary Jane
The night before it was Sweet Lane
But tonite I don't care if allyuh fret
Sparrow alone will get.

There's only one calypsonian I recall, who chastised Sparrow seriously in song (there were the famous battles between Birdie and Melody, but those were largely in jest). It was Blakie, the Warlord himself, who sang

*Every every day meh neighbor complaining
Bout Sparrow and his smutty calypso singing
De mother say come sing a song for yuh Daddy
Right away she start to sing Queen Canary
Only leh she go and come inside
De girl start to sing de family size.
Sparrow Sparrow be decent and clean
With your marvelous voice you can trap a queen
But smutty and vile won't get you nowhere
You will stand like the statue in Woodford Square.*

But the mothers and the daughters and the girls in town forgive him, and dance to his sweet songs, even when they were as suggestive as,

*Ah didn't mean to be so slick
Is as yuh move so quick it slip
But it feelin so nice and warm
Any port is for a storm*

Since yuh done put it dey, leh he stay.

You want forgiveness? Listen to the all-female back-up chorus: since you done put it dey/leh he stay leh he stay.

Jean Marabunta, nobody wants her. Somehow, Sparrow made us all recognize, and want her.

Mervyn Taylor

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