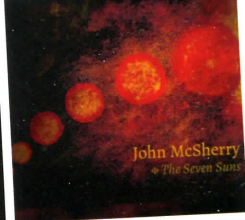




Sharon Jones
1956-2016



Ay Bain
"I'd go to gigs with Billy [Connolly] and Gerry [Raferty] on a motor bike and sidecar!"



Reviews
John McSherry
"It's gutsy, it's deep, and it's overflowing with heart."

penguin eggs

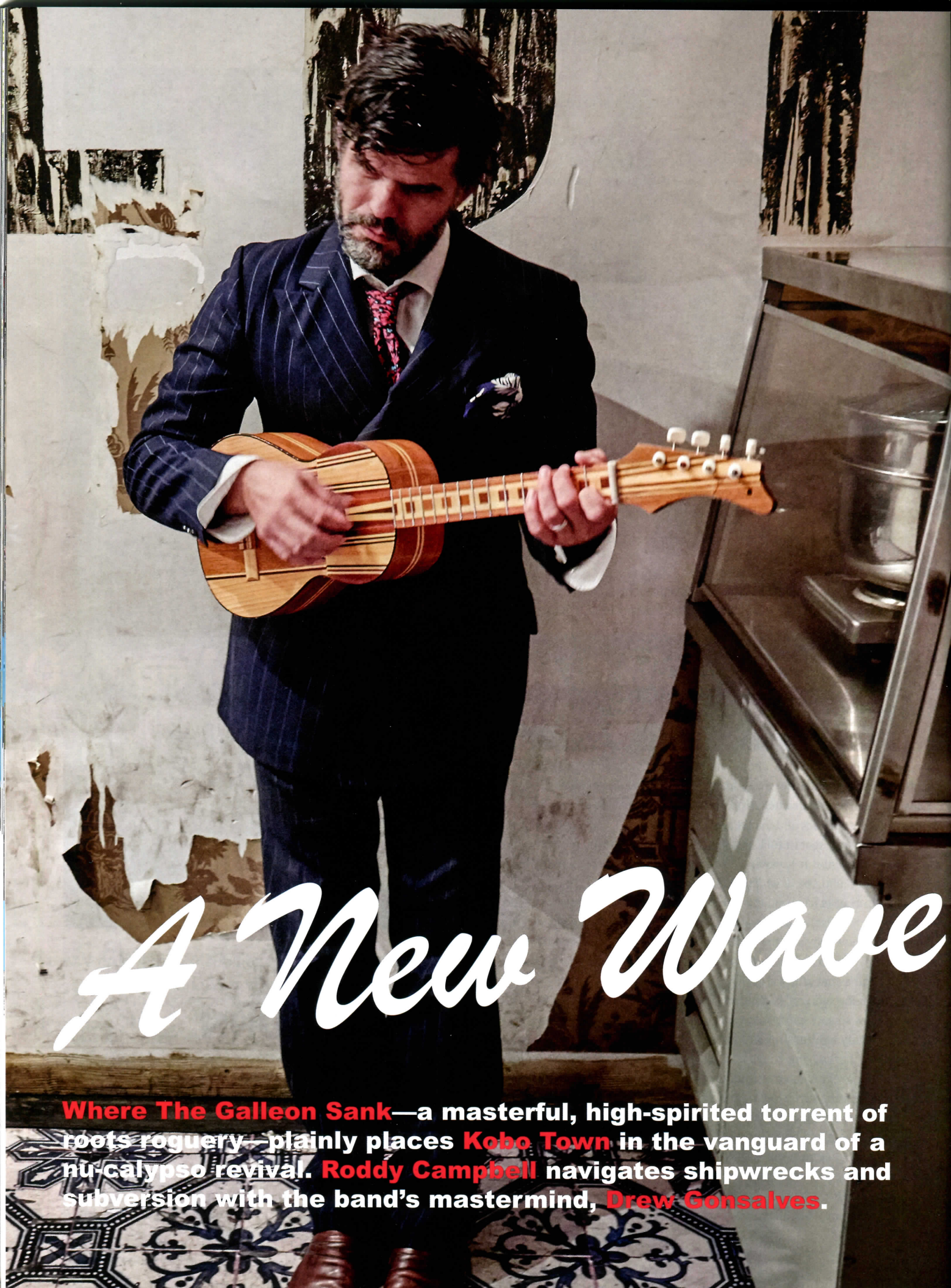


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A New Wave

Where The Galleon Sank—a masterful, high-spirited torrent of roots roguery—plainly places **Kobo Town** in the vanguard of a nu-calypso revival. **Roddy Campbell** navigates shipwrecks and subversion with the band's mastermind, **Drew Gonsalves**.

Trinidad: home of Calypso—one of the planet's most joyful, intoxicating party music. And one with a long, distinguished history rooted in social and political commentary. You would expect nothing less from such brilliantly named characters as Mighty Sparrow, Roaring Lion, Lord Invader, Lord Melody, Lord Kitchener...legends all from calypso's glory days of the '30s, '50s, and '70s.

Sadly, it has grown into a marginal music, even in Trinidad. Its stalwart fans, though, have much reason for optimism. The heart-warming comeback of 76-year-old Calypso Rose last year will do for starters. Her album, *Far From Home*, won the French Grammy for World Music Album of the Year this February. Recorded in Belize by producer Ivan Duran, renowned for his work with Andy Palacio and the Garifuna Collective, its guests included world music superstar Manu Chao. But as the *Financial Times* of London dutifully noted: "the most valuable player is actually Drew Gonsalves, from hyper-literate, nu-Calypso band Kobo Town."

Just so.

"It was a real pleasure to write and arrange and perform with Rose," says Gonsalves. "And I'm thrilled to see her doing so well. Her French Grammy, it's a lovely recognition for all the years of lifting up this music."

The Trinidad-born, Toronto-based Gonsalves and his kinetic combo Kobo Town truly deserve more recognition than most for rekindling interest in calypso. Charlie Gillett, the late, highly influential world music BBC Radio host, certainly threw his substantial support and encouragement

behind their initial recording, *Independence* (2007). While Gillett died in 2010, his faith in Kobo Town was totally justified with the release of *Jumbie In The Jukebox* (2013), a wonderful, uplifting recording that garnered universal acclaim and some dodgy but flattering comparisons. Neil Young? Hmmm, I hardly think so.

Now Kobo Town has just released *Where The Galleon Sank*. And like its predecessor, it's a masterful, high-spirited torrent of roots-rock, reggae handsomely infested with reggae, soca, and ska.

Gonsalves, as always, provides the shrewd, sharp lyrics that touch on subjects as disparate as the Industrial Revolution and street riots in Karachi, Pakistan.

We meet in a less exotic locale, though, backstage at Festival Place in Sherwood Park, AB, in arse-nipping February. He looks splendid, too, in his double-breasted, pinstripe suit, even after an impressive night of revelry. A warm, engaging and humble character with a captivating sense of humour, his accent still retains the colourful inflections of the Caribbean islands despite arriving in Canada as a 13-year-old in 1989. But to the business end of this interview, *Where The Galleon Sank*.

"This one came together very naturally," says Gonsalves. "I feel that *Jumbie In The Jukebox* and *Independence* were very studio-crafted albums. This one, most of the takes are live in the studio and some of the performances were one-takes. It just felt like a natural process. Every thing came together much more quickly."

Jayme Stone's Juno Award-winning 2015 album *The Lomax Sessions* might have had something to do with that. It featured Gonsalves singing Lord Executioner's *Bury Bula For Me*—a song Alan Lomax initially recorded in Trinidad in 1962 at the home of The Growling Tiger.

"Actually, maybe in a way, our recording was a bit inspired by that because [Jayme's recording] was all live sessions. If somebody made a mistake on one solo, the whole song, everybody did it again. So we did this song over six or seven times. But I thought it was nice that they captured the energy in the live performance. So it was a lovely experience."

From a traditional perspective, calypsonians were once the equivalent of newspaper reporters in Trinidad. Singers processed the news of the day into songs. Ingenious calypso lyrics, full of double entendres, also provided a devious tool for political subversion.

"[The authorities] actually broke up a slave rebellion in my home town of Diego Martin because they discovered a song that was spreading place to place, from estate to estate, encouraging people to rebel," says Gonsalves. "The song in Creole went, 'the bread that you eat will be the whiteman's flesh, and the wine that you drink will be his blood'. When questioned, the conspirators claimed that it was actually a Eucharist song of devotion."

You do have to admire their gall. Unencumbered by colonial oppression, Gonsalves took a more direct approach contemplating the darker realities of society. Social themes surrounded by slums, vagrants, madmen, broken dreams, unfettered consumerism...all appear in his earlier songs.

"When I first came to Canada I was somewhat of a maladjusted teenager. I was very bookish. I read a lot and it was reading history that framed a lot of my political views. I should say, I don't consider myself a very political writer or person. I try to tell the stories from the human dimension that may speak across partisan lines.

"But I do see myself as part journalist, part storyteller. Most of my songs are based around a narrative, a story, and sometimes they are confessional, but based on things that have happened. Calypso around Trinidad offers a running commentary on the events and the fads of the day. And that

"When I first came to Canada I was somewhat of a maladjusted teenager. I was very bookish."

is definitely something I include in my own writing.”

A truly gifted and perceptive narrator, Gonsalves often draws inspiration from history. Indeed, how the past shaped contemporary Trinidad proves a recurring theme throughout *Where The Galleon Sank*. *King Sugar*, for instance, marks the final passing of the once-formidable sugar industry.

Smokestacks And Steeples makes the case that widespread social upheaval created by the Industrial Revolution still remains ridiculously familiar today. *London Town* pithily recalls the influence of the Caribbean’s colonial brigands. *World Is Turning* offers a series of musical postcards of dilapidated and abandoned rural buildings.

Guayaguayare takes its title from a remote bay on the southeast coast where Columbus first saw Trinidad. Again, *What The Sea Remembers* skips across time and water and provides the initial inspiration for this album.

“I was in a small fishing boat with a friend who was scoping a location for a film. He was going out to a rusty old barge that was half sunken. It was a clear day and you could see beneath the water. We passed a bunch of sunken boats and I was really struck by how much of our past is buried under the ocean. In that area there was German U-boats, Spanish galleons, slaving ships, fishing trawlers. Because history was like a muse on the album, we likened the writing of it to trying to raise one of these ships to the surface.

“But at the end of that song there is a line that goes: ‘When the waves reached for you’. Once when I was walking with my wife on the beach, she was caught in an undertow. I remember jumping to grab her arms and holding her. I don’t know why I wasn’t pulled in. She was underneath the water and I was screaming for help. Finally people came and we pulled her out. In that moment, I shake when I think about it, we were almost part of that buried past, too. So that was all percolating in my mind when I wrote that song.”

Like *Jumbie In The Jukebox*, *Where The Galleon Sank* was recorded and produced by the aforementioned Ivan Duran. Jacob Edgar, the driving force behind the noted Putamayo and Cambancha world music labels, made the introduction.

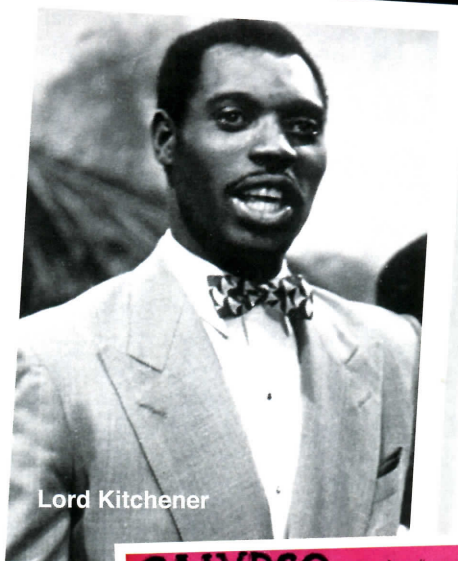
“I guess he thought Ivan and I would be a good fit—an arranged marriage.”

As Danny Michel found out recording his *Black Birds Are Dancing Over Me* with Duran at his Stonetree Studio in Belize, the renowned producer hardly adheres to convention. Indeed, he pulled the same disorientating instrumental stunt in the studio with both Michel and Gonsalves.

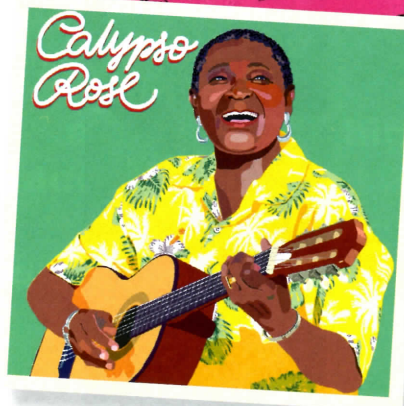
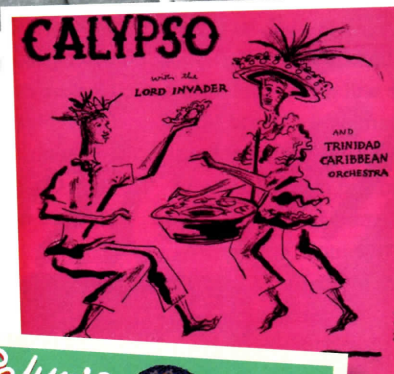
“Funny, before I met Ivan I played mostly acoustic guitar. He put this cheap Japanese electric guitar, almost barely playable, in my hand and he said, ‘Go on, play all the lines on that,’ play the things I was imagining for horns. The sound was so rich and vibrant that it just stuck and I went on my own hunt for cheap Japanese guitars.



Drew Gonsalves



Lord Kitchener



“We hit it off quite quickly, Ivan and I. We went to Montreal and went into the studio. We didn’t always see eye to eye on everything but he brings a real creative signature to everything he produces. Often it was fooling and a healthy tension that brought out something better than I would have ever come up with by myself.

“His studio is such a great space. With *Jumbie In The Jukebox*, we worked a lot in Belize. He has this fantastic old, antique equipment and instruments and microphones from the 1930s.”

Drew Gonsalves grew up in Diego Martin, a middle-class suburb five miles northwest of Trinidad’s capital, Port Of Spain. His father was from Barbados and his mother, Jacqueline, was from Quebec. When their marriage turned abusive, Jacqueline fled to Ottawa with her four children in 1989. Drew was 13 at the time but remained in touch with his father. By the time he entered Carleton University to study history and politics, he had returned to the island several times.

“I started to notice things about Trinidad that I would have taken for granted had I remained there,” he says. “Things stand out and things shock you. You appreciate more.”

These trips also nurtured his interest in calypso. His father introduced him to Lord Kitchener—the most dominant figure in calypso in the post-Second World War years. His *Give Me The Ting* is still a dancehall classic.



Peter Gabriel and Drew Gonsalves

“He lived just up the road. I can’t say I saw him that often; he was pretty reclusive. My father took me to meet him, when I was about 18. He took me to Kitchener’s review tent and took me backstage to meet him a couple of years before he died. I guess the thing that has always stood out about him was his fantastic arrangements. He was a bass player and he brought the harmonica to calypso—he expanded the palette of the music.”

Books, poetry, and music always held a fascination for Gonsalves. While he mucked around with music as a lad in Trinidad, he formed his first real band at 15 in high school with Kobo Town drummer Robert Milicevic. As they evolved into the band Outcry, they dabbled with dub, reggae, and calypso and released one album, *New World Raging* (1999).

But Milicevic left for Europe and Gonsalves got married, moved to Toronto in 2002, and enrolled at teachers college in Brampton.

“We all went to do sensible things with our lives. But on the long bus rides across the GTA, I was haunted by music. Being away from it was a bitter separation. I couldn’t stop writing. Eventually, I called a producer, Lyndon Livingstone, whom I respected a lot. I called him out of the blue. He was quite familiar with the music and wanted to work with me. We didn’t have the name Kobo Town, it was born in the studio. So I made [*Independence*] with expats from Trini’ and friends. I guess that was the turning point. I left full-time teaching and finished the record and got on the road.”

But let’s clear up any misconceptions before we go any further..

“Kobo Town is in part my personal songwriting/recording project and part band,” says Gonsalves. “I am the songwriter and arranger of the material but have had the good fortune to be surrounded by a wonderful and dedicated group of musicians who have given life to my music.”

Released in 2007, *Independence* earned numerous universal accolades, including nominations for a Canadian Folk Music Award and an International Folk Alliance Award. Named after the historical district in Port Of Spain where calypso first emerged, Kobo Town was up and running. A prestigious showcase at WOMEX in Copenhagen and an appearance at WOMAD in the U.K., galvanized support for Kobo Town throughout Europe. At the latter event they were greeted by Peter Gabriel. “He was backstage, welcoming musicians to the festival when introduced to our starstruck band.”

And that Charlie Gillett endorsement certainly didn’t hurt.

“When *Independence* came out he wrote me a couple of times, words of advice and encouragement. I was really touched that he took the time to do that. And he shared my music with his listeners. He had one show where he had Manu Chao on playing different songs and he played some of our songs. He was a wonderful support.”



Charlie Gillett

SPECIALS



The fabulously titled *Jumbie In The Jukebox* was released in 2013. Robin Denselow, *The Guardian* newspaper critic, summed it up succinctly in a four-star review: “Impressively original,” he wrote. But this is common ground for regular readers of *Penguin Eggs* as an extensive, insightful interview with Gonsalves in issue No. 58 covers *Jumbie*’s gestation.

All the same, several reviews for *Jumbie In The Jukebox* included references to such British, Two Tone, ska bands as The Beat and The Specials. Drew Gonsalves chuckles as he sets the record straight.

“I have to admit this with a great deal of shame, when I read in newspapers like *The Guardian* that reviewed *Jumbie In The Jukebox* and compared it to The Specials, I thought I’d better find out who The Specials are. What’s so special about The Specials?”

“I listened to a lot of old Jamaican ska but British ska was a new thing for me. It is such fantastic music. And I love the almost chaotic punk sensibility they bring to these West Indian rhythms. I feel a kinship with them. In a way, we have a bit of that attitude in our own renditions. Now you can hear there is a decidedly English ska influence on *Where The Galleon Sank*.

“I want to be a traditionalist but can’t help but exist outside that box. Some people come up with calypso in an organic way, like Calypso Rose, who told me stories of hanging around calypso tents since she was 18 years old. She got her name Rose from the Lord Pretender. He bestowed it on her, which was part of the tradition. You got your sobriquet from somebody else. And I came to it from the outside, you know, from books and old records.”

An estimated 100,000 immigrants with roots in Trinidad live in the Greater Toronto Area. And they turn out in their numbers to hear Kobo Town. The most discerning calypso audiences, though, still reside in the Caribbean. And when a nervous Gonsalves put his cultural instincts to the test with Kobo Town in Trinidad, well, apparently it all went rather swimmingly.

“Calypso doesn’t have the same kind of universal relevance that it used to, or popularity, I should say. But among the crowd that is into it, the response has been very favourable and touching. Trini’ calypso audiences are very intimidating, they tend to listen for the lyrics and they sit. When they are won over, though, it is especially gratifying.”