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Introduction

I love soca music and I find that instead of developing we are moving backwards. Not only are we moving backwards but the way we approach soca music is fundamentally wrong. What I will try to do is not just state what some of the problems are but also give some ideas for solutions. There are three groups of people who I will address: the radio stations, the government (i.e. the NCF) and the artist themselves.

The Radio Stations

During the period June to July, some of the radio stations go into Crop Over mode and only play Soca and Calypso. I have absolutely no problem with playing only Soca but there are problems and I will give a few of them along with possible solutions.

Only Playing Music from the Current Crop Over

Each and every year Crop Over comes around and you hear tons of new music but none from last year, none from five years ago, none ten years ago. In fact you are more likely to hear old soca outside of Crop Over. Also not a song from another island can be heard. As a result of only play current Bajan Soca music the good songs get over played and the not so good songs get way more air play than they should. The result of this is that some the good songs get killed and do not have the life span that they should. Furthermore because the bad songs are played more than it should, some people are glad when Crop Over is finished so they can hear good music (i.e. something other than Bajan Soca).

Solution

Simply play some new Bajan soca, older Bajan soca and some non-Bajan soca (new and old). You should still play mostly new soca but there must be a mix, maybe a 60% new Bajan, 25% old Bajan, 15% non-Bajan. You will get a lot of heat for playing Trini music during Crop Over but if you look at it the Bajan to Trini ration on the radio will be 85:15.

The result of this will be better quality Soca on the radio, less monotony and less killing of songs. Also good songs that “got lost” in the sea of new songs could get a 2nd chance at life, especially early in the festival when the new songs are now coming out.

Giving Airplay to as Many Song as Possible

This sounds like a good idea; give people a change to be heard, promote new artist, etc. The problem is that what you are really doing is facilitating mediocrity. Some artist put in half the work that they should in a song and they get air play, others try hard but are not meant to sing soca and they get air play. The truth is you are doing both a disservice; if you are a natural and by doing nothing you can get an ok song, imagine what you would get with some hard work. If you try very hard but only get mediocrity you should find something else.

Another consequence of playing as many songs as possible is that a lot more poor songs will play on the radio. This is one of the reasons why people say soca (specifically Bajan soca) is crap. When they hear rap, R&B, reggae, pop, etc they only hear the big songs, the “crap” doesn’t make it onto air but when they turn the radio and hear Bajan soca it is unfiltered.

Lastly, some quality artists get frustrated when they work hard, put out a quality song and they get the same air play as someone who when on a laptop for a week and put out a song.

Solution

Filter the music. It’s that simple. Every football nation has a chance to play in the World Cup but most nations don’t make it, they don’t get pass the qualifiers (i.e. the filter). The same should apply with soca and the radio; all sounds should have a chance as all will go through the filtering system but not all will make it. This will improve the quality of music on the radio

You will get some heat by artist because they put out a song and it isn’t getting air play but if they don’t bring quality why should accept it.

Lack of Music Scheduling

To put it simple soca music is just played, out side of Crop Over, there are times set for Rap, R&B, “Conscience”, etc. Assuming that we play soca old and new, Bajan and non-Bajan, there is enough variety in soca/calypso to schedule different sessions during the day. This isn’t really a big problem but it is something that could be improved.

Solution

Have a program schedule, below is an example

- 12pm – 1pm social commentary
- 2pm – 3pm new releases / small name artist
- 6pm- 7pm raga soca
- 7pm – 8pm fast soca
- 9pm – 10pm soca classic

This is not a full schedule nor is it meant to be, it is only to illustrate how you could mix it up. One very important thing to remember is that during any given session (e.g. raga soca) you will be place mostly new Bajan music but also some for the previous year, two or more years ago and a few Trini songs (new and old) as long as they fit the session.

The Government

Government's role should be that of a facilitator. As such here are some of the areas that need to be addressed.

Competitions

There are two big judged competitions, Party Monarch and Pic O De Crop. Competitions can be counter productive as they have relatively fixed rules and criteria. As a result, if people write songs for a particular competition and this is often the case (particularly with Pic o De Crop), the songs will be made to get the most points and not to appeal to the population. Also, if the rules and/or criteria do not change it can hinder the evolution of the music.

Solution

Constantly review the judging criteria. Take Party Monarch, for example, every two years look at the twenty biggest soca songs in the party both Bajan and non-Bajan both during and after Crop Over (like in November) and find out what elements they have in common, and adjust the judging criteria accordingly. This will mean that the songs that place in the top 5 will likely be popular songs as well as songs that have longevity. Also, since most of the songs in competitions will be true party songs, Party Monarch should always have full crowds.

NB You will probably find that many of the elements are found in most but not all, you will have to think outside the box to solve this problem.

Also, don't even think about create anymore judged competitions.

Create an Environment that Promotes Quality Music

One of the problems with soca music in Barbados is that it is seen as a three month a year thing. As a result many artists write "bubblegum soca", i.e. soca that you listen until it has lost its flavour and it is thrown away never to be heard again.

While bubblegum soca has a valid place in the landscape of Bajan soca, it should not be the mainstay of the soca music industry.

Solution

During the month of November give an award of say \$2,000 to the five soca songs, released for Crop Over that get the most air play during November. This would give artists an incentive to produce music with longevity.

Assuming that the radio station start mixing the old soca with the new, a “2nd lap” award could be given to the most popular songs from the previous year during the current year’s Crop Over.

Create Education Programs for Aspiring Artists

One of the main functions of Government is that of facilitator. The government should develop programs to teach aspiring artists the skills required to succeed in the industry. This should include but need not be limited to:

- Song writing – almost every song has lyrics
- Vocal training
- The musical aspect – this would emphasize soca/calypso but should not be limited to it
- The technical aspects – mixing, mastering, etc
- Performing – microphone technique, stage presence, dealing how to deal with a non-responsive crowd, etc
- The business aspect – contract negotiation, public relations, self marketing, etc

These programs could be developed as a certificate program within the UWI or BCC. The programs should not be free because freeness often promotes the wrong attitude, they however must be affordable.

Prevent Controversy

There are three things that can be done to prevent controversy.

1. Involve all the relevant parties from the beginning whenever a decision has to be made.
2. All decisions should be transparent. It would be wise to go as far as making a news release whenever there something significant.
3. Settle matters early. All Crop Over matters should be addressed and decided on before the end of February, the end of March at the latest.

The Artists

The artists are the ones actually making the music so in many ways they are the most important. There are also things that they should do.

Emphasis Quality

There should be an emphasis on quality. By quality, I simply mean how well it makes you do what the song is supposed to make you do. If the song is supposed to make you think, a quality song will make you stop and think. If it is a “do bad” song, a quality song will make you want to “get on bad”.

Emphasizing quality may mean that you release fewer songs but it is better to have a few hits, than a million duds.

Be Proactive

Simply put, try to make you own opportunities. Try to get booked for as many shows as possible especially if you are new. If you hear a good show advertising and you are not in it, contact the promoter and see if you can get on, even if you have perform for free. The exposure and the contacts that can be made should be worth it (plus at worse you'll get a free VIP pass).

Think Outside the Box

There are many creative way to push your music and yourself. One simple way would be to take the chorus of your song and make it into a ring tone. You could then Blue Tooth it to everyone you know, that way whenever your phone or your friends phone rings people will hear your song.

Conclusion

Crop Over I “we ting” and so is soca/calypso music. We need to help it to grow and develop. Hopefully, my ideas will help in this regard.