

Jany Williams

The Last Interview

by Anderson Reynolds and Jacques Compton

“I also think that it is important for persons involved in the arts to take the bull by the horns, do what needs to be done, perfect your art, work on your development, and then something will definitely work out.”

By many accounts the 2004 calypso and carnival season was a year of bountiful harvest and Shakespearean drama. It was a year of record attendances at the tents and soca and calypso competitions. It was a year that celebrated the history of St. Lucian calypso with a massive calypso event at Pigeon Island at which the best twenty-five calypsos since independence were performed by their respective artists to the crowd's hearts' content. It was the year that gave us *Down De Road* and *We Making Love*, two songs that, given their freshness, tempo, rhythm, and universality, were bound to make waves across the Caribbean. It was a year where the soca was so captivating and so original that St. Lucia captured the first four spots of the OECS soca monarch competition. It was the year that the calypso competition was such that Invader and Pep, two perennial calypso monarchs, were unable to secure a place in the finals. It was the year that welcomed back the legendary Ashanti, and Herb Black, the veteran calypsonian, who had become the conscience of St. Lucian calypso. It was the year of the youth, the year that all the crowns (road march, party monarch, OECS soca monarch, and calypso monarch) were won by persons under thirty and who were competing only for the first, second or third time. It was the year that Lady Spice, the first woman to win the calypso crown and, up till then, the only woman to have done so, caused the nation to hold its breath as, eight months pregnant, she strutted, gyrated on stage like a teenager without a care and pelted her calypsos like there



were no tomorrow. She was to give birth the day of the calypso finals; so to avoid any mishaps and thus ensure her place at the top of the calypsonian heap, she added more drama to an already drama packed season when a few days before the finals she induced forced labor and gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Shakespeare could not have scripted a more dramatic and thematic play, for Lady Spice's best and most popular song for the year, which also was one of the

most controversial and talked-about songs of the competition, was about abortion and a woman's right to choose. The 2004 calypso season was also the year of the women. It was a year when there was Jany and Spice and the rest. It was the year when these two women blew the competition so far away that next to their performances at the finals, multiple crown calypso kings like Educator and Ashanti looked like child's play and it seemed they would have been better served staying at home and recounting to their grandchildren stories of their past glories. Above all, 2004 was the year of Jany Williams, who, remarkably, in her first foray into national calypso competition, both stunned and mesmerized a nation, when like a bud bursting into flower, or sunshine suddenly flooding a room, she edged Lady Spice—the crowd's favorite, the one who had hitherto captured the hearts and imaginations of calypso and non-calypso lovers alike—by two points to win the calypso crown.

We caught up with Jany on a late Thursday, September morning when the heat of the day was already making its presence felt. She was wearing a green top and worn out jeans, both clinging tightly to her petite body. Her yellowish hair matched her sunshine complexion. We were lucky. Since winning the crown, Jany's already hectic schedule had become even more so. This was our second attempt at meeting her.

Taking advantage of whatever little breeze there was, we sat in the balcony of a house on top Barnards Hill, a short distance away from the Cultural

Development Foundation, overlooking Castries and its historical harbor.

The Jako: **Jany, I must first congratulate you on winning the calypso crown.**

Jany: Thank-you.

With all the excitement that has surrounded wining the Calypso Monarch, how do you feel now about all what has happened?

Definitely I am very happy, because I achieved one of the goals that I had set out to do for the carnival season. But generally life is the same, no great changes. But I must say I am very, very happy about that.

Laborie seems to be becoming a hotbed of music in St. Lucia. There is Extra Love, and I remember when we were establishing a band in Vieux Fort, we could get few committed musicians from Vieux Fort, most of the musicians came from Laborie, and here you are from Laborie, having won the calypso monarch. I don't think there is anyone from Vieux Fort, per se, who has won the monarch. What do you think accounts for that?

Laborie is a very strong community, and growing up there the whole community support was more like the community raising the child, rather than just the parents or a family member. In general, going to school there, the community was very open to being involved in the arts, whether it was dance, drama, or music. And in terms of encouragement from the other community members, it has always been very, very high. Being from Laborie, I am very proud that I was at least able to take home the calypso monarch, because we have been able to accomplish in other fields but not really music. I know that other Laborians are extremely happy as well, and I'm just proud that I was able to do it. I know I made a lot of my teachers and family members proud as well.

Yes, I am pretty sure of that, because this is a very big accomplishment, especially since this is only the second time a woman has won the crown. So I think it is special.

Now, when I first saw you at the Cultural Center, at one of the calypso tents, I said wow! This woman must have had theatre training. What impressed me most was the way you dramatized your songs, your performance. I sensed that you gave it your all, each line receiving its full dramatic flair and space. Have you had theatre training? What has molded you into such a fantastic performer?

The group I am a member of, Caribbean Visions, have members from

different Caribbean islands. Our whole focus is with the young persons in the schools and bringing across positive messages to them. Our production entails dance, drama, music, poetry and so on. In terms of the drama part of it, this is what I do in the other Caribbean Islands and at the schools, that is the experience I have in terms of drama. The support system from the group, Caribbean Visions, is tremendous as well, so in terms of rehearsal and getting everything together the other members have an input in that.

Reggae has become international, but calypso and, to a lesser extent, soca has not made that kind of headway. I have thought a little bit about how best to present calypso to the outside world. One thought I had was to present calypso



as theatre. What I mean is that the same way the calypsonians perform in the finals, with all the props, and so on, if when they present the calypso to England, Europe, America, they accompany the calypso with theatre, maybe that might be one way of selling it. I'm not sure whether this has been tested, I know when I have seen calypsonians perform, say, in America, they are usually straight up, with none of the props. Furthermore, when they do go abroad, they cater specifically for a Caribbean audience. I suspect because the non-West Indian is not too au courant with calypso. That is partly why I think the theatre aspect of it might help to

carry it over. What do you think?

I think that's a very good idea, because my whole enjoyment of performing calypso for the season was because I was able to be a lot more expressive than I could have been when I do soca. I think it comes hand-in-hand. Sometimes you may not have props, but with the message your song is sending and how you perform, your expressions, it will entail that. But I definitely feel that would be a good idea. Probably will make it easier for a non-Caribbean person to understand what you singing about, whereas a West Indian person will automatically grasp the message.

The other idea I have about how to package our calypsonians is to team them up with big European and American artists. Maybe initially as warmup acts. When Lady Spice first joined the arena I envisioned her singing calypso and soca to large international crowds who may not have necessarily come to listen to calypso or soca; maybe they came to listen to a Janet Jackson, or a Wyclef Jean, or a Lauryn Hill, but once there, they get exposed to calypso, and if the performance is captivating, the audience may get hooked. I think this is one way to help grow the calypso and soca audience. I still feel we have not done enough to internationalize our calypso and soca. That is why I keep thinking of ways of how best that could happen. I suspect it is women who will have to do it. When I saw first Lady Spice and then you perform this is the idea that came to me. Watching the men perform didn't bring out that idea.

Now for the standard question asked of artists. Who influenced you? What got you started in the music business in general and calypso in particular?

My grandmother was a member of the Laborie choir, so automatically when I went to church I could sit nowhere else but in the choir. So you just became a member of the choir by force, you didn't really have a choice. But what really started it for me was in primary school when in those days they had interschool folk competition. And I competed for my school, Laborie Girls Primary, as a chantwèl. I was a chantwèl there. The two years I competed there I won the best chantwèl award, so that started it off for me in terms of really taking note of singing and music and being interested. I moved on to the convent where we did calypsos, not to compete with the other schools, but within the school we had calypso competition, so I

represented my class every year until Form Four, that was in 1994, when the school finally decided that we were going to be competing with the other schools and entering the Junior Calypso Competition, which I did and placed first runner-up. So that was basically the starting of my interest in terms of music.

So who were your idols in the singing, music, or calypso world? Of course, idol is probably too strong a word.

Well, actually my favorite calypsonian has been Robbie. In terms of the persons who contributed to my love for calypso and my being in the art-form, I can't say it is one person. The song that I did in the finals, the surprise song, actually dealt with that aspect of it. I learnt a lot from Pele, Pep, Educator, Ashanti, Invader, and Lady Lin in particular. As a woman she was the only one out there for a number of years, maybe not the only one, but the most significant woman who actually competed against the men. So all of them contributed in their own way to me being interested in the art-form. And when you see people working hard at something and you realize that they are at it year after year it has to be that they love it. And you know generally it is not a career where you make a lot of money, yet they keep doing it

year after year, so that means they really love it and they respect that part of our culture. I see myself as somebody who loves culture, who is Caribbean in nature. Those are the persons I must say contributed, all the calypsonians.

Yeah, you touched on something there regarding artists. In terms of making money, making it big as an artist, it is almost like buying a lotto ticket. One can do it all one's life and nothing big happens. For some, the first time they are out and big things happen. So really if one is doing it strictly for financial reasons, it is very difficult to sustain the effort because the outcome is so uncertain, so unpredictable. Talent matters and hard work matters, but it is also being at the right place at the right time.

Your second song at the finals blew me away, I think it blew everyone away, the shock factor, the unexpectedness of it all added to its effectiveness. It was a brave move. I have heard people say that when you come up with a new song in the finals you are taking a big chance. The audience do not know the song so they may not respond strongly. But you took that chance and it worked quite well. So I think you should commend yourself for your bravery.

Thank you.

Do you see yourself as basically a soca and calypso artiste?

I wouldn't limit it to soca and calypso. I will just limit it to a Caribbean artist.

So what are your plans in the near and medium term future? For you have now started on a path.

I am not now starting on a path, I am just going to be continuing the journey I have started. Definitely continue in the work of my group, Caribbean Vizion. As the Calypso Monarch I now have more responsibilities on my shoulders in terms of bringing out positive messages to students, in particular those in St. Lucia. Presently, what I am going to be working on with my group, Caribbean Vision, we will be focusing on the schools, the students, definitely bringing out those positive messages to them via the arts, making them realize their education is very important, as much as being involved in any cultural aspect or any form of our culture.

Tell me more about Caribbean Visions. What's the concept behind it? Who is behind it? What is its scope of activity?

Caribbean Visions is a group made up of artistic persons from different Caribbean Islands. It was the brain child of Curt Allen who is also my writer and the

Creole Canticles

In Memoriam of: George Odlum, Egbert Mathurin, Ruby Yorke, Lucia Peters-Charlery, Jany Williams, Florita Marquis, Evy Mondesir. R.I.P.

1.

Let us praise His Name with an opening lakonmèt,
and in the graceful procession of weedova;
let laughing, madras-crowned girls rejoice before Him in the
scottish

and flirtatious moolala, its violon hinting of heartache.
And while we forget time turning in quick-heeled polkas,
pause during the tentative norwegian

for when the couples end the gwan won,
you alone must dance for Him your koutoumba.

2.

I was glad when they call me to go up in the Séwénal.
The violon scraping my heart,
banjo and kwatro thrumming my grief like their plectrum,
and the guitar pulling my heel.

I only seeing her tuning the mandolin on her bosom

Then the shakshak shake me loose, insisting, insisting,

“wait for the bow, the bow and the courtesy,
wait for the sax, the drum and the kwadril to start.” Selah.

3.

And so, she has come: to the gold-flecked Wob Dwiwèt,
its long train in folds over her left wrist,
the clean petticoat adorned with lace,
the satin foulard, the head-piece of rainbow madras

from the nondescript costume of the far city,
from the profligate famine of Cardun's estates

to the embracing plenitude of Kwadril shakshak and violon,
to that Bright Brooch on the glistening triangular foulard.

4.

The cascading words of my hand
pluck His praise from eight-string bandolin and local banjo,
place His favour on madras and foulard, the satin and the lace,
plant His steps in mazouk, lakonmèt and gwan won;
point His casual grace in yellow pumpkin star, pendular mango,
plait Him a crown of anthurium and fern

He is the Crown, the Star of grace, the Dancer of creation,
the Robing of righteousness, Tuning of the spheres,
Hand of the Incarnating Word.

—John Robert Lee

director of the group. Caribbean Visions lobbies for cultural and economic cooperation between Caribbean governments and their people. Our focus is mainly on youth, young persons in the Caribbean. First off, getting them to realize that Caribbean integration, bringing to them the message of Caribbean integration, and finding artistic and cultural ways to send messages to them, the messages they would probably get via lectures and talks from parents. Try to get those same messages across using the arts. Getting them to realize that being artistic does not prevent them from excelling academically, but it could only enhance their personality, their whole being.

The marriage of education and culture is very important in the message of the group, that's why we call it "educulture." Everything that we do is called "educulture," a combination of education and culture. So that is the focus of the group. We focus on young people around the region, we work with different ministries of education and culture, the various ministries involved in the messages that we want to bring across. Some of the topics that we deal with include keeping the education up, being involved in culture, West Indian Cricket, Caribbean tourism, HIV and Aids, school violence, mutual respect between themselves, the teachers, the parents.

I am very glad to hear this. I think it achieves several different things. Not only working with the children, inculcating in them an appreciation for their culture, instilling in them self-worth and so on, but liaising with the governments of the region may help elicit greater governmental support for the arts. It is often said that our governments don't respect artists, they don't give sufficient support to art and culture, they have not begun to realize the importance of the arts to the society, and they are skeptical of the financial benefits to be derived from the arts. So it is good that you all have so engaged governments and ministries of culture.

The other thing is that even in the best of economic times, when, as in the late 1980's, the economy was growing at 7 percent per year, our unemployment rate was still above 15 percent. In the United States when the unemployment rate starts approaching 6 percent, Americans carry on as if the country is in a crisis. And I am pretty sure that faced with a 10 percent unemployment rate, the US will go fight a war. Yet in St. Lucia and some of the other islands, a 20 percent unemployment is the norm. I am saying all this to say that the way to

deal with this high unemployment rate is to attack it from many different fronts. And one such front is by way of the arts—music, paintings, books, film, etc. By giving the artists greater support they can become big on the international scene, thus turning art and culture into an important source of income and employment. So I think the work of your group is commendable.

In fact, your group's approach would have had the support of the late Sir Arthur Lewis. In his famous address to the students at Cave Hill he urged them to be different and he made a strong case for the introduction of the arts in schools, and for the governments of the region to spend more money on the arts.

Have you been getting good responses from the ministries of the various islands?

Yes, actually our group is an unfunded organization. It is voluntary. We don't get paid for what we do. I think that is important among artists. Sometimes we always look for help before we make one step. With Caribbean Visions that was something that we said we would definitely not get involved in. We need to show our commitment, show what we want to do. Do what we say we want to do. Achieve some of our objectives before we even stretch out our hands. I also think that it is important for persons involved in the arts to take the bull by the horns, do what needs to be done, perfect your art, work on your development, and then something will definitely work out. If we need to be seen out there internationally, then we need to be international ourselves, and a lot of us are not that way. So we need to work on our art, do a lot of research, find out the number of different ways that we can get recognized. But generally since I have become calypso monarch, I have paid courtesies to the different ministries and discussed a lot of different issues I would like addressed, issues that need to be dealt with within the year of my reign. And they have been very supportive; they have pledged their support for the different activities we want to undertake as a group.

How do our singers compare with those of the other islands? How much talent do we have? Do we have the talent to be international artists? How do we compare with Barbados, for example?

I am not very good at that. To be honest, I don't really focus on other artists. Because of my preparation for this whole competition, I haven't been much updated with what's going on outside of what I was preparing for. But in terms of talent, I think that we have talent all over. It is just a matter of getting to nurture that talent and

getting it to be developed to the standard that is necessary for getting out there.

I was speaking with Adam Gilmore of Chronic Heights, probably the best sound or studio engineer in St. Lucia. He has recorded some of the best CDs to come out of the island, including Freedom by Itoobaa and Awake by Meshak. He senses that there is an opening, a window of opportunity for Caribbean music on the international market, because right now there seems to be a craving for Caribbean music. Recent examples of that phenomenon may include the success of Vincentian, Kevin Lyttle, with *Turn Me On* and the Bahamian group with *Who Let the Dogs Out*, and now you, about whom there is talk of having received a multi-million dollar recording contract. What's your sense of that? Do you think that this is a valid assessment?

Yes, definitely. But like I said awhile ago, we need to be prepared. In terms of contract, there is definitely a possibility of me getting the contract, but I need to be prepared. I need to get an album together. I need to produce good music. So the challenge now is producing music of the right standard that would be recognized out there. But definitely I think that there is an opening for Caribbean music. We just need to capitalize on it.

Now, I notice that with both you and Lady Spice, many of your songs focus on women's issues. Do you see yourself as being on a mission to bringing out issues of concern to women?

Yeah, first off, but still bringing out issues that deal with everyone, particularly young persons, not just women.

Regrettably our conversation with the calypso queen had to come to a close. "Educulture" was on her mind. She had to keep an appointment with the Ministry of Education. St. Lucia could not have hoped for a better and more dedicated calypso monarch, a perfect ambassador for the art-form. I congratulated her once again on winning the crown and I wished her continued success, but with her alertness, enthusiasm and sunshine smile it would have taken no effort on my part to engage her all day. As Jany walked away, carrying her sunshine with her, I had the feeling that the rest of my day, and even the rest of my week, would be quite dull in comparison to the time I had spent with her. And little did I know that this would be my last face to face conversation with Jany, for a month later, Sunday, October 24, a fatal auto accident would bring an end to her life, leaving all of us in shock and disbelief. 