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27th May 2011

LETTER FROM TRINIDAD

JOSHUA JELLY-SCHAPIRO



Beyoncé in Trinidad, February 18, 2010. Photo © Stuart Patrick

Beyoncé is gold. Gold like the burnt grass of the Queen's Park Savannah at dry season in Port of Spain, Trinidad's capital city. Like the lamé costumes and corded locks of the masquerade band which, two days before she performed here, strode around this same park to claim top honors during Trinidad's famed yearly carnival. Like the six Grammys she scooped last winter. And gold, too, like her glittered bodysuit and shining skin and hair as she emerged, on the largest concert stage ever built in the Caribbean, to close her triumphant 10-month world tour on this hot island at the bottom of the Antillean chain.

In years past in Trinidad's capital, a steaming oil town wedged between the sea and the island's high Northern mountains, this concert wouldn't have occurred, for religious reasons. In the land of calypso, Fat Tuesday's excesses are meant to connote a Farewell to the Flesh. "No calypsos were heard for the whole 40 days of Lent," the Trinidad-born actor and artist Geoffrey Holder has recalled of his childhood in 1940s Port of Spain. "You heard only sacred music, classical music, 'refined music.'" Now concerns of theosophy had been replaced with more secular worries — over whether people who save for much of the year to afford carnival costumes costing upwards of \$500 US, would pony up, just after its end, for tickets to Beyoncé's show ranging in cost from \$70 U.S. for general admission to \$160 for VIP, to — if you wanted to be in real sight of the actual stage — \$250 for "VVIP". Many commentators had urged the island's main cell phone company, TSTT — the show's prime underwriters — to withdraw their support for an event they saw as competing directly with carnival. Cultural power brokers like Brian MacFarlane, the masquerade designer of the lamé costumes that this year won him his third straight carnival crown, protested that "that same money could have been spent on promoting our local culture."

The controversy had embroiled the opinion pages for weeks. The promoters were nervous: ticket booths had remained open right up until show time. Despite the presence on the bill of local *soca* legend Machel Montano, sales had been slow. Yet as dusk approached and show time neared, it seemed clear from the press of people around the Savannah's southwest edge that enough tickets had been sold. Most years in Port of Spain, the day after Ash Wednesday is a time for pee tests and groggy naps. This year, Lent's start found *tout* out for a last lap around the Savannah.

Groups of brightly dressed young women queued along roads still stained with the paint from *jouvert* morning — the pre-dawn celebrations of the Monday before when many of these same people, coated in mud and cocoa powder, stormed the city's center flinging paint on one another. This year like every other, *jouvert's* "dutty mas" had given way to the "pretty mas" of Carnival Tuesday, with swarms of feathered revelers in sneakers and thongs marching and "wining" (gyrating alone or with a partner) behind trucks belching diesel-exhaust and booming *soca* in corresponding measure. Now the sneakers had given way to high heels wobbling on dusty ground. Tan-lines left by carnival tops accented strapless dresses, and unsubtle make-up accented faces which — in their striking rhymes of Benin bone-structure and Kerala hair — suggested something of the complex past that had given Trinidad's people a particular beauty not unlike that of the creole superstar about to perform. This was a place to see and be seen. And everyone was here — not just those young women from Port of Spain's privileged classes who could be counted on all along, but Indians from the countryside, grown-ups of all kinds — young men too. All, it seemed, were welcoming the chance, in the afterglow of carnival's lowered inhibitions, to button up (at least partway) and parade oneself with a boo or at least move in on one in more elegant fashion than humping his thigh on a paint-spattered street. This was an Event.

It was also a concert. As dusk fell, the 100-plus members of Silver Stars — crowned the island's top steelband during carnival's Panorama competition — wheeled their pans onto the vast metal stage erected by the Savannah's western edge. The ringing tones of the national anthem sounded from their round metal drums. Most of the crowd remained outside the fences that had sprung up around the park's perimeter. Sucking down plasma-rich water from fresh green coconuts procured from a salesman across the street, my friends and I lingered in front of the stately Queens Royal College: the prestigious Victorian school where the island's overclass had long sent their boys to study Shakespeare and God. This was where leaders of Trinidad's struggle for self-rule like Eric Williams — long before he penned *Capitalism and Slavery*, a famous scholarly indictment of England's selfish motives for ending slavery, and became Trinidad's first prime minister — played cricket, on the same patch of grass where Beyoncé's trailer now sat.

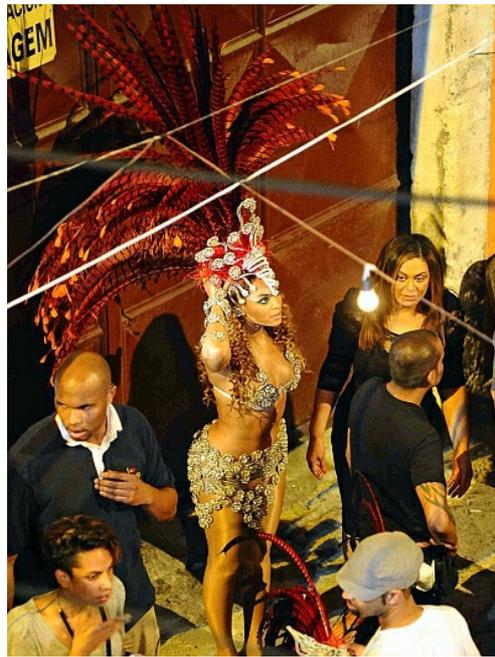
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First claimed by Christopher Columbus for Spain in 1498, Trinidad (which takes its name from the three mountain peaks Columbus glimpsed on spying the island) spent most of its colonial history as a thinly settled backwater, used by the Spanish as a launching place for expeditions seeking El Dorado: the mythic city of gold said to lie on the nearby Main. By the late 18th century Trinidad was distinguished as a Spanish crown colony with a population and culture that — due to Madrid's policy of offering land grants to French Catholic planters to bolster its population — was majority French. Its ultimate seizure by the English in 1797 marked no end to the complexity of its cultural history, which continued to be shaped, thereafter, by the French slaves and planters who remained on the now-British island. After the abolition of slavery in 1838, indentured workers from India were imported by the British to toil on the cocoa and sugarcane estates. Finally, in the years during and after World War II, the presence of a U.S. Naval base on the island — apart from corrupting local women with GI cash — bequeathed to its culture the 55-gallon oil drums from which local musicians crafted what is here plausibly termed the "only acoustic instrument invented in the 20th century": the steel-pan drum. Grouped together in great orchestras like Silver Stars and Phase II, the "pan" has been celebrated as the national instrument since Trinidad & Tobago (so called for Trinidad's administrative joining with its smaller island-neighbor) gained its independence in 1962.

Down the road from where I stood, by the Queens Royal College, a row of Victorian mansions known as the "Magnificent Seven" were being allowed to conspicuously crumble: symbols, perhaps, that the government of this "emerging" oil-rich nation may be less interested in preserving the colonial past than in building monuments to the Future. This evening a monstrous glass structure, visible across the Savannah from where we stood, was the subject of fierce critique from my Trinidadian companions. This was the just-finished National Academy for the Performing Arts, an out-of-all-scale knock-off of the Sydney Opera House, purposed to someday house a symphony orchestra in a country with no tradition or affinity for classical music. Chinese-designed and built, and with no evident utility in a city whose perfectly serviceable concert hall is only full to capacity a dozen times a year, the spaceship-like building had been built, according to the consensus view, largely to serve the megalomania of Williams' latest heir as head of the People's National Movement (PNM), Patrick Manning. The PNM of today, like many Third World parties legitimized by little more than the faint memory of their heroic role in liberating the Nation, rarely shows the intent or need to consider a People whose extremely rich local traditions require not a concert hall but support for their carnival arts in the streets.

"Local culture" is as loaded a phrase in Trinidad as anywhere: One man's "local culture" is

another woman's dead art (and indeed many here view MacFarlane as lamely derivative of mas' design's great innovator, Peter Minshall). And of course the Beyoncé show's backers, staked by TSTT's billions, had their own gloss on "local culture": the need to put on a show for which enough locals would buy tickets that they'd recoup their investment. Word was the promoters had been able to get her for a cut rate — the South American leg of her tour had been booked months earlier; Trinidad was pegged onto the end — but still Beyoncé, and the 80-strong brigade of stylists and roadies and dancers with whom she arrived by private plane, fresh from a triumphant series of dates in Brazil, don't come cheap. TSTT needed a bankable local star on the bill. This they got by including the dominant figure in soca, the kinetic brand of "soul-calypso" which — incorporating aspects of Indian and electronic music, and played at deafening volume from the sound-trucks that entered carnival shortly before soca's birth — has been Trinidad's de facto national music since the late 1970s. Machel Montano hadn't appeared in any of this year's carnival fetes: the buzz provided by his presence would, the organizers hoped, sell the tickets they needed to cover Beyoncé's rider. In the week before the show, one couldn't listen to the radio for more than a minute without being assaulted by ads for the show playing up its two acts — the champion of the world and the champion of this small island — as if they were equals. "Boy Meets Girl in the Savannah" was the tag-line, and it was everywhere.



Beyoncé in Rio. Photo © Bauer-Griffin

As darkness fell and the stage lights rose, a woman near me exclaimed, excited by Montano, "the headliner goes on first!" A few songs into his set, though, she turned away to find the "free" drinks and corn soup that came with her VVIP ticket. "He's soft tonight," she murmured in a tone meant to convey that she'd grown up seeing him perform a dozen times a year. Not everyone felt that way. Many enthused along with familiar hits, coaxed by his bevy of special guests and wining dancers. Montano has talent — an ex-child star with a singing voice at once tuneful and gruff, he exudes a raw sexuality ideally suited to bringing revelers to the crescendos they need. He's not unused to big crowds: he's filled Madison Square Garden with émigré "Trinis" who've made parts of Brooklyn's Flatbush Avenue as Trini-feeling as jangling Frederick Street in Port of Spain. But what quickly became plain was that for this diminutive dread-locked figure in silver pants, commanding this immense stage purpose-built for Beyoncé's act was — at least after a three-month hiatus from performing — a task too tall.

At a few minutes past 8:00, velvet curtains dropped across the stage and spotlights raked the scene. The curtains parted and her golden-ness emerged at the top of a staircase. Shimming down those stairs in the way of someone who'd been honing their act for a year, she took the stage with her dancers. The number was "Crazy in Love." The sidelong pumping of chest and pelvis was fierce. And Sasha Fierce — Beyoncé's stage-queen persona — was working now, belting and stomping her way through this anthem which, with its music video featuring the first couple of "urban music" leaving the city like Bonnie and Clyde, will be forever associated with her epoch-making marriage to Jay-Z. Backed by Suga Mama, her crack backing-band made up entirely of black women whose name and appearance are seemingly meant to provide the "authentic" backdrop for Beyoncé's straightened-haired ability to "cross over," she moved smoothly into "Baby Boy," another high-energy duet which, with its video featuring our girl writhing on a Caribbean beach, has always come off as a *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*

style paean to re-igniting one's libido on a tropical isle like this one.

The hits came as fast as the costume changes. Beyoncé, now clothed in leopard-print leotard, slinked from the brilliant Timbaland-produced bounce of "Irreplaceable" ("To the left/To the left"), into the name-making hit from her Destiny's Child years — "Say My Name" — which might still be, in its girl-power calling out of a skeezy lover, her best distillation of the particular "post-feminist" self-love she embodies to her fans (a tune lent a certain extra élan now that it's hard to picture anyone on the planet — let alone her famous betrothed — forgetting the name of the woman mouthing these words). After singing "Ave Maria" in an elaborately cantilevered white wedding dress, she disappeared. Re-emerging in the aviator eye-shades and black studded garb of an S&M leather queen, she accented "If I Were a Boy," with a spot-on covers of Alanis Morissette's "You Oughta Know" and Tupac Shakur's "California Love."

"This show is very special to me," she said into the hot night air during an early pause. "[It's] my first time performing here and I can see you all can party." She had the crowd even before that. To see her perform — so stunning and so given to connecting, so possessed of her body's voice and its power — is to understand why she is where she is. Working out her three-and-a-half octave range with practiced aplomb, she shimmied and sang circles around what anyone else in the game today can do, exuding in each thrown hip and nailed C all the class and control it takes to be sounding this good after spending the past year tearing through this set three nights a week. Some performers thrive on conveying contempt for their fans' love: "Beautiful black star, can you love me?" wrote Elizabeth Hardwick of Billie Holiday's nightclub crowds in mid-century Manhattan: "The answer: No." Beyoncé is no Billie. She was given to the stadium: she wants you to love her, and to let yourself feel that she loves you too. Not least by making you know, throughout a show that ends with her standing before an immense screen reading "I AM...YOURS," that she won't rest until you do.

It's a risky approach: safe only for the freaky-talented. Her detractors traduce her flights of melisma as "oversinging," bemoaning the truth that, seven albums and ten years into her dazzling career, one still has next-to-no sense of what she has to say. Yet the haters miss the point. Like all pop stars of the stature she's now attained, Beyoncé is less an expresser of herself than a mirror for our fantasies and fears. Which isn't to say she hasn't played a key role in fashioning that mirror herself: among American women, only the power-ballad master Diane Warren has writing credits on as many number-one singles (11). Hers is a genius, shaped from her Texas youth, for Giving People What They Want. Between songs, home videos projected onto screens by the stage showed a kinky-haired little girl singing and hamming in her parents' Houston home. Meant to convey the kitchen-table roots of a "born performer," these images also depicted a pretty girl who learned early on how to put people at ease by enacting their fantasies, and who draws on her nurtured talent for doing so as a woman. From her affected southern girl drawl when giving "church" in interviews, to the crafted menace of her hip-hop diction (when, in spit-singing the opening lines of "Get Me Bodied," she enacts her role as what Jay Z calls "the flyest girl in the game"), to her strutting turn, wearing a sequined "freakum dress" that recalls the Supremes, she evinces raw needs even Diana Ross never quite touched, those of a grown lady on the prowl.

If the home-videos playing on those screens were meant to show us where she's come from, the other images that played there in the midst of many of those songs — of her and her troupe, and of the crowd's enraptured faces screaming and singing and smiling — showed us where she's come: to a place where, in a country where she'd never before set foot, a grown man cried along to the lyrics of "Broken Hearted Girl" as he stared up at his hero from the front row. Such is the power of her celebrity, six years after she began a schedule of non-stop work which transformed her from a rising star at the head of a Texas girl-group into a married woman at the top of the global pop heap, that she is now poised — if credible rumors are true — to fire the manager-father who's mentored her career since its start in his kitchen.

Classy, driven, sweet — these are the words uniformly attached to her by many in the business. The accessories summarily dumped along the way — the original "other two" girls nixed from Destiny's Child's first line-up; the more recent two, Michelle Williams and Kelly Rowland, seemingly placed on ice until such time as she needs them again — might add some other descriptors. Whatever the faults or virtues of the "real" Beyoncé, the conceit of her current album and tour — with its "I am..." side featuring a star scrubbed of all makeup on the CD-cover, and a selection of tender ballads within; and its "Sasha Fierce" flipside, picturing the big-haired, coal-eyed diva she enacts when performing "Single Ladies" or "Bootylicious" — succeeds precisely for its falseness. She is a performer. Whether she is being more "real" when she is singing a ballad before a screen of ocean waves, or shaking her booty in a leopard-print swimsuit, or giving an "intimate" interview on Oprah in front of millions: this is a boring question. She is a performer.

And it is her stage show's precise virtue not to pretend otherwise. Her plane-load of costumes were by French designer Thiago Mugler, best known for creating the "power bitch" look of the 1980s; her choreography is informed by "J-Setting" — the lead-and-mimic step-dancing that's recently become the rage among gay black youth in Atlanta. She knows, just as Madonna did a generation ago when she brought "voguing" from New York's queer ballrooms to the mainstream, where to get what she needs.



Beyoncé in Trinidad, February 18, 2010. Photo © Stuart Patrick

Trinidad carnival, like its close cousins in Brazil and New Orleans, was born in a joining of the masquerade balls that French Roman Catholics used to celebrate *carne vale* (farewell to the flesh), with the festive traditions of their slaves. In the case of Trinidad, this meant those practices used to mark the Africans' harvest festival of canboulay (from *canne broulée*, for burning of the cane): limbo dancing; stickfighting; the ensemble drumming that begat the steelbands of today. Trinidad carnival was from the start a time for "turnabout": for landed whites to doff their heavy suits and dance shirtless like the dark-skinned and poor who, during carnival, donned powder-wigs and crowns. As it grew into the grand mixed party that it remains today, a number of stock characters emerged who still roam Port of Spain's streets each year: "King Sailor" with his cane and naval epaulettes; "Fancy Indian" in his Crazy Horse headdress; "Dame Lorraine" with her French parasol and petticoats (often played by a man, with pillows stuffed fore and aft). If you're picturing a gay disco in Greenwich Village of a certain vintage, you're not far off. The explicit joys of masquerade may have migrated from queer subcultures into "mainstream" of American pop only since the 1970s, but in carnival cultures like Trinidad's, the public joining of gender play and sexual license is as old, literally, as sin. On Fat Tuesday this year, my friends and I ended our carnival in a large club, its entrance festooned with a rainbow flag, where the last and best party of Carnival 2k10 was raging. Sailors and Dames grinded and vogueed beneath the stars, in the open-air space off an avenue that had served as one of the main drags for masqueraders earlier that day. In some ways Trinidad's culture is just as homophobic as that of any other island in the West Indies. But it was hard not to think that the presence of this space — still unthinkable in Jamaica, say, with its centuries of Anglican rule and gay-bashing norms — was at least partly due to a tolerance bred across two centuries of life on an island whose inhabitants, as the saying goes, are at all times either "playing carnival, reminiscing about last year's, or preparing for the next."

Beyoncé's stage-show may have its most crucial antecedents in the kinds of pop spectacle made famous by Madonna — and Michael Jackson as well, an obligatory tribute to whom she tastefully worked in to her show (and whose pop monarch mantle, with the metallic glove she's taken to wearing on one hand, she seems ever more intent on claiming). But watching Beyoncé enact her own brand of masquerade here in the afterglow of Trinidad carnival, it was hard not to think, too, of the New Orleans roots of a performer named for the maiden surname of her creole mother, born of French, African, and Amerindian ancestry in a city termed, by its splendid chronicler Ned Sublette, the "northern edge of the saints and festivals belt." Whatever the sources of Beyoncé's feel for this place's carnival vibe, there wasn't a heart she hadn't won after strutting out to the end of a catwalk to the rhythm of "Check On It," and, providing, from a platform out in their midst, the show's crowning moment. The rhythm switched to one this crowd had heard not less than a few hundred times in the weeks before, and Beyoncé and her dancers pogo-ed left and right, energetically aping the dance that went along with the song. "Palance," that won this year's Road March title, as carnival 2k10's *soca* anthem.

“Palance” is little more than a catchy jingle repeated and joined to the gleeful exhortation of its creators — two affable *soca* deejays called JW and Blaze — to perform their tune’s eponymous dance (“*watch we palancing/watch we palancing*”). Bygone are the days when calypso masters like Mighty Sparrow and Lord Kitchener beguiled with their word-play, and everyone on the island knew not just the hooks from each year’s favorites, but entire verses spun around layered metaphors as likely to reference geopolitics as sex (and often touching on both). That *soca* has never gained the same sort of international reach as Jamaican reggae is perhaps unsurprising: heard out of context, the charms of many of these songs — with their frantic tempos and shouted hooks — can be obscure. To understand the effect of Beyoncé’s dancing along to “Palance” as she closed out this year’s carnival season, one has to understand the singular relationship that these people will have developed with the song by this time, and how that relationship has come to be: a process of annual hit-making which begins, at the start of carnival season, with hundreds of songs contending for airspace. Over the two months of near-nightly fêtes running from New Year’s to Shrove Tuesday, these are winnowed down first to a few dozen, then to ten, then to one Road March champion whose status is based on its ability to meet a single purpose: to get people to drink rum, “jump up,” “wine,” and “trip down the road” all at once from dawn till dusk beneath the broiling sun. Its singular purpose, in other words, is to feed a kind of collective delirium within which revelers can “get on bad.” For people who’d heard “Palance” at top volume dozens of times on Tuesday alone, seeing this famous body and person affirm their way of doing so was a potent gesture of generosity and presence.

Carnival, as performance studies scholars like to point out, is a unique form of spectacle for collapsing all distinctions between performer and spectator: it is a folk culture, wrote its most famous theorizer Mikhail Bakhtin, “that knows no footlights.” Beyoncé’s performance knew not merely footlights but air-jets blowing out that golden hair. And she was a foreigner. But a people that knows so well the power of spectacle and the joy of shaking your ass understood they were seeing a performer who knew more than a bit about both. As the last chords of “Halo” faded, fireworks exploded above the Savannah, red and white against the dark mountains beyond. Beyoncé embraced her dancers. Visibly moved — the fireworks were a surprise from her hosts — she headed from the stage. In the days following, newspaper stories about her show were full of complaints about long lines for that corn soup, but no one could be found saying a single bad word about a performance which, all seemed to agree, had miraculously met the sky-high cost of its ticket.

Those papers and the conversations of the chattering classes were full, too, of the annual debates about what the year’s carnival might suggest about the state of a nation that, for its half-century of independence, has grown accustomed to looking at its near-naked self through this particular lens. Some hailed *jouvert’s* ability, with its mud-covered revelers erasing their ethnic identities, to unite this sometimes fractious nation. Brian MacFarlane announced that he wouldn’t be presenting a band next year, lending fuel to those who see, in the continuing descent of masquerade arts into bikinis and beads, a symbol of the nation’s larger decline. Others rejoined the annual debate about whether and how carnival’s fleeting joys relate to the political trajectory of a country whose course, in the following weeks, was perhaps deeply altered by the ascendancy of an impressive Indian woman, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, to the head of the party in opposition. By the time I left the country a month later, signs were growing that the PNM of Patrick Manning — hamstrung by the news that his great performing arts center was not even usable due to shoddy construction — might soon be on the way out. Despite the lack of rain to wash away the *jouvert* colors that still stained Port of Spain’s streets, Carnival 2010 was fading into memory. “Palance” had died a rapid death on the nation’s soundscape. Beyoncé, though, was everywhere.

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Images: Stuart Patrick, Bauer-Griffin.

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