

Caribbean **Beat**



In Trinidad, Christmas would not be Christmas without the rhythm of parang music. Georgia Popplewell explains why

Illustrations by Christopher Cozier

When the Orinoco Delta is in flood, the strange current they call the *remous* comes rustling up the Gulf of Paria like a garbled rumour of origins. It throws up frothy white corrugations on the surface of the flat sea; the waters become brackish — even Columbus, wrong about so many other things in the area, was able to tell that a great river, and therefore a great continent, lay nearby.

Trinidad lies about seven miles from Venezuela's Paria peninsula, bounding the Gulf on its eastern edge — “the little place in the mouth of the Orinoco”, as V. S. Naipaul put it. These seven miles have loomed large in the relations between the two countries. Today, skirmishes between Trinidadian fishermen and the Guardia Nacional have turned the area into an intermittent war zone; but in the 18th and 19th centuries, the inhabitants of eastern Venezuela, isolated by geography from Caracas, relied on little Trinidad for news of the rest of the world.

And across those seven miles, also in the 19th century, came *peones* or contract workers from eastern Venezuela to the cocoa estates of Trinidad. It is here in cocoa country — in places like Arima and Santa Cruz, Caura and Sangre Grande, Valencia, Siparia, Palo Seco and Maraval — that the story of parang begins.

The Venezuelan *peones* landed in a British colony which had previously (1498-1797) been ruled by Spain. They were absorbed into the rural “Spanish” minority known in Trinidad as *cocoa panyols* (descendants of white Spanish planters, *mestizos*, African slaves and Amerindians). They had a profound impact on their new country, and not only in economic terms.

The golden age of Trinidad cocoa came and went, and most aspects of the *cocoa panyol* lifestyle — including the language — all but disappeared. What survived, oddly, was a set of Spanish-language folk songs and melodies collectively known as parang.

If Trinidad Christmas has a distinctive sound today, a face, a “vibe”, it is parang. Apart from the French creole *crêche*, sung today only by a handful of people in the hill village of Paramin, virtually no other indigenous Christmas music has survived.

It used to be a running joke that many parang singers had no idea what the words they were singing meant — because Trinidad and Tobago today is, of course, an English-speaking country. Given its geographical position and Spanish past, it often surprises outsiders that Spanish is not an official or unofficial language.

But Trinidad has always been something of a linguistic conundrum. It was sparsely populated under Spanish rule: the Spaniards invited French settlers to tenant their little outpost, so by the end of the 19th century Trinidad was a British colony with a Spanish colonial past and a largely French patois-speaking population. Today, the descendants of Indian indentured labourers, who make up half the population, sing pop songs in Hindi.

So perhaps it is appropriate that as Spanish died in Trinidad, parang moved toward centre stage.

In most of the Spanish-speaking world, the word *parranda*, from which the Trinidadian term parang derives, means simply a spree or a party. But in Venezuela it attached itself to a particular musical form.

In Trinidad, it refers to several different Venezuelan or Venezuelan-inspired folk rhythms: *parranda*, *zoropo*, *manzanare*, *paseo*, *estribillo*, *guarapa* (*warap*), *sebucán*, *galerón*, and others.

The soul and motor of parang is the *cuatro*, the small four-



THE SOUND OF CHRISTMAS



...
...
Maria

stringed guitar which is now the national instrument of Venezuela. Light and supremely strummable, the *cuatro* is the quintessential troubadour's instrument; it drives the simple 2/4 and 3/4 rhythms while the voice delineates the melody. "The voices," one *parandero* points out, "are the instruments that you're really looking forward to, because the message is there." And it is for their vocal abilities that the great *paranderos* and *paranderas* of history, people like Sylvestre Mata, Segundo "Papa Goon" Dolabaille, Gloria Alcazar and Daisy Voisin, are remembered.

Parang formed the repertoire of bands of singers and musicians known as *paranderos* who went from house to house singing and playing during the Christmas season. It was almost exclusively a country thing. "Folks were not willing to accept parang because it was hardly known to them," parang veteran Paul Castillo said back in 1986, "especially those folks residing in the city. It took a tremendous amount of time and hard work to explain to these city folks that parang was one of the first folk arts, and it was indigenous to Trinidad and Tobago."

Old-time *paranderos* — the few who now survive — will tell you, as they told Sylvia Moodie-Kublalsingh when she was researching her book *The Cocoa Panyols in Trinidad*, that "in a parang band a *cuatro* and a *marac* were essential and that other instruments such as violin and mandolin or bandol were adornments, while the box bass was not part of the old tradition."

Early parang bands were small and informal. A *parandero* was liable to leave home before Christmas and return days later, unshaven, dishevelled, instrument in hand and a wide smile on his face. The lyrics and melodies



The golden age of Trinidad cocoa came and went. What survived was a set of Spanish-language folk songs and melodies collectively known as parang

DAISY VOISIN

"Who will be the next Daisy?"

A pregnant pause.

"There is only one Daisy," a *parandero* told me sternly, "just as there is only one Gloria (Alcazar)." "Some people say I sound like her when I sing *Alegria*," said one modest *parandera*, "but I don't really believe that."

Great *paranderos* are one-offs. Just as there'll never be another Sylvestre Mata, Papa Goon or Sotero Gomez, there will never be another Daisy Voisin.

Daisy Voisin's rise to the status of Parang Queen coincided with the rise of parang in Trinidad, and today she's the most recognisable figure in the parang

pantheon. Which is not in any way to diminish her talent. "She was the Maria Callas of parang," Aubrey Adams wrote on her death in 1991. The comparison is a good one only in so far as voice and presence are concerned, because off-stage Daisy was no prima donna.

Born in Caparal Village in the deep south, Daisy was reared in cocoa country and eventually settled in the "sand city" of Siparia. "Aunty Daisy never seemed sad or depressed," said a Siparia native. "She always greeted everyone with a smile from ear to ear, a 'hug-up' anywhere on the streets and a big kiss."

Daisy is remembered with equal warmth by anybody who saw her perform with the group La Divina Pastora. "She

were in his heart and head, memories and fragments he'd heard from his parents, who had probably come from "down the Main" or had some other sort of tie with Venezuela.

The *paranderos'* Spanish would have been the peasant Spanish of eastern Venezuela — correct in intonation and cadence, wonderful in song, but, as Moodie-Kublalsingh puts it, unable to "bear the burden of long exposure and close scrutiny."

Trinidad Spanish culture and language, unenhanced by further influence from across the Main, would have remained in the 19th-century peasant mode until it began to break down and become Trinidadian. When Venezuelan *cuatro* virtuoso Freddy Reina attended a parang session in Arima in the 1960s, it's said he sent a driver all the way back to town for a tape recorder — the songs he was hearing had apparently not been heard in Venezuela since his grandfather's days.

Even though he might be hard-drinking and wayward, the old-time *parandero* was devout. As one town boy-turned-*parandero* said: "They were very,

was a vivacious, explosive, tempestuous, soul-filled performer with effective dance movements and a startling, bewitching contralto voice which made her the nightingale of parang songs," Adams wrote. The repertoire she made famous is sung by *paranderas* throughout Trinidad, but none can declaim her signature "Aiyee! Aiyee!" with equal verve.

In August 1991, *paranderos* accompanied the body of Daisy Voisin in a musical street procession to the La Divina Pastora Church in Siparia. As one Siparian wondered at the time: "Will Christmas and parang ever be the same again?"

very deep in their beliefs . . . They had their own philosophy. Of course ninety percent of them never passed Third Standard because of their sticking to the cocoa estates and having to work and so and so . . . But they had this to hold on to, they had this altar to kneel at, this Christian thing."

The *paranderos'* visit to a home followed a set pattern. The group would approach the house singing the *Serenal* or entrance tune, the gist of which was: *here we are, open the door*. Once admitted, the group would begin the *aguinaldos*, a song cycle recounting the events leading up to *el Nacimiento* (the birth of Christ) and the visit of *Los Reyes* (the Three Kings).

Biblical chronology had to be strictly followed. As one *parang* veteran put it: "You can't just go from Bethlehem in the stable and go back to when the Angel Gabriel announced. As long as you going to sing you must know your scripture, the chronology . . . Fella might hop from there and jump to the Three Kings, throwing everybody off. They'd sing *coro* then, to make up the time, and somebody would remember in the meantime what happened after the Kings saw the star. Some would ad lib and some would know lines and parrot it off. Others would make up something in the meantime that could fall in the period that they referred to."

This ad libbing, known in Trinidad as *extempo* or *picong*, is one of many features of *parang* which have disappeared over the years. Sylvestre Mata, the first *parandero* to receive a national award (the Silver Medal of Merit in 1972), was an expert at "throwing *picong*"; he was said to be able to walk into a room and spontaneously compose lyrics on anything that took his fancy—in Spanish (small wonder it's now a dead art).

Once the biblical portion



of the session was over, the group was free to sing songs on secular themes, like *Mi Gallina* (My Hen) or *Rio Manzanares*, which might be in *manzanare*, *joropo*, *gaeta* or one of the other folk styles. The household would serve food and drink, and there would be dancing and general merriment.

"We didn't go in any commercial way," says one *parandero*. "We went to people's homes. And if we knew we were going to a home which couldn't offer us refreshment, we'd carry some in the car. So that we wouldn't embarrass them. One of us would go round the back and give him a bottle of rum. Humble people, real humble people, but heart and soul pouring out to you."

Today, for anyone outside a rural area or without parang roots or an aficionado in the family, exposure to parang is likely to be simply to the music, either recorded or live in the setting of a club, concert or festival. Parang bands have become larger, with several vocalists accompanied by a range of instruments: *cuatro*, mandolin, violin, guitar, flute, box bass, and a variety of percussion instruments like the marac and toc toc.

Village groups like the Lara Brothers (who celebrated their 50th anniversary in 1995) formalised themselves gradually into musical ensembles, and today bands compete in several national competitions, including one sponsored by the National Parang Association of Trinidad and Tobago (NPATT). NPATT also designates a parang season, which lasts from the first week in October until January 6, *el Dia de los Reyes* (also called Lewah or Lawah).

Groups are doing less and less of the informal house-to-house thing, and ironically most of them cite the heavy performance schedule during the season as the main reason for the shift. "It's not that we don't want to," says Sharlene Flores of Flores de San José, "but sometimes we have two, three performances a night." And without the house-to-house visits, Flores points out, the song cycle that once formed the heart of parang no longer makes sense.

The average parang ensemble's repertoire is now merely a mix of parang songs, with some soca parang and Latin music mixed in. Having moved from the living room onto the concert stage or into the recording studio, the acoustic flavour of parang has also changed.

Over the past few years, calypso, soca and even chutney music have been influenced by parang, taking traditional parang rhythms and overlaying them with secular themes. One of the most successful of these, *I Want A Piece Of Pork* by Scrunter, is often cited as proof of the breakdown of Christian values, and perhaps parang values as well. "Parang music and the holy seasons of Advent and Christmas are being desecrated through offensive. . . soca-parang songs," went one Letter to the Editor back in 1992. "It appears that efforts are being made to turn Christmas into a 'Mini Carnival' (God forbid!)." Calypsonian Crazy's soca-parang hit of some years ago actually suggests this, with its parody of an old-time parang session:

*I sang on the Annunciation
To show my appreciation
When the crowd went wild
I sang on the birth of the child
My next song, an aguinaldo
With good rhythm, and fast tempo
People jumping, like Carnival
To my rendition of Serenal . . .*



Dancing to parang is apparently unheard of in Venezuela, where, it is true, the audience understands the lyrics and the seriousness of them. As one parang aficionado put it: "I have been told all my life that change is inevitable, so one has to face it, but it is not one what I would think of as parang. They giving a beat to make you enjoy yourself. . . but they're not sending that message to recognise the birth of Christ, to recognize Christianity."

It is of course natural that parang should change radically on its way to becoming a nationally accepted form. Once removed from the village context, from communities with some connection with the origins and language of the music, parang had to become simply an indigenous Christmas music.

"Parang is not dying," Paul Hospedales of the Lara Brothers is quick to point out. What he really means is that parang is still very much alive, musically speaking, and perhaps in even better shape than before. Bands are now paying greater attention to diction, pronunciation and the quality of the Spanish. ("I don't speak Spanish," one *parandera* coolly states, "but I'm quite aware of what I'm saying. I have people who work with me on the language.")

New compositions are being added to the repertoire, and new groups are appearing, each year. Los Paranderos de UWI, based at the University of the West Indies, are absorbing influences from contemporary Latin American music — and turning would-be *paranderos* back from rehearsals. Even groups like the Laras and Los Niños de Santa Rosa, which think of themselves as traditional or purist, are, literally, cleaning up their acts.

Parang bands are also highly visible, with rigorous performance schedules which include Festival appearances, corporate gigs, office parties, charity shows and club and concert dates. The Lara Brothers recently made a very well-received appearance at the International Afro-Caribbean Festival in Veracruz, Mexico.

The old *paranderos* may look upon the drift of parang away from its roots with sadness and nostalgia. But the fact is that folk forms, which evolve in particular contexts for particular reasons, are liable to die or be transformed when those contexts and reasons cease to exist — unless they are taken up as causes or money-spinners. So as the "Spanish" rural lifestyle changed, and the already small numbers of native speakers dwindled, parang as the old-timers remember it was already doomed.

But where is parang going?

Because of the music's ties to Christianity and Trinidad Christmas, there are probably serious limits to its commercial viability. A better question is, perhaps: does parang have to go anywhere? ■