

# **What Is Soca Music**

By: Mantius Cazaubon

This material is geared primarily towards folks who are new to this genre of music called soca. As an artist who has been recording soca songs for the last eight years, and who has won Caribbean wide soca competitions, I shall humbly attempt to present a comprehensive introduction to soca music.

Soca music originated in the Caribbean island of Trinidad and Tobago. It is widely accepted to have been created by Lord Shorty (born Garfield Blackman). He noticed that Calypso music was threatened by the more popular reggae music and dying out and attempted to create a new hybrid that was more appealing to the masses. He fused Indian music with calypso music and this resulted in a more energetic hybrid called solka, which later became known as soca. Lord Shorty introduced soca to the world in 1973 with his hit song, Indrani.

Naturally, soca music of the seventies is very different to what exists today. Today, there are two main types, namely Power Soca and Groovy Soca. What is the major difference between the two?

Power soca music is very fast, with tempos of around 160 beats per minute. The music is largely instructional in nature. Soca artists thrive on motivating audiences to respond to their dancing instructions. Power soca music is largely music to jump, wave and "wine" to. ("Wine" is derived from the word "wind" and is a type of dance that consists of hip movements). Crowd reaction is key.

Trinidadian soca artist, Superblue has been credited with starting the "jump and wave" craze. His success with this style of soca was so incredible that since then most soca songs are written with crowd response in mind.

Today, the challenge for power soca songwriters is to write songs that can move audiences but not be a regurgitation of the jump and wave theme. This is not the easiest of tasks because of the very nature of the festival that soca music is centered around. Soca music is largely carnival music. Since carnival is all about jumping and waving, the music that drives it must be able to engender such activity. Increasingly, artists are succeeding at writing songs which are not necessarily based on "jump and

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wave" or waving rags and flags. In an attempt to stay clear of monotony, themes like love, peace and togetherness have been very common.

Groovy soca music is arguably, a better means of propelling soca music forward internationally. It is much slower, around 115 beats per minute. This newer kind of soca allows for a wider range of topics to be addressed. Unlike the total frenzy that power soca gives rise to, groovy soca is music to sway and dance slowly to. Artists like Kevin Lyttle and Rupee have demonstrated that this type of music is very palatable to mainstream music markets, with international hits like "Turn Me On" and "Tempted To Touch" respectively. Another artist who has gain international recognition with groovy/crossover soca is Barbadian based artist, Alison Hinds.

I believe that fast and groovy soca music should continue to co-exist. I readily accept all variations of soca and put none against the other. Music is dynamic. Throughout history no genre has ever stayed the same and hybrids are constantly created.

In addition to power and groovy soca, other types of soca music include ragga soca and chutney soca.

Ragga soca is a fusion of dancehall and soca music. Ragga soca performers include Trinidians, Bunji Garlin and Maximus Dan.

Chutney soca is a blend of East Indian chutney music and soca. Chutney Soca is an up-tempo, rhythmic type of song, accompanied by traditional Indian musical instruments such as the dholak, tassa, the harmonium and the dhantal.

The line between different kinds of soca music is becoming less and less clearly defined. It can sometimes be very difficult and controversial to pin-point what is groovy, power, or ragga soca. There is so much fusion taking place that it is often difficult to tell whether a song is really a soca song. For instance some have argued that Alison Hinds' hit song, "Roll It Gal" is not really a soca song but an R&B song with a West Indian influence. While I do not hold that view, it goes to show that there are no clear distinctions and definitions. Soca music, like other forms of music is

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an art and cannot be restricted to a specific or exclusive mold.

Soca music is largely competitive. Every year artists try to outdo each other at carnival competitions such as Soca Monarch and Road March. At a soca monarch competition soca artists perform before large audiences and are ranked by a panel of judges. A road march song is the song which is played the most during a carnival street parade. Each Caribbean island holds its own competitions. Prizes can amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars for each winner, particularly in Trinidad and Tobago.

Some of the biggest soca artists in the industry have bowed out of competition. These include big names such as Machel Montano, Bunji Garlin and KMC. The commonly held view is that "music is a mission, not a competition". Personally, I have found such competitions to be a very negative force, causing undesirable friction between artists. As an artist, I have had my own battles. However, winning is so much fun that it can be hard to quit. The fans can be relentless in urging an artist to compete against their own will. The way these competitions are set up, it is easy to go unnoticed if one is not taking part, except if you are already strongly established in the market.

Popular soca performers include Machel Montano, Destra, Alison Hinds, Atlantik, KMC, Shurwayne Winchester, Denise Belfon, Bomani, Bunji Garlin, Iwer George, Bomani, Kevin Lyttle, Tizzy, Maximus Dan, Mr Killa, Mantius, Fireman Hooper, Jamesy P, Tallpree, Claudette Peters, Burning Flames, Nicole David, Ricky T, Qpid and Krosfyah.

Some of soca's biggest worldwide hits include "Turn Me On" by Kevin Lyttle, "Tempted to Touch" by Rupee, "Who Let the Dogs Out" by Baha Men (originally sang by Anselm Douglas), "Sweet Soca Music" by Sugar Daddy, "Nookie" by Jamesy P, "Hot Hot Hot" by Buster Poindexter (originally sang by Arrow), and "Follow the leader" by Soca Boys (originally sang by Nigel and Marvin Lewis).

Brass instruments such as trumpets and trombones have been very typical of soca music. Sometimes, the saxophone forms part of brass sections. While these instruments are still used in live performances, synthesizers and samplers are increasingly replacing them, particularly in

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studio recordings and at smaller concerts. Soca is very percussion and drum driven and these are often very loud in a soca mix. The bass is also very important. Other instruments used include guitars, and keyboards.

Leading soca-producing Caribbean islands include Trinidad and Tobago, St Vincent and the Grenadines, St Lucia, Grenada, Barbados and Antigua and Barbuda.