

Interview subject: Surpriser

Interviewer: J. Hunter Moore

Date: October 13, 2017

Location of interview: Home of Carmsen Merrique, Surpriser's daughter, Mount Lambert, Trinidad and Tobago

Actual name: Clewin Romero

Other sobriquets/nicknames: D. Surpriser, Mighty Surpriser, Scorpion (early)

Date of birth: February 24, 1931

Place of birth: Gran Lagun community, Mayaro, Trinidad and Tobago

Awards (as of March 2018): South Calypso King, 1971, National Calypso King Semi-Finals, 1970, 1971, Chaguanas Calypso King, four years (beginning in 1960's), Couva Calypso King, three years

Best songs/best-known songs: "Old Age is a Disaster," "De Lazy Villager," "Leave D Salt"

Individuals heard during the interview:

S: Surpriser

HM: Hunter Moore

CM: Carmsen Merrique (Surpriser's daughter)

OM: Ozy Merrique (Supriser's grandson)

RT: Ruth Telfer, a friend

ER: Elizabeth Ryan, a friend

Trinidad and Tobago terms and expressions as used in the interview:

Ah: I, I'm, a, or as an interjection: "ah!"

Dey: they

Doh: don't

Eh: ain't

Extempo: a form of calypso in which two singers take turns insulting each other via extemporized verse set to an established melody, known traditionally as picong or “war”

Mihself: myself

TUCO: Trinbago Unified Calypsonians’ Organisation, promotes calypso and calypsonians

Subject sings: 7:49, 9:50, 17:07, 24:50, 33:48

Notes about interview: the interview took place on an outside porch. A neighbor’s electric drill is heard intermittently. Two minutes (approx.) near the end of the recording, during which sound equipment was being set up, has not been included. As of December 1, 2017, Surpriser was said to be the oldest performing calypsonian in Trinidad and Tobago

The lyric for “Old Age is a Disaster” matches the version that is played during the interview, but the dialect I use in the transcription is taken from Surpriser’s handwritten lyric of the song. Surpriser presented me with a handwritten lyric and said that he knew the standard spelling but had intentionally used creole for his handwritten version.

Interview:

S: “Old Age is a Disaster,” (Laughter.) I have it there, “Old Age is a Disaster,” and I have been back, it’s why I get back in the calypso thing, and why I get back in the calypso tents, you know.

RT: (Several missing words.)

ER: Ah. Yeah.

S: You know. I sang with, two years with Kitchener, then I went, that is 2000, 2001. I didn’t sing ‘2, 2003 I went to Yangatang, ‘4, Spektakula, but that is the year they close down.

ER: Okay.

S: ‘5 and ‘6 I went to Chaguanas Central. And I in this Karavan from ‘7 till now.

(An electric drill starts, reappears) intermittently.)

RT: But you know, I’m sorry, I must have seen you then in Kitchener’s tent, or Spektakula . . .

S: That would have been 2000.

RT: . . . because I always went there.

S: In 2000.

RT: (Laughs.)

CM: Yes. She's been here a long time.

RT: Yeah. I've been living here since '79 and we used to be always in Spectakula, Kingdom of the Wizards . . .

S: Oh, well. Well. Ah. Yeah.

RT: (Several missing words.) Kitchener's tent. Yeah. Oh yeah.

S: Mm-hm. Alright. Well.

RT: And that's where I've seen you perform.

S: Yes. Yes. Yes. And from twenty-oh-seven I started with Spektak, I mean Kaiso Karavan.

CM: He ready for you now. Are you ready Hunter?

HM: Yeah. I was. Now, if I, you don't mind me asking you again, hah, I just want to make, I'm clear your, that your full name, is it Clevin?

S: C-l-e-v-i-n. Clevin. Yes.

HM: Clevin Romero

S: Romero, yeah.

HM: You were born February 24.

S: 24. Yes.

HM: 1931?

S: Yes.

HM: And is it Mayaro?

S: Well, well, let's . . .

CM: Guayaguayare.

OM: Mayaro

CM: Mayaro

HM: How do you spell Mayaro, Mayaro?

CM: M-a-y

HM: M-a-y

S: a-r-o. Yeah.

CM: a-r-o

S: Mm-hm.

OM: We just say Mayaro.

HM: Mayaro.

C: Mayaro

HM: We're the same way in Tennessee.

S: No, wait, let me say this, Jude.

CM: Ah?

S: Let me just say, Gran, Gran Lagun village, Mayaro, is where I was born.

CM: Gran, oh. Ah.

S: Gran Lagun village.

CM: Gran Lagun village, Mayaro.

S: G-r-a-n-d. (sic.) Gran Lagun

HM: Gran Lagun.

CM: Yes.

S: Yes. Village. Mayoro.

HM: Like Spanish. Like great lake.

S: Mm-hm.

HM: Gran Lagun.

CM: Yeah. (Laughs.)

S: Yeah.

HM: I was just enjoying hearing what you were saying, but maybe I should get you to say it again for the recording. You said you were two times national champion?

S: Nah, nah.

CM: No.

HM: Two times.

S: Semi-finalist.

HM: Semi-finalist. In the national competition.

S: Yes. Two years semi-final. And I made the south monarchy in 1971.

HM: 1971. Good. Just. Those are just kind of some basic things.

RT: South Monarch in 1971.

S: '71.

HM: So I didn't realize that you could just be the South Monarch, but I know that was true.

RT: You have to do that to win that.

HM: Yeah. You have to win that first, before you, then to go to the national?

S: Yeah, but.

Others: No, no.

HM: No?

OM: Each, each village or each town can have their own monarch, you know, so southeast would be.

S: Yes. Yes. Yes.

CM: They still do.

OM: They still have . . .

CM: They still have a San Fernando calypso crown.

HM: A crown for San Fernando. I'm really concerned this drill over here . . .

CM: Oh God. Yes. Yes. Yes.

Others: (Several missing words.)

HM: . . . that we can hear. Maybe if I hold it really close.

S: Central. I did four years in Chaguanas as a monarch and three years in Couva.

HM: In Couva. And you were the monarch in those places?

S: Yes. And. But I was running a calypso tent there, you know?

HM: So, you were running the tent.

S: Yes. I was running. Yes. Yes.

HM: Most of my questions, and I'll tell you a little bit more about myself when we're done, but I'm a musician and songwriter from Tennessee.

S: Mm. Okay.

HM: And so I'm particularly interested in how composers of calypso write . . .

S: Mm-hm.

HM: . . . calypso, to compare it to . . .

S: I know.

HM: . . . my understanding, how we do things. You know?

S: Yes, I, I understand this.

HM: When did you start writing calypsos, at what age?

S: From school.

HM: From school? How old do you think you were?

CM: (Several missing words.)

S: Let me look at it, ten-twelve years old.

HM: Ten or twelve years old.

S: Mm-hm.

HM: And did, have you ever composed other kinds of music or only calypso?

S: No, only calypso, only calypso throughout.

HM: And so, what I always like to ask is, how do you know it's calypso? What makes it calypso for you?

4:49

S: Oh, that is quite, that is nice. Now, as I mentioned a while ago, I were motherless at the age of nine. And a neighbor was taking care of us. The neighbor's husband was working in the oil field in Guayaguayare. Well, he have money, so he could buy a gramophone.

Other: (Laughs.)

S: He bought a gramophone and with it, calypso music. And he gave me the full authority to use, you know.

HM: To use it.

S: Yes, man, I started playing only this calypso song, this old days of Radio, King Radio and all those fellas.

HM: So, the older.

S: And "Take me, take me, I'm feeling lonely, take me back to Los Iros." And all these kind of songs, you know? And I believe that is what really brought in this calypso thing in me.

HM: What were some of the artists that you were listening to? King Radio. Who else? That you remember from your being young?

S: Yes. Lord Iere. Radio, we had, and also them, boy, let me see, we had all those old fellas, even some Growling Tiger. Yes, and this other one (three missing syllables.)

CM: Atilla the Hun.

S: Atilla. No, no, but I know Atilla, but . . .

HM: Atilla? These were recordings you had that you had and . . .

S: Yes, yes.

HM: . . . used to play on the gramophone.

S: I knew. I knew Atilla. Yeah.

Others: (Several missing words.) Spoiler.

S: Tiger, Lion, Growling Tiger, Roaring Lion. All those fellas. I known them.

Others: (Several missing words.)

HM: So you knew these records really well. Because you could play them on the gramophone.

S: Yes, I could play them on the gramophone.

HM: And so you were, were you aspiring to write, though? So you sort of wanted to do that yourself?

S: Yes. Yes.

HM: You heard those songs, you started writing some like that.

S: Yes. I started writing. I, the first calypso I wrote it was, there was a school outing. And there's a chap called Carl Frontin. I couldn't go. My father couldn't afford to send me. But those fellas went into a train, on the train, going somewhere. And this fella came and excreted on himself in the train. And well, when I went to school they just give me the little thing, the little joke, and thing what happened to Carl Frontin, what had . . . (Laughs.)

Others: (Laughter.)

HM: But what happened on the train? I didn't understand.

S: Yeah, well . . .

CM: Oh (Laughs.)

S: . . . he messed on himself. (Laughs.)

HM: Ah, okay, okay.

Other: Oh.

HM: So . . .

S: You know?

HM: Yeah.

S: So, well, I can't remember the song really, but I remember the chorus.

S: (Sings.) Well, change your voices and sing again, Carl Frontin shit on the railway train. (Laughs.)

HM: So, it became a song. Yeah. Now, did you write that, or that was just something . . .

S: (Speaks.) I write about three verses. That was the chorus.

HM: That was the chorus. Was that the first song that you remember, that you wrote?

S: It, yes, that is the first song I really write.

HM: That's a great story.

S: While discussing this with my late schoolmates, this principal, he was watching. And he get up, make a little spin around, and come behind our backs. And I just see the hand come down and take up the paper. (Laughs.) When he read it, he gone to the desk and he press the silent bell and he put me on the stage to sing it. (Laughs.)

HM: So, he wanted you to sing it. That's great. So, you didn't get in trouble.

S: No, no, no, no, no. He put me on the stage to sing it.

HM: So, you became a performer.

S: Yeah, well.

HM: (Laughs.)

S: From that I started singing. I started writing me little songs and so on. When Edric Connor, now I used to call mihsself "The Scorpion."

HM: That was your first name, was Scorpion?

S: Yes, my first name, The Scorpion, but I get to know Superior and I like that name, but he done had it. Superior had it already I can't get it from him. But it happened that Edric Connor after being away from Mayaro for about twenty or something years, he was coming back to act in a picture called "Fire Down Below" (a few missing words) in Mayaro (two missing syllables). And they asked me to do something to welcome him back. And I did. I'll deliver the verse and the chorus.

9:50

S: (Sings.): Ahh, Edric Connor, that baritone singer, of course we are more than glad, as to welcome you back home in Trinidad.

S: (Speaks.) Right? And that day was a Sunday morning. Went and we stopped there. They called me. And a old truck was the stage. (Laughs.) My old truck. (Laughs.) And I gone up there, man, and I sing. And when, the people, well, they applaud. Man, I make a whole, I make a mess there, man. Yeah. (Laughs.)

HM: It scared you. (Laughs.)

S: Sure. When I come down the stage oh they lift me up they shake me hand. And everybody, "My Clevin, Clevin, boy, you really surprise me today, buddy. You really surprise me." I studyin' now Superior, look, I get Surpriser and I get mihsself. (Laughs.)

HM: That's where Surpriser came from.

S: That's where I get that name. I got that name just by that.

Other: Oh.

HM: That's wonderful. That's wonderful.

S: Yeah.

HM: Well, I was going to say, too, that you've only composed calypso. But when I said how do you know it's calypso, it's because you were listening to calypso.

S: Oh, yes. Yes.

HM: You were listening to these records . . .

S: Yes, yes. Records.

HM: . . . so that's how you knew it was calypso. Because you were writing it in the same tradition as the records you were listening to.

S: Yes. Yes. Yes.

HM: Have you been influenced by any other kind of music?

S: Ah, no, no. Not at all.

HM: Just calypso?

S: Well, I mean we had bongo, the bongo music, and so on and would even stick, the kalenda music and so on.

HM: Kalenda music.

S: Mm-hm. I had little ideas about those songs. But calypso was my, is best thing I know. And up to this point in time, calypso is always on me mind. I sleep and wakin' calypso. I'm telling you this.

HM: You're still thinking about it.

S: Yes. Nothing gets me vexed. I'm always a pleasing person. I always have something humming in me mind.

HM: In your mind. And in . . .

S: I get up from my bed in the morning, I humming a calypso.

HM: So, you're still, you're still writing in your mind. I mean you're still hearing ideas, music and words.

S: Yes, a little. I'll show you something. I have a song that I just write. I'll show you. Yes. And when I dead, I done. (Laughs.)

Others: (Laughter.)

HM: Yeah. Yeah, that's good.

S: Four verses and chorus.

HM: Good. I want to hear that.

S: Yeah.

HM: Where do you find your ideas? Do you get them from the news? Do you get them from what people say?

S: Yes. But I love humor.

HM: You what?

S: Humor.

HM: Human. Humor.

S: Yes. Yes. Humor. I love humor. And I just make up me own humorous. Right? As for instance, I have, I do "Old Age is a Disaster," I said. I did the, I do one called "The World Cup Spray." You probably wonder what I mean by that. Well, it mihsself and me lady, we were watching a football game, you know? And, a World Cup game, in fact, competition. And one of the fellas kicked another one, alright? And they started rolling on the ground. And a man come out, a doctor, or someone who he is, with a spray and he sprayed the player and as the play-the man he jumped up and started kicking again. Me madam tell me she want me to get, get some of that. (Laughs.)

Others: (Laughter.)

HM: She wanted some of that same stuff?

S: For me! (Laughs.)

Others: (Laughter.)

HM: For you. (Laughs.) So that was where the song came from.

S: Yes. I have the song there.

HM: You wrote a song about that.

S: Yeah. Look at this here. Look at this here. Yes, I have, I ain't minding nothing what I cannot sell. I am not minding nothing what I cannot sell.

CM: (To HM) (Missing words) I'm wondering, you understand that?

HM: That I cannot sell, but I didn't hear the first part.

CM: Okay. Well it's like I am not going to take care of anything that I cannot sell.

S: Yeah.

HM: Like a song. Meaning . . .

CM: So, minding, minding is like taking care of.

S: Yeah.

HM: Meaning like to sell the song commercially, or?

CM: No, like, well, when you hear the song you'll know.

OM: You'll understand when you hear the song.

CM: When you hear the song you will know what he talking about.

S: (Laughs.) You know.

HM: Okay, okay. 'Cause I want to hear, to hear that song.

S: (Laughs.) You know.

HM: 'Cause I was just gonna say, you just answered my next question, which is, is there a particular example of where you find your ideas? And you've already given me two, with the World Cup song . . .

S: Yes. Yes.

HM: . . . and even on the train. You know, when you were starting.

S: Yes. Yes.

HM: That, you're getting, A lot of times it's from something you're seeing right . . .

S: Yes. I know.

HM: . . . at the moment. And it immediately goes into a song for you.

S: Yes, yes, of course.

14:58

S: You see there is something we call open topics. Something happen. You'll find everybody doing something, writing something about it.

HM: About that.

S: You know? But I don't think, I does read (a few missing syllables). I'm not writing anything or saying that, because I know somebody . . .

HM: Somebody else.

S: . . . else and they might find better, more favor than . . .

HM: There might be twenty calypsos on that . . .

S: Yes.

HM: . . . on that same topic.

S: (Laughs.) Yes. Yes, you know? So, I look for the humorous side, that little kind of humor, and thing, and so on.

HM: Be a little different.

S: Yes.

HM: I think that's smart from a business point of view because you have the only one.

S: Yes.

HM: You know, instead of one of ten, one of twenty, whatever.

S: Mm-hm. Yeah.

HM: Are there any, in your songs, are there any particular themes over time that you are more attracted to, certain topics, social, political, certain themes in your music that . . .

S: No. Mm-mm.

HM: . . . you, you looking back you can see?

S: No. The political thing. I don't want no part of that at all. I try me best to keep myself away from the politics. Because I just believe I am a calypsonian. I want to get everybody to love me.

HM: You want, you want, you don't want to divide your audience.

S: (Laughs.) Not at all. Not at all. I leave the people and the politics right there. I am not writing.

HM: So, you think it's, you would look at your, all the songs you've written and kind of generally say they are more about current events, something . . .

S: Em. (Hesitant.)

HM: . . . not, not in the news, but just things that happen to you. You see those things.

S: Yeah. Yes, yes. Let me see if I could. Ah alright, as, the old, not, no, there's a calypso I sang about, what's that next song again, gal?

CM: What?

S: She hold up the rubbish truck.

CM: Oh.

OM: (One or two missing words.)

S: She hold up the rubbish truck, and yes and . . .

CM: (Two or three missing words.)

S: (Sings): Anytime the government says cleanup. (Speaks.) "Cleanup Campaign" I call that song. Alright? They had something, the government had something, to, a cleanup exercise program. And I went with them and I leave my wife and I ask her to clean around me place and when I came back home all me furniture's gone. (Laughs.)

HM: Did a little more than you thought. More than you meant. Yeah. So, you wrote a song . . .

S: (Laughs.)

HM: . . . about that.

S: Yes, yes. All me furniture. She leave me with an empty house. But it's (missing word) the furniture what I had. It's what I had.

CM: It's more like humor. Humor. Wit. Humor. And a little risqué too. That's what it is.

HM: But it's more about everyday. More about everyday things. Rather than big . . .

S: Yes. Of course.

HM: . . . news items. That occur to you.

S: Yes.

RT: And that's a category in calypso too. Humorous calypso. Sometimes in the competitions. There's actually a category.

HM: There's actually a category. For . . .

S: Mm-hm.

HM: Did you ever enter the humorous category?

S: Yes. But I didn't win. What it was about four years ago.

HM: Four years ago. So, you were competing as long, as recently as four years ago.

S: Mm-hm. Yes. About four years ago. Yeah.

HM: How are you influenced by your community? Meaning the people that you know, the people in your neighborhood. The people in your town. Wherever you, how are you influenced by them?

S: Yes. Yeah.

HM: How do they influence you?

S: Anywhere, at least, I don't really walk the street and nobody ain't know me. (Laughs.) They call me from a distance.

HM: They all know you.

S: (Laughs.) They all know me. They all know me.

HM: So, what they say to you, what you know about them, what issues, what concerns there, they may have also affect you?

S: I wouldn't say.

HM: No?

S: No.

HM: But so, do they, but does your community affect your songs, in other words do the people, what's important in your neighborhood, do they influence your songs?

CM: No.

HM: And not really?

S: Well, what do I want to say about this? I want to say yes. They, yes, yes.

C: Also?

S: Yes. Yes.

HM: How do, how do they influence you? In what you write?

S: By, you see, they always. When they see me, they are very, they feel very appreciative, and they will be giving me, telling me, what about that song. You understand what I'm saying?

HM: They're encouraging you.

S: They're encouraging me. Yes. Yes. Yes.

HM: That helps you keep going.

S: Ah-hah. (Agrees.)

HM: Makes you feel appreciated.

S: Yeah.

20:01

HM: That you have a place in the community.

S: Surely. Surely. Surely.

HM: That you are recognized as a . . .

S: Surely. Surely.

HM: . . . calypsonian.

S: Oh. Surely. Surely.

HM: And that's an important thing in this country.

S: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yes, I have a lot of, where they honored me. I've been honored. (Wind noise.) I have a lot of, yes, what do you call those, plaques, and . . .

CM: Plaques.

S: . . . so on. I have a lot of that.

HM: He's received plaques and things.

S: Yeah.

HM: You've got them on your wall?

S: Yes! Yes!

CM: Some. (Laughs.)

S: Down in Guayaguayare.

HM: You should or give them to Carmsen to put up.

CM: I have one.

S: Yeah. I have, I was given,

CM: I have one.

S: . . . I have a painting.

CM: Oh, alright. That they gave you.

S: A big painting. A portrait of me. That some, I was honored by the . . .

CM: TUCO.

S: The, yeah.

HM: TUCO.

S: Yeah. I'm getting there, TUCO, the people who do the . . .

CM: Humorous?

S: Not the humorous. Them, boy. The picong business now.

CM: Oh hoh. Extempo?

RT: Extempo. Yeah.

S: Yes.

HM: The extempo.

RT: You did the extempo, too?

S: Yes, I was honored by the extempo section I was.

HM: You were honored by the extempo section.

S: Yes. Yes.

HM: Yeah. So that's good to know, too. That you do extempo also.

S: Mm-hm.

RT: That's such an art form.

CM: When we grew up you did extempo?

S: Yes.

CM: I didn't know that.

S: But not now again. The brain's not working for all that. (Laughs.)

HM: (To CM) What did you just ask?

CM: I asked him if he, if he ever did extempo and he said yes, but he couldn't do that now because his brain would not be . . .

S: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

HM: You have to be really quick to do that.

S: Yes, you have to be very quick, yes. But I did extempo a lot. I did a lot of extempo.

HM: I really appreciate that form.

S: Yes. Yes.

HM: These, the second section of questions I have, besides just a couple of wrap-up questions is sort of more practical. Like, what instrument do you play?

S: None.

HM: None. You just do it all. Without.

S: Nothing. I'll show you. (Surpriser demonstrates using his hand on the table to make a syncopated rhythm by alternating between the heel of his hand, his thumb, and his knuckles.)

HM: Rhythm. Just doing some rhythm.

S: This is, this is what I work with. This is what I work with. (Shows me his hand.)

HM: But when you compose your melody it's all in your head, or you're singing to yourself, or whistle, or what do you do?

S: Yes. Yes, well, now you will see, when you think about a song. You have to get the melody. You, you fix the chorus.

HM: The chorus first.

S: Yes, you fix your chorus and that, this you get your beat from that.

HM: That gives you your beat.

S: And you get a melody, for the, for the verses.

HM: So, you get your chorus set.

S: Correct.

HM: All the words done, too.

S: Yes.

HM: So, the chorus is finished and then you work backwards, really.

S: Yes. Yes. Yes. Because if you only do the verses first, you mightn't be able to get . . .

HM: Get there.

S: . . . the chorus. So, you want to, you have to get the chorus first.

HM: That's the most important part. It has to work first . . .

S: Yes. Of course it is.

HM: . . . or it's just a waste of time.

S: Yes. Yes.

HM: But then if it's good that inspires you then to finish the rest.

S: Yes. To finish the rest.

HM: You've sort of got some forward momentum

S: Right. Exactly so. Exactly so. Mm-hm.

HM: That's really good.

S: Yeah.

HM: So I that was going to say, how you start. So, do you, when you do, when an idea starts for you is it words and the mu-, just the idea and the music or just the words.

S: And.

HM: What works. How does that happen for you?

S: You start with the words, with the . . .

HM: The idea?

S: As I said, the music for the chorus.

HM: The music comes first for the chorus?

S: For the chorus, yes. And with that you could get the music for the verse. You know? You get the music for the verse.

HM: So you have all the music finished first, or . . .?

S: Yes. Well.

HM: You're finishing the chorus first.

S: Chorus and first verse, and you would mold the verses, you follow your verses, sure, until you've made the fourth.

HM: So, the chorus.

S: Mm-hm.

HM: Then the first verse.

S: Yes.

HM: And then the other verses.

S: And the other verses. Yes. Yes. And you could have change chorus in between there.

HM: You might change it.

S: You could change your chorus, but not the, the lyrics, not the melody.

OM: The lyrics.

HM: Keeping the melody the same but you might change the lyrics.

S: Yeah.

HM: But I was kind of going back. When you have your first idea for one of these songs, like the World Cup Spray song, do you, did you, just take those words and then add a melody to that, or did it all come at once, the world cup spray and the . . .

S: Mm-hm.

HM: . . .melody you sang to it, all at once?

24:47

S: Mm-hm. Yeah. Well, let me show you for example. When that idea came to me, I said well the lady sent me to get, right? So, she tell me, (Sings.) Get some, Surpriser. (Speaks.) Right?

HM: So that was maybe the first thing?

S: That is the correct. (Sings.) Get some, Surpriser. (Speaks.) Then I start the line, now that is the chorus, the chorus line there. I got the chorus line. (Sings and taps rhythm on table.) Well, I was watching a World Cup game on me television, that how me and me dame, gon' end up in contention. (Speaks.) You know what I mean? So, then I use the (Sings.) Get some, Surpriser.

HM: And then you were ready to write the rest of the chorus . . .

S: (Whispers.) Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

HM: . . . at that point because you have the whole story.

S: Exactly. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

HM: That's great. That's wonderful. Because in my experience when I'm writing if I don't have some words, a phrase, and some music, it doesn't stick. I have to have . . .

S: Mm-hm

HM: . . . some of both

S: Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

HM: But then I get excited and it gets me going to finish . . .

S: Mm-hm.

HM: . . . the rest.

S: You finish it. Yes. Of course. Of course. Of course. Of course.

HM: Do you write anything down before you're finished, do you write down the chorus? Or do you just get it all finished in your head before you write it down?

S: Mm, I used to do that long ago, but not now. (Laughs.)

HM: When you started out you were just writing it in your head.

S: I write me song, when I finished the whole song, then I write it.

HM: Then you write it down.

S: But now . . . (Laughs.)

HM: But now you have to get it down while you're thinking about it, right?

S: I have to write it.

HM: Because you probably weren't recording anything at that point . . .

S: Ah-hah, Ah-ah (Agrees.)

HM: . . . until later. You were just maybe just writing the words down.

S. Yeah.

HM: Did you have any way to record the melody so you wouldn't forget it?

S: Nothing.

HM: Yeah. You just had to remember it.

S: I had to remember. I had to remember. Yes.

HM: I would have to practice. (Laughs.)

S: Now I had a fellow they called the Spitfire, deceased. He was my mentor, really.

HM: Spitfire was your mentor.

S: Yes, and he's the fella who taught me. You know, when I write me song and thing he would sit down with me and tell me: "You see this? Take out this and you will put that there and so on."

HM: So he was giving you guidance. He was teaching. A veteran.

S: Guidance and, yeah. and something he left with me. When you write a song. That what you write is only the skeleton of the song. Okay? Then after you finish write the song and everything, you start to take out and put on, now you putting the flesh on the song.

HM: You put on, what was the last word? You put on the . . .

CM: The flesh.

S: You're putting the flesh.

HM: So you have the bones. But then you have to put the rest of it.

S: Yes. Yes. You're putting the flesh on all the songs. You know.

HM: Yeah, but you go ahead and lay out the whole structure.

S: Yes, the whole structure. Now you start taking, you're taking out and listening, that kind of thing. You move it and you (missing word) it and you, if you catch yourself, if you really catch yourself, you wouldn't stop, you know. (Laughs.) You say "well, that good now, that good now, I think that good now."

HM: But you have to do that all, you were doing that all in your head, it wasn't, you weren't on paper, crossing words out.

Surpriser: No, no, no, no. And I write with lead pencil.

HM: Oh, you did use to write down with pencil, so you could erase and change.

S: I erase all the time. I didn't write with pen. I write with a pencil throughout.

HM: So you could change easily.

S: Yes. Yes.

HM: Yeah. Somebody said one time that writing is mainly rewriting. So, it's, I mean, it's writing but then going back and making adjustments, refining.

S: Yes. Well, that is it. You refine it.

HM: Making it better, improving it.

S: Yes, yes.

HM: So, you better have an eraser.

S: Mm-hm, Mm-hm.

HM: I'm just seeing here. We're answering intuitively my questions so, which is wonderful. Did being a performer, 'cause I talked to some composers who don't perform, they only write and they give their music to other people to perform.

S: Mm-hm.

HM: Does being a performer, or did being a performer affect your writing, did it, was there any effect that that had, knowing that you were writing for yourself, versus if you were writing for someone else, how did being a performer and a writer affect your writing?

S: Mm-hm.

HM: Is there, was there any difference you can see, that being, performing your own songs might have made?

S: Yeah, well. The answer to this. Go ahead, say that again I may ask?.

HM: How did performing affect your composing?

S: Mm-hm. Well, come with the rest. Say if I was writing for someone?

HM: Versus if you were writing for someone.

S: For someone. But I use the same thing. I use the same thing.

HM: The same approach? So, maybe it didn't affect it at all.

S: Yes, it's the same approach. I wouldn't give you something I wouldn't like to hear.

HM: You wouldn't sing, so . . .

S: Yeah. Right.

HM: In other words, you wouldn't write for someone else something that you wouldn't feel good singing on stage yourself.

S: Uh-uh, uh-uh. I want to sit down and listen to it. (Laughs.)

29:56

HM: So, in a sense you are writing for yourself. Whether someone else sings it or not, you're still writing it for yourself.

S: Right, right, right, right. Yes, of course.

HM: And, uh, you've answered this question. About you still write. Yes, you're still writing. Everyday. In your mind.

S: Yes. Yes. Yes. I have it in my mind. Calypso is on my mind throughout, throughout. Right. Always.

HM: Tell me a little bit, we were talking mainly about touring, but, I mean composing, but tell me about touring in the Caribbean, where you went and some about that history.

S: Oh-ho. I went Grenada, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, Barbados, Dominica, Monserrat, Antigua. And I didn't go for a day, you know.

HM: You didn't what?

S: I didn't go for one day or two days.

HM: One day or two days, you were . . .

S: When we reach an island we go to every little village.

HM: Ah, you traveled around on each of those islands.

S: Surely. We'd sleep in the hall. (Laughs.) We sleep in the hall and the next, then we move to another place. And sometimes we spend, we spend one month or more. I'd say that we stayed in St. Vincent, we spent about two months in St. Vincent.

HM: Were there other performers traveling with you?

S: Yeah, well there's mihsself.

HM: A package?

S: A fella that was actin' on a bicycle.

HM: You were traveling on bicycle.

S: No, no. He was an actor.

CM: There was another performer.

HM: There was another actor.

CM: Like a troupe. A group of performers.

HM: It was like a troupe. So some were actors. There would be an actor, there would be a calypsonian.

CM: A magician.

HM: Different things, a magician.

S: He stayin' on the bicycle and take off the front wheel.

CM: Acrobatics and so on.

S: Yes. He have this wings, nut nut. He don't have no spine I don't know, and he take off the front wheel, put it down, and his foot still on the pedal. He come back and he put back on the wheel.

HM: While he was still on the bicycle.

S: And he ride. On the stage I'm talking about, not in the road. (Laughs.)

HM: On the stage. Wow. This in the States they would call these vaudeville, or traveling, sometimes they would be selling . . .

S: Yeah.

HM: . . . medicine. They would call them medicine shows, so it would be mostly alcohol, but they would be selling. But they would draw people . . .

CM: Yes.

S: Mm-hm.

HM: . . . with these . . .

CM: Acts.

HM: . . . shows, with these acts.

S: Yes. Yes.

HM: But, who was putting these tours together? Who, was it an advertiser? Or who was organizing them?

S: Well, the fella on the bicycle, he was the boss man. He was the man.

HM: So, he organized, the whole thing, he hired the people. He hired you.

S: Yes, of course. He hired me.

HM: How many years did you do that?

S: I did it, a two-year contract I had. With him, through the Caribbean. You know, through those islands and so on. I did that two years with him.

HM: What years, roughly would that have been.

S: It was '57-'59.

HM: '57 through '59.

S: Yeah.

HM: That's wonderful.

S: Yeah.

HM: Well, is there anything else that you want to add? The, I, we answered all my questions . . .

S: (Laughs.)

HM: . . . but maybe there's something else that I didn't ask that you would like to add. Anything?

S: Now let me go for the, let me say, I mean, after, what's after this?

HM: After this, is that what you're saying?

S: Yeah, what we're doing after this?

HM: Oh, well, we're going to eat. We're going to have lunch. But I have no plans.

CM: Okay, well, no, he was just hopin' to play one of the songs for you.

Others: Yeah. That would be great.

(Edit.)

(A recording of "Old Age is a Disaster," performed by Surpriser at Kalypso Revue tent in 2000, starts, stops, and then is re-started.)

CM: That's it.

Others: (Several missing sentences.)

OM: (Popping sound.) That's a short.

HM: I can set this down. You want to just start it over?

OM: Yeah.

HM: You can just start it over.

33:49

S: (To tent audience: Good night, ladies and gentlemen.

Age is honor me grandparents used to say
 It's ah treasure da we all should enjoy one day
 Ah used to pay me attention to their conversation
 Dey say age bring reason and respect to every man
 Well, Ah always cherished de thoughts dat one day I'll be
 Enjoying de honor dat age would provide for me
 But ah find is ah lie ah would tell you why
 My whole life is a misery
 Plagued with hypertension or some strange condition
 Threatening restriction to my most important functions

Now checking quite carefully

Ah come up wid dis philosophy
 (Background vocals: Age is a disaster, old age is disappointment and horror)
 Big brother, Things ah could ah do before
 Honor make me can't do dem no more
 (Age is a disaster) Why they say it's a number (old age is disappointment and horror)
 Arthritis controls me joints
 Have me losing reason to a point
 (Age is a disaster,) You could ask Pretender (old age is disappointment and horror)
 Me mind does tell me to go
 When ah try de body saying no
 (Age is a disaster, old age is disappointment and horror)

Ah remember in de days when ah was ah youth
 D. Surpriser, Ah was fascinating and cute
 Ah was the power of vigour, ah genius in every field
 Ah master of professionalism and skill
 When it come to calypso Ah had ah popular voice
 Every show da Ah go Ah was always the lady's choice
 Now that age intervene and wrinkles stepped in
 De table keep turning 'round
 Endurance falling down tolerance on de ground
 When Ah walk 'round de town ladies watching me like ah clown

At de rate I keep noticing, strange and funny things start happening
 (Age is a disaster, old age is disappointment and horror)
 Ever so regularly undertakers checking home by me
 (Age is a disaster) Not a rumor (old age is disappointment and horror)
 Posing as some longtime friend, Passing little handout now and den
 (Age is a disaster) Why you say is a number? (old age is disappointment and horror)
 Well, brother, ketch one wid ah piece of string, so Ah know is me length dey measuring
 (Age is a disaster, old age is disappointment and horror)

CM: Long ago. That's what undertakers used to do. To measure you for the coffin.

Others: (Indistinct.)

As ah sportsman, many thrilling battles Ah won
 Ah was ah champion in de javelin and marathon
 Ah used to conquer me opponents in fine style
 Now honor have me once ah man, twice ah child
 If Ah try to regain de fame Ah eh have ah chance
 I am nothing but a cultural annoyance
 Well sometime Ah does cry whenever I try
 Failure's got me spellbound
 Ah does feel like Ah strong when de time come around
 But I "oops" on de ground so different to when Ah was young

Ah used to tackle old man Dick
 He couldn't walk without ah walking stick
 (Age is a disaster, old age is disappointment and horror)
 Ask brother, Dat man tell me one day, "Wey eh pass you, doh feel you get away."

(Age is a disaster,) I tellin' you (old age is disappointment and horror)
 Big Brother, When Ah met me wife Cathy, Papa Rocky she used to call me
 (Age is a disaster,) all right, all right, (old age is disappointment and horror)
 Yes, papa, Right now when I pass by she, hear de whisper, "Softie, softie."
 (Age is a disaster, old age is disappointment and horror)

Those present for interview and live recording audience: (Laughter and applause.)

Emcee (Sprangalang): Surpriser.

HM: Do another verse?

S: Yes.

I am warning you, de younger generations
 To do something to avoid dis situation
 Sometimes you may have to go down on your knees and pray
 And hope that this gracious honor eh pass your way
 When your hair turn silver and it start to drop off you head
 And your losing your vigor my boy you better off dead
 Now while you are young, you're vicious and strong
 Please take dis wonderful note
 Place your concentration in the right direction
 Know your obligation and enjoy de pleasures of earth

Now, some old men does walk de street, they forget dat age have a limit
 (Age is a disaster, old age is disappointment and horror)
 Big brother, when they see a well-shaped chick, if you see old style and monkey trick
 (Age is a disaster,) Eh, eh, brother (old age is disappointment and horror)
 Yes, papa, Ah young girl dey called Yvonne, tell me how she had ah (missing word) wid one
 (Age is a disaster,) I tellin' you (old age is disappointment and horror)
 Yes, papa, She (two missing words) to split de scene, She couldn't take de head dat he was
 pushing
 (Age is a disaster, old age is disappointment and horror) Aiiee.

Emcee: (To audience.) 69 years old next month.

S: (To people present for interview.) That was 2000.

Emcee: Form is temporal. Class is permanent. You know what is worrying me, boy? Them fellas
 tired and they're slow and t'ing, boy, but oh god they have this calypso down to a science, boy.
 You have, you gotta have the next verse from the old man? Yeah. Let me go back again.
 Surpriser doh run 'way. We're gonna get the next verse. It's a bad one. Them young boys have
 them energy like rain, but the elders stand you up. Papi. Come back. Sing Papi.

(Surpriser sings)

Ah remembe in de days when Ah was ah youth
 D. Surpriser, Ah was fascinating and cute
 Ah was the power of vigor, ah genius in every field

Ah was a master of professionalism and skill
 When it come to calypso Ah had ah popular voice
 Every show da Ah go Ah was always the lady's choice
 Now that age intervene and wrinkles step in
 De table keep turning 'round
 Endurance falling down tolerance on de ground
 When Ah walk 'round de town ladies watching me like ah clown

Now, at de rate I keep noticing, strange and funny things start happening
 (Age is a disaster), Not a rumor (old age is disappointment and horror)
 Ever so regularly undertakers checking home by me
 (Age is a disaster,) Why they say it's ah number? (old age is disappointment and horror)
 Posing as me longtime friend, Passing little notes out now and den
 (Age is a disaster) (missing words) (old age is disappointment and horror)
 Ah, yes man, ketch one wid ah piece of string, so Ah know is me length dey measuring
 Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, thank you
 (Age is a disaster, old age is disappointment and horror)

OM: Nice one.

Emcee: (To tent audience.) Put your hands . . . (Recorded version of "Old Age" ends.)

(Applause by those present for the interview.)

End of interview