

Interview subject: G.B. Ballantyne

Interviewer: J. Hunter Moore

Date: September 26, 2017

Location of interview: National Academy for the Performing Arts (NAPA), Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

Actual name: Gregory Ballantyne

Date of birth: September 6, 1951

Place of birth: San Fernando, Trinidad

Lived abroad: Lived in Jamaica in 1985

Awards (as of March 2018): International Extempo Monarch (1990), International Humorous Calypso Monarch (1995)

Best songs/best-known songs: "Calypso Rising," "Ramajay," "Carnival Children," "Ribbons"

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Individuals heard during the interview:

GB: G.B. Ballantyne

HM: Hunter Moore

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

Bacchanal: public quarrel

Meh: my

Petrotrin: the state-owned oil company of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

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Subject sings: 4:06, 4:28, 4:37, 9:57

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Notes about interview: the final (approx.) 45 seconds of the interview was on an unrelated topic and has not been included

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Interview:

HM: I'm sitting here with Gregory Ballantyne on September 26, 2017. And tell me what instruments you play?

GB: I play the steel pan, mouth organ, drums, and I'm currently learning the keyboard.

HM: And what do you write on, when you write music. What do you use most?

GB: I just compose out of thin air. I use a portable cassette recorder. Old school (two missing syllables).

HM: So, you don't really have an instrument in your hands?

GB: No. I'm not limited by my playing ability. (Laughter.)

HM: That's good. (Laughter.) That's good. When did you begin writing calypsos?

GB: Ooh, boy, back in Hope E.C. School, Tobago, at the tender age of nine.

HM: At nine.

GB: As a senior I won the arts festival in scholarly speaking and verse speaking and started dabbling in music as well, yeah.

HM: But what interested you in calypso in particular?

GB: I think it was just in my blood. I don't remember having any particular inspiration back then. It's just something that came natural. I was the kind of guy who did doze off in class, not doze off, but daze off, you know.

HM: Yeah. Look out the window.

GB: Yeah. And because something would fill my head, that I would need to work on, I just felt a vibe, you know, and I would lose track of whatever the teacher was saying, you know, because I was just, I was in my own little world.

HM: Well, I know you write other kinds of music besides calypso, so what makes it calypso? How do you know when you're writing calypso?

GB: Calypso. Well calypso has a unique beat, you know, per se, it has a unique rhythm that is all its own. You know, once you go above a certain pace, it becomes calypso. Even if you started off doing something that was originally R&B, if you go above a certain tempo, it's automatically in that zone that we call calypso.

HM: So, you're hearing that rhythm in your head . . .

GB: Mm-hm.

HM: . . . when you're composing . . .

GB: Yep.

HM: . . . and so you know that it's a calypso now. It might have started out as something else.

GB: (Laughs.) Yes. Yes.

HM: But now it's a calypso. So, it has more to do with the beat than the lyric itself?

GB: Calypso as I said is identified primarily by the beat, the rhythm. Yep. Mm-hm.

HM: When you are writing a calypso are you influenced by other kinds of music?

GB: Oh yes, I listen to everything. I listen to rock, reggae, gospel. So, I know that these influences are impacting me as much as I may not, you know, want to admit it. It must. It must.

HM: Sure.

GB: You become what you imbibe.

HM: Sure. And what you hear.

GB: Mm-hm.

HM: What about the older calypso, more trad-, you know, traditional calypso, is that influencing you, too?

GB: Oh yes, definitely. I listen to a lot of Roaring Lion, and Attila. I was very excited about the documentary you put together.

(Note: G.B. thought that HM was the maker of a documentary film about Jamaican mento music, "Pepper and Pimiento.")

HM: Oh yeah.

GB: I learned a lot from it. Lord Flea, and the Lord Fly and these guys. Very exciting, you know.

HM: Yeah. So, all of the traditional as well as contemporary is having an effect . . .

GB: Definitely. Definitely.

HM: . . . when you're composing.

GB: Impacted by everything.

HM: When, where do you, I know this is, as I'm a songwriter, too, where . . .

GB: Where do I get inspiration?

HM: Yeah. Where do your ideas come from? I mean what inspires you?

GB: Anywhere . . .

HM: Anything.

GB: . . . and everywhere.

HM: Anything.

GB: Anything. I'll be looking at championship league football, which I love. I play football. I look at football. And out of a clear blue sky a song may just drop into meh spirit and I have to just dive for a recorder and, and capture it or otherwise it probably won't come back, you know? So, it's, half of the songs I write, I like to say the songs write me, more than I write them, you know?

HM: So, it's happening really before you even are aware.

GB: Exactly.

HM: I mean, it's just there. Your brain . . .

GB: My job is just to catch it.

HM: Your brain's working.

GB: All the time.

HM: You don't say, "Oh, that would make a good song." Your brain is just working.

GB: Once in a while I will do that, but I find seven times out of ten, the song comes.

HM: It's happening.

GB: It's like I'm on a frequency. And I just receiving vibrations and I just need to capture them and put them on paper or . . .

HM: Do you have any stories you could tell about a particular song . . .

GB: Oh, yes.

HM: . . . and where you were when you had . . .

GB: Oh yes.

HM: . . . the inspiration? That would be, could you tell us . . .

GB: Oh yes.

HM: . . . what the song, what was the name . . .

GB: "Calypso Rising," which most people put down as my best work to date. I was walking home from work. I was working at, in Petrotrin as a public relations officer and just short of my home, five, twenty yards from my home. I heard, (Sings.) "Rising out of the ghetto of third world stagnation." (Speaks.) That's all. So, I run home, throw my briefcase in the car, told my wife, "I

think there's some kind of spirit in the road. I just heard something." Because I know I didn't hear it from anybody's radio, no external source. I heard it in my head. So, I went back out and I heard nothing else. So, I came back inside and I put, I added a line. (Sings.) Rising out of the ghetto of third world stagnation/Reaching out for tomorrow with a world vibration. (Speaks.) And I started to build the song from there. (Sings.) I hear a song, I hear a cry/Some say it wrong, I can't see why. (Speaks.) And the next thing I knew I had "Calypso Rising" on my hand, which most people will tell you is my best work to date.

HM: And, but there, you know, when you look back at it, there was no particular reason why that idea just happened . . .

GB: Nope.

HM: . . . at that point.

GB: Nope.

HM: It wasn't something you read.

GB: Nothing.

HM: It wasn't something . . .

GB: It had nothing to do with me.

HM: It just . . .

GB: Like I said. This song just came. That one line. One line. Lyrics and melody together. Just came out of nowhere. But the freakiest song I think I've ever written is a song called "Time." 'Cause I know myself. I normally write lyrics and melody together simultaneously.

5: 09

HM: Oh good, that's a good . . .

GB: Okay?

HM: . . . question, too.

GB: I normally put . . .

HM: At the same time.

GB: The melody has a bit of a lead. Okay?

HM: Sometimes . . .

GB: I could la-la a few bars and I put the words afterwards.

HM: It comes a little bit after.

GB: Yeah. But generally, words and music together. This particular song, which I call "Time" just came to me, like out of the blue. And no melody. Just lyrics. I was sitting with a girl in a room. And I just started pacing up and down like a madman. I said to her: "Write this: Time does not move as we who traverse time's horizon, yet we perceive in the future and past." She said, "What?" I said, "Just write what you hear, because there's more comin'. I don't have time to edit. I will, I will try to fix it afterwards." It just came out of nowhere and I dictated the entire song, or what ended up being the entire song, called "Time," which I licensed to Sugar Aloes. Alright? Back in 1982, I think it was, okay? The freakiest thing about it is, I put the melody to it afterwards. And I was reading a book about six or seven years later called *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind* by Depak Chopra, and everything I said in the song is in the book, and I never read the book before . . .

HM: That's wild.

GB: . . . I wrote the song. That is wild. Yeah. "Time."

HM: That's good. Well, I . . .

GB: And I could never prove to anyone that I didn't read the book before I wrote the song.

HM: No. How would you?

GB: That whole cyclical concept of time. Everything is in the song and I never read the book until about seven years afterwards.

HM: Was it word for word or just the idea?

GB: Almost word for word.

HM: That's amazing.

GB: Amazing

HM: Yeah.

GB: So, I'm satisfied that there's some kind of energy, some kind of vibration.

HM: It must have been the time to write that, you know?

GB: Yeah. Yeah.

HM: 'Cause I've noticed that in Nashville, that if I think of a really good title, if . . .

GB: Somebody else, somewhere . . .

HM: . . . was thinking . . .

GB: Will also have the same idea.

HM: If I don't get busy and write it, then . . .

GB: Somebody will jump the gun and do it before you.

HM: And it won't be because they heard me.

GB: Nope.

HM: It's just in the air.

GB: That's right, that's right.

HM: You know?

GB: There's a frequency. (Laughter.)

HM: Are there any themes you tend to go back to in your music? That looking at your music that you've written?

GB: Oh yes. Oh yes. I, not just themes. There are some lines I have to be careful not to repeat in songs that I write for different people, you know? One is about equality of people, you know. That we should all see each other as one. That's something that comes out because that's me. It comes out in my work and I have to be careful to shift it and say it in different ways, at different times.

HM: So, it's like you're writing the same song over and over.

GB: Yes. I guess growing up with a Baptist grandmother in Tobago she imbedded some qualities in me that are still coming out in my work.

HM: That's a good message.

GB: Yeah. (Laughs.)

HM: Are there any others you can think of, besides that?

GB: First world, third world perception. I have an issue with that, too. And that comes out from time to time, you know. And that geography about the, you know, first world and the third world. I think we, I am trying to, in my own little way, to kind of work past that, you know.

HM: You've heard the phrase two-thirds world.

GB: Of course. Yes.

HM: And I like that.

GB: Yes.

HM: Are you influenced by what's going on in the community?

GB: Of course, you are. Yeah. But I tend to shy away from doing that because the average composer, I hate to think of myself as average, I think, I like to think I'm a little better than average (Laughs.) The average composer tends to dive at those topics without thinking. Like I got called by couple of people in the last couple of weeks tell me they wanted me to do a song on something that was very much in the news in Trinidad over the past three or four weeks, the Syrian community saying that they are the one per-centers and they are the most powerful group in society. They said that to Anthony Bourdain when he came down here.

HM: Oh yeah. When he did his show.

GB: "Parts Unknown," "Parts Unknown." And they rush me like it was an original idea and I'm thinking to myself, "I think we're going to have a wash of songs next year on that topic, so I do not want to write on that."

HM: 'Cause, I mean, calypso is known for being topical about . . .

GB: Yes, it is.

HM: . . . you know, mentioning the prime minister's name, or whatever.

GB: But I just finished a song yesterday in which I said that the role of calypso is changing, or has to change, because our role is now being usurped by social media and the multiplicity of media. Everybody's smart phone, you know, has access to all kinds of stuff. So, the role of the calypsonian, where he traditionally would come forward and bring to the public's knowledge all the little secrets of the society and this little bacchanal here and there, in the, especially the upper echelons of society, that role has changed. But there are people who are still set on putting, leaving the calypsonian in that mode. And I think we need to evolve out of that.

HM: That's interesting. Yeah. There's not the need for the oral . . .

GB: Nope. There's too much media.

HM: . . . passing the news from mouth to mouth.

GB: We are no longer the voice of the people, per se. Yes, we are still the voice, but we're not the news carriers anymore. The news is there in your face . . .

HM: So, what is . . .

GB: . . . all day long.

HM: . . . what's needed? I just went to the Shadow tribute, well, on Saturday night.

GB: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. Yup. Yup. "The Man, the Moods, His Music."

HM: It's interesting with him, that his, some of his songs were much broader. They were beyond the topical.

GB: Yes, he is. Well, he is.

HM: 'What's the meaning of life'?



GB: That's right.

HM: You know?

9:56

GB: That's right. (Sings.) Man can take away my honor. Man can put me (two or three missing syllables). (Speaks.) "My Belief," I think is the name of that song. Fantastic song by Shadow. Yeah. You can sing that in any part of the world. They can lift you up and drop you in Moscow, Vienna, Timbuktu. You can sing that and it would make sense to your audience hearing it for the very first time. That's the kind of work I want to do. And that's where I think calypso needs to go.

HM: He was kind of a groundbreaker in that way.

GHB: That's where calypso needs to go, you know?

HM: Did your time in Jamaica, you were only there for a year, but did it affect your music?

GB: Not directly. I won the calypso competition on campus, performed with Byron Lee, had some great fun on the north coast and stuff. But it didn't really affect my music. I was too busy studying sociology and psychology and all kind of stuff, completing my assignments on a daily basis.

HM: Just to get your business done.

GB: Yeah. Yeah.

HM: The last few questions I have just basically are sort of the practical thing, and you already told me that when you're composing, you don't have an instrument . . .

GB: No, I'm not, I'm not, I don't allow my composing to be limited by my playing ability. I do however have a fantastic guitarist, a guy called Lennox Saunders, with whom I work.

HM: So, you work with him.

GB: After I've comp-, put the thing together, I rush to his house and he will then pick up his guitar and I will tell him, "Mm-mm, not that. That's, I don't feel that chord. I feel this, I feel that. Not Eb, maybe F." 'Cause I knew, I'm beginning to learn, a few, a bit of the language. Right?

HM: So, you can tell him. But you've got the melody set. The melody's there.

GB: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. The melody's there.

HM: And then you're, he's working with, he's suggesting chords.

GB: And he has fantastic ears. So, if for example I sing like (Sings.) I hear a song. (Talks.) He will hit (Hums a melody.) He will find the accompanying chord and if he plays a chord and I don't

feel it, I'll say, "Mm-mm. Give me something else." And he will give me three or four options and I will say, "Oh, yeah. That, that's it."

HM: Ah, that's very interesting.

GB: So, he's an integral part of . . .

HM: Of helping you realize the song.

GB: Yeah. Build the thing and give it shape.

HM: Do you write anything down before it's finished in your head, or you just put it on a hand recorder?

GB: Both ways. Yeah. The hand recorder is faster. Yeah. That's why I was so excited about the, your digital recorder.

HM: You can just carry that with you.

GB: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

HM: But typically, so you just, you're working on it in your head. Do you put it down before you're finished with it?

GB: Yes, yes. Yeah. I put it down in pieces. I come back and look at it dispassionately a week or two later on, or a day later because sometimes the idea comes in the middle like I said of nowhere. I'm downtown shopping on the way to talk with you and a vibe just drops in and so I reach for something, record it, and then I go home . . .

HM: And fin . . .

GB: and later or tomorrow I look at it again.

HM: And you may not have the whole song. You may . . .

GB: No, no, no.

HM: . . . may just have a verse or a chorus . . .

GB: It may just be a line.

HM: . . . or a piece.

GB: It may just be a line, it may just be a phrase.

HM: But like you said, if you don't get that much down you might lose it.

GB: It may never come back, because you get distracted by the other noises you will hear in the course of the day, especially musical noises. That will knock out from your head.

HM: Well, you hear a radio or whatever . . .

GB: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. That's it.

HM: So, you generally carry a recorder with you?

GB: A recorder with me. Yep.

HM: Are you using a cassette recorder?

GB: I like old school. Yeah. Because with . . .

HM: Me, too.

GB: . . . a cassette recorder you can stop and rewind and erase.

HM: And you can hear it but with a . . .

GB: But with these fancy digital gizmos, every time you stop, it's, you got a new number and it goes on as a new file.

HM: It's harder. I'm so used, 'cause with a handheld recorder you can press rewind, leave the play on, and you can hear it go back to a certain place.

GB: Exactly (Imitates sound of tape rewinding.) Yeah. Exactly. (Laughs.)

HM: I've got a shoebox full of cassettes, shoeboxes full of cassettes.

GB: I'm stuck on my old cassette recorder. I know I will graduate. I have one of these at home, actually a smaller one, but it digital and fancy, but I like meh cassette recorder. It gives me the option to rewind, to stop, to replay, fast forward, erase, without having to deal with all the digital tracking.

HM: Oh, yeah. I'm still figuring it out. Is there anything I didn't cover that you can think of? That's really kind of the breadth of what I wanted to ask you . . .

GB: Well that's okay.

HM: . . . that I was thinking about. Oh, how do you get your songs recorded that you don't write, that you're not recording yourself? How do those . . .?

GB: These clients call me and say, "Listen GB, I want a song." And they . . .

HM: Okay. So, you're basically commissioning, they're commissioning songs from you.

GB: Exactly. And more often than not. They don't even have a topic. They just say I leave it up to you. You know, I want something . . .

HM: I want a song.

GB: . . . social commentary. I want to make the Dimanche Gras, I want to make it to the Soca Monarch. Whatever. They leave it up to me most of the time.

HM: How long, are you still performing yourself?

GB: I'm actually, I've been off the stage now for twelve years, but I plan to return this year, all things being equal and if. . .

HM: I'll be back.

GB: . . . they'll take me back I plan to come back on stage. In fact, I already finish my song, something called "Vintage."

HM: Ah, well, you told Ray a line from that.

GB: Yeah. Yes. I sang a couple of lines for your guys.

HM: I liked that. I liked that. I can, I could relate to that.

GB: Yeah. Yeah. I think it's a nice reintroduction after twelve years.

HM: When you were starting though, before you made a name for yourself, how did you get your songs, how did that work, how did getting songs to artists who would record them?

GB: Well, I had to start first.

HM: Well, you were recording yourself.

GB: I was recording myself, and my repu-, people heard my songs and somewhere along the line somebody realized I could write for other people. And the requests started coming.

HM: But they heard you sing them first and then they said maybe, you know, I could do that song, or maybe you could write a song for me.

GB: Yep. Yeah. Yeah. I was singing first in 1986. I started over in Sparrow's Hideaway. A song called 'Big Country Attitude.' I used to get six encores on a Saturday night.

15:03

HM: Wow.

GB: I distinctly remember Karuso Kid was the emcee saying after encore number six, he not calling me back out. He said, "The guy's young. You're gonna kill him. Six is enough." Yeah. I had the number one song in the tent in my debut year. Made it all the way to Dimanche Gras as a result.

HM: I'll have to find that.

GB: "Big Country Attitude."

HM: "Big Country Attitude."

GB: Mm-hm. Sparrow's Hideaway, 1986.

HM: Were you signed as a writer to anybody, like an exclusive songwriter at any point?

GB: I did that for a brief while with Ice Records, Ed Grant. In my debut year, by the way, in 1986 I also launched Denyse Plummer and Rikki Jai. Denyse Plummer?

HM: They had songs, you had songs with them.

GB: I wrote their brand, their very first calypsos.

HM: Their very first calypsos.

GB: Yeah.

HM: I'm familiar with them as artists. That was a very big year for you.

GB: Den-. A very big year. In 1986. Yep.

HM: Well, great. Well, thanks very much.

GB: I've also won the Extempo competition in 1990.

HM: 1990. Yeah. Tell me that, tell me, so you . . .

GB: International Extempo Monarch in 1990, and 1995 I won the International Humorous Calypso Monarch with a song called "Gas" and another one called "Dog in the Roti."

HM: (Laughs.)

GB: Very, very funny stuff.

(Edit.)

End of interview