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*DREADNESS: The Mystic Power, Philosophy and
Performance of Shadow 1941-2021*

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“BRING DOWN THE RHYTHM!” –
SHADOW & THE RISE OF SPEED SOCA



Martin Raymond

1. “Is The Last Days”

The year was 2000 - the dawning of the new millennium. In the up-market suburb of Maraval, in Port of Spain, Trinidad, the air was full of new possibilities. In the cafeteria of the futuristic Caribbean Sound Basin recording studios, the neon-rimmed steel drums mounted in the ceiling above shone their chrome light on the musicians below. Sitting by himself, Winston Bailey, the seminal calypsonian known as The Shadow, stared off into the distance. Suddenly, apropos of nothing, and to no one in particular, he declared:

“Is the last days!”¹

All conversation and idle chatter ceased instantly. Everyone froze. On the rare occasions that the Shadow deigned to speak it was wise to listen, because serious business was usually afoot. Still staring into the distance, Shadow frowned. Then his face darkened, as if glimpsing the event horizon of coming events too terrible to contemplate...

“Is the last days, I tell you!”

¹ Author’s recollection

He slowly lifted his menacing six-foot frame from his seat, his penetrating gaze touched on those to the left and to the right, his bloodshot eyes daring anyone to challenge the obvious truth of his statement. A pause. Nervous glances exchanged. Then a lone voice spoke up - Mr. Pearce, the head of Cassette Duplication. Clearly not in the least intimidated by Shadow's carefully cultivated reputation of schizophrenic mystery: the calypsonian rumored to be a possible dabbler in the dark arts of Obeah; the black-clad cipher who turned the voices in his head - "the bassman from Hell" - into a monstrous hit record that forever changed the course of calypso...

"Winston?" prodded Mr. Pearce gently. "Why you so? What the ass you mean is the last days?"

"Look!" thundered The Shadow. "God send the mealy bug parasite to kill plants.

Heads nodded in agreement..

"AIDS!"

The word hung in the morning Maraval air like a death sentence.

"God send AIDS to kill man!"

More nods of agreement. We could all see where this was headed. Or so we thought...

"And..."

His dread gaze alighted on the one-man musical revolution known as Sheldon

"\$hel\$hok" Benjamin...

"... God send *little boys* with drum machines to *kill* music!"

Flinging his chair aside, The Shadow stalked out.

2. "Bring Down The Rhythm!"

A few years before, the young soca singer Keith 'Ajala' Sutherland had done the unexpected. After creating "Horsie" (1995) -acknowledged then as one of the fastest calypsos ever recorded- he released "Bring Down The Rhythm", a note perfect imitation of The Shadow. Singing like a man possessed, skillfully bending his voice to sound uncannily like the dread wizard² himself, Ajala voiced the concerns of exhausted masqueraders and an older generation of calypsonians who saw their popularity diminishing as tempos increased:

"I tired of de running an' de running!

Bring down de riddim!

Bring it down, down, down

And let we have some fun, fun, fun³"

It was a masterstroke. Due in part to Trinidadian radio DJs' innate distaste for providing basic information such as the names of artistes or song titles, it was several weeks before the population realized that it was not the Shadow who had intervened on their behalf, but instead Ajala - the very perpetrator of the speed Soca madness that was sweeping all aside in its 150-plus beats-per-minute wake.

The song took the form of an extended conversation between the master artist and the young up-and-comer:

I and the Shadow conversing

About the speed of the rhythm. (He say:)

² Shadow had formed his own calypso tent called "The Kingdom of The Wizards" in the 1980s.

³ *Bring Down The Rhythm* performed by Ajala, ©1997, Rituals Records.

'I moving like a racehorse on a track

Allyuh want somebody break mih back!

The soca sounding weird

So I want to jam this music instead.'

According to Ajala⁴, this is more or less exactly what occurred. Sometime after the success of "Horsie", Shadow 'braced' him in a corridor at Caribbean Sound Basin, thundering, "What wrong with you? Look what you doing to the music! Where you going with all that speed? You trying to kill people or what? You need to bring down the rhythm."

Shadow went on to say that speed for speed's sake should never be the goal; that music, whatever the tempo, should always have a groove. And this was what he felt was missing in the headlong rush to outpace each other. He also felt the younger generation of musicians, composers, arrangers and producers were infatuated with technology and allowing it to dictate the direction of their music.

In the third verse of 'Bring Down The Rhythm' he opines:

The youths have a different direction

They confusing the whole nation

People started acting weird

They want to hear my rhythm instead.

Shadow expanded on this concept to me a few days after the infamous "cafeteria incident". "I have nothing against drum machines. But look, it name 'drum machine'.

⁴ Personal conversation, March 2022.

Two words: Drum. Machine. If you treat it like a drum, you will play it. But if you treat it like a machine *it* will play *you!*⁵

This idea of “the rhythm”, “the beat”, “the groove” is central to understanding Shadow’s music. It is important to note that Shadow explicitly stayed away from using the typical soca drum beat and soca bassline as popularized by Lord Shorty (Garfield Blackman) circa 1975⁶. He always took a hyper-percussive approach to all aspects of his music. According to cultural critic John Mowitt in his writings on the percussive field this type of percussive approach can be divided into three main parts – the musicological, the sociological, and the psychoanalytical (16). From Sherese Francis’ writings on hip-hop, we see that diasporic music ‘...defies the conventional methods of Western European harmonics and tonal music through its stress on percussiveness’ (12).

We can see this dichotomy clearly in a quote from producer/arranger Carl ‘Beaver’ Henderson:

“The first time we met for me to arrange his music we had a heated argument on the arrangement for one of his songs; I was theoretically correct but Shadow was musically right. Shadow broke all the traditional musical rules and made his own and that made him a musical giant. He changed the face of Calypso music.” (qtd in Sousa, 2016)

Shadow always had a very unique approach to bass lines. According to Robin Imamshah, “every bassline you hear on a Shadow record was written by Shadow. He

⁵ See McLuhan, 1964.

⁶ Perhaps he didn’t want to be lumped with all the other calypsonians that were being accused of copying Shorty. This was really the first time that so many calypsonians had copied another calypsonian’s *musical* style.

composed from the bass up.”⁷ From about 1978 Shadow also started experimenting with new approaches to drumbeats, incorporating Shango Baptist and Tobago Jig styles and rhythmic patterns. It created a very distinctive, hypnotic sound for his music. This approach of using non-typical drumbeats was later built upon by Superblue (Austin Lyons) and David Rudder, both of whom it should be noted, also incorporated shamanistic elements in their music⁸, thus laying an important part of the foundation for modern (1990s and beyond) soca.

3. “Way Way Out”

According to Rogers (2003) and Khasawneh (2008), technology adoption is defined as the first use or acceptance of new technology or a new system. Technology adoption is clarified by numerous theories and models such as the technology acceptance model (TAM), the theory of reasoned action (TRA), and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB).

In this sense, Shadow can be described as an “early adopter”; he was among the first in the calypso fraternity to utilize synthesizers and later, drum machines in his music. His 1977 “Dreadness” album is a landmark in the use of synthesized bass along with lead synthesizer lines replacing the traditional call-and-answer saxophones in calypso. This can be heard most clearly in the lead-off track “Jump, Judges, Jump” as an aggressive, nasal synthesizer snakes its way like a power saw through the thicket of drums, bass

⁷ Personal conversation, June 2022

⁸ As per Perkinson *Shamanism, Racism and Hip Hop Culture: Essays on White Supremacy and Black Subversion* (2005)

and brass, while Shadow calls down the vengeance of Moko on the calypso judges who he deems unworthy to judge his music:

*They want me to learn
Everything in science.
I wanted to learn
How to make people dance
Now I come to prove
What I learn secretly
They bring men to judge me
Who have degrees in stupidity!*⁹

The synthesizer reappears again on the second track “The Children Thing”¹⁰, in which Shadow makes explicit that “...conspicuous link between percussion or rhythm and spiritual practices...” (Perkinson 5) as he portrays himself as a ghostly Pied Piper leading a group of children who have found themselves possessed by his beat and music:

*We go tell we mama
You give we music fever
You go drive we loco
This thing have too much tempo!
Stop that singing
Because we can't stop jumping.*

Shadow returns to this shamanistic theme of musical possession in another track on the album, “Beat Dem Drums”, in which the main character – “An old man/named Sylvan” is awakened out of a weird dream in which he sees “Mr. Death, liming in a fete...” He

⁹ *Jump, Judges, Jump*, track from *Dreadness*, ©1976 Richie’s Music Production.

¹⁰ *The Children Thing*, track from *Dreadness*, ©1976 Richie’s Music Production.

then begs Death to not hold him yet and proceeds to dance to the beat of the drums, using them in a "...shamanic manner as a tool for survival" (Francis).

Interestingly, this track points a way forward for Shadow's music. It is the first time he replaces the traditional calypso brass "band chorus" with synthesizers; not in an attempt to sound like or replace the brass, but rather to treat us to a musical call-and-response dance between a bass synthesizer and lead line that makes no attempt to disguise its synthetic origins with its wah-wah-like resonant filter on full display. Brass makes brief appearances in a supporting role in the verses and choruses, and by 1984's "Sweet Sweet Dreams" album, brass had disappeared from Shadow's work entirely¹¹.

In conversations during the early 2000s at Caribbean Sound Basin, Shadow told me that he programmed and played all the synthesizers on the "Dreadness" album himself. It was an ARP 2600 model that was "lying around gathering dust. Everybody like they 'fraid to touch it. I say I have to have that in my music" (Personal Interview).

He had to go against the strenuous objections of his arranger, Arthur "Art" De Coteau, who felt at the time that synthesizers were just a 'gimmick' that had no place in calypso music. This attitude towards music technology – as an alien or unwanted thing – was common amongst older calypso practitioners at the time, both artists and arrangers. Robin Imamshah recalls being asked by Art DeCoteau to disconnect or switch off all his guitar effect pedals during recordings as that sound "wasn't calypso". Carl "Beaver"

¹¹ The album was a commercial flop at the time and heavily panned by critics, mainly for its lack of brass. But it has had quite a revival recently among fans of electronic music. According to Sousa (2016), "What Shadow didn't realise back then was that the proto-electronic cocktail he had mixed in 1984 would only find the recognition it deserved three decades later."

Henderson recounts that he was asked to do some synthesizer work on an album for The Mighty Sparrow in 1976. After hiring all the synthesizers available in Trinidad & Tobago at the time (mainly from various East Indian orchestras including Harry Mahabir and others), “Birdie” balked at the last minute upon seeing the synths lined up in the studio and declared: “That have no place in calypso!”¹²

According to Imamshah, Shadow has to be considered as one of the main bridges from traditional calypso to the modern era of soca. Not the version of Soca as envisioned by Ras Shorty I, (which Imamshah sees more as a deliberate, considered cultural product – an aesthetic if you will), but rather the deep-rooted ancestral drum and bass vibration that continues to shake dancefloors the world over. Imamshah argues that while Shadow used Western instruments – and the most modern, cutting-edge ones at that – his rhythms were rooted in the African continent. In essence he was doing ethnic West-African music dressed up in Western electronic clothes.

In Shadow’s own words from a 2016 interview, he put the contrast between Shorty’s music and his this way:

“You talk about the beginning, and the beginning was me and Picton Fort [Tobago] and I used to strum and talk and tell Shorty [Ras Shorty I] what I like. And that little word came – Soca, Soul of Calypso – and he first came up with Soca. We know his music is beautiful but my music was always beautiful, they were paying attention because he came up with the name. After a time nobody was using his music, they were using the music with the bass and that’s my music.” (Nurse 2016)

¹² Personal conversations, June 2022.

Shadow was on target with this observation. From the late 1970's onwards, as bands and DJs equipped with high-powered sound systems gave rise to the phenomena of the "Big Fete" in Trinidad & Tobago and the wider diaspora, and as tents emptied and dance floors filled, it was the "music with the bass" that dominated. Shadow also set the tempo, with his fast-paced yet groovy offerings. Whereas Shorty had wanted to "*Change – the accent of Carnival. To a groovy, groovy bacchanal*"¹³, Shadow's 1978 album defined him as "De Zess Man" – a nod to both the new phenomenon of the colourful male characters of the nascent fete scene who would party non-stop, and the uncrowned king who could be guaranteed to bring the zest to the party with his musical offerings¹⁴.

While synthesizers were grudgingly making an appearance as a novelty item on other calypsonian's offerings, they were now front-and-center in Shadow's music. Art DeCoteau had long conceded the point to Shadow, and on 1978's big fete tune "Sugar Plum", DeCoteau went all out: his signature tinkling Latin-tinged piano now replaced by a twin attack of synthesizer bass with layers of ARP Omni string synthesizer providing the chords, while a wah-wah'd Hohner E7 electronic clavinet supplied the classic calypso strum. All this on top of a massive-sounding kick drum, designed to test the speakers of any hapless DJ's to their limit. Brass was now relegated to a supporting, percussive role, with trumpets and saxes providing short, funky stabs as if they were mere drums instead.

Shadow's music was a boon to the bands that dominated the new fete space. From their origins as "combos" in the late 1960's and '70's, groups such as Shandileer, Kalyan, Fire

¹³ *Endless Vibrations*, track from *Endless Vibrations*, ©1974, Lord Shorty Enterprises

¹⁴ See 'King of the Calypso', Thomas, 1974, Rolling Stone Magazine

Flight, Blue Ventures, Sound Revolution and others, were now the new lords of the dance. Apart from each band having their own high-powered sound systems, they were all equipped with racks of the latest synthesizer technology, from Moogs and ARPs, to the latest models from Oberheim, Sequential Circuits, Roland, Yamaha and more - the country being flush with petro-dollars and blessed with a low US dollar exchange rate. With Shadow's music (and later that of Crazy, Nelson, Superblue, Merchant, Explainer and others), the bands could flaunt their latest technological acquisitions.¹⁵

4. "Beat Dem Drums"

The term 'entrainment' refers to the process by which independent rhythmical systems interact with each other, often involuntarily (Clayton 12). Often associated with dance and humans' response to music generally, it is in African diasporic religious traditions that the process seems to reach its zenith. According to Francis, "No matter whether it is a sacred space or secular culture, that sense of rhythmic and percussive spirituality is present as a foundation" (5).

The effect that Shadow's music (in particular the unconventional drum patterns) would have on the audience was electrifying. You would find yourself moving whether you wished to or not; it was common to see persons "catch power"¹⁶ when Shadow's music played. His 1982 hit "Obeah" was notorious in this respect. With its seemingly back-to-front drumbeat that leads with the snare drum on the "one" (first beat of the bar), and lyrics in which he is confronted by an angry young boy accusing him of using witchcraft

¹⁵ See Rogers, et al

¹⁶ See Mowitt, pg 84 and Asante (1998), p. 206 on this idea of 'possession' in diasporic religious traditions

(by way of specific drumbeats no less!) to mesmerise an unsuspecting public, including the boy's unnamed sister:

*He say the beat / That you does use
Could make your feet / Bus' up your shoes'
Obeah man – you think you smart
No normal man – could beat like that¹⁷*

Shadow also applied this idea of entrainment to himself. I recall being at a soundcheck in James Ling High School in Montreal during the summer of 1982. Shadow was carded to perform with the band Charlie's Roots that night. However, they had not learnt the specific drumbeats that Shadow was using in his songs, preferring to use a standard syncopated calypso beat for most of the accompaniment.¹⁸ I was the rhythm guitarist with the Carl 'Beaver' Henderson-led Fire Flight at the time. Shadow was standing at a table chatting with myself and our background vocalist Patsy Holder, when our drummer Anthony 'Tony' Woodroffe started the soundcheck playing the beat to "Obeah". Shadow's left shoulder suddenly began twitching involuntarily. Shadow (who had his back to the stage), said, "Look! All you look! All you see what happening?" His right shoulder then began to twitch, and slowly, slowly, he turned his head to stare at Woodroffe on the stage.

"That man playing my beat. That man playing my beat. I singing with *this* band tonight!"

¹⁷ *Obeah*, track from *The Return of the Shadow*, SR Records, ©1981

¹⁸ Prior to Shadow, drum charts and bass charts were unheard of in calypso (Imamshah, Henderson). Bass was furnished with a chord chart to pay root notes while the drummer was expected to provide a 'standard' calypso or (post 1975) soca beat.

At this point, the promoter Henry Antoine interjected, explaining that he had already made all the arrangements for Charlie's Roots to be the accompanying band. Shadow dismissed this out of hand.

"Listen. You ain't hear what happening here? That man playing my beat! I singing with this band tonight!"

Shadow continued to experiment with this "back-to-front" beat and others. By 1984, he was disrupting dancefloors with "Tumble Down", his Afro-futurist tale of alien abduction, the reverse drumbeat here supplied via a Linn LM2 drum computer , its distinctive snare and clap instantly familiar from Prince and Michael Jackson records of the day.

According to Dario Smagata: "Following the death of his long-time arranger Art DeCouteau in 1987, Shadow attempted to forge a new musical partnership with Frankie McIntosh, who (along with Leston Paul) was one of the defining arrangers of soca in the late '80s. The result was a string of four albums (one a year from 1988 to 1991) which were well done, but failed to capture Shadow's unique musical personality."¹⁹

I agree to some extent. The Frankie McIntosh-arranged albums, which brought us hits such as "Tension", "The Garden Want Water", "Give Me Pressure", "Tan Tan" and others, feature somewhat generic LinnDrum programming, strikingly similar to that utilized by Leston Paul, who was also using the same machine. But to me these records

¹⁹ Comment (2019) retrieved from <https://www.discogs.com/master/1817978-Shadow-High-Tension>.

still had that unique Shadow signature via the basslines, call-and-answer synths, and of course, completely original song concepts.

His songs continued to dominate the parties, defining the idea of what soca should be. But by 1991, Superblue (Austin Lyons) had begun to remake soca in his own image, carving out a new space in the fetes, and the Carnival Road March. His seminal "Get Something & Wave" incorporated the percussive, staccato, crowd-pleasing fete chants pioneered by "band singers" such as Fire Flight's Steve Sealey, Shandileer's Carl Jacobs and Charlie's Roots' David Rudder²⁰, along with a frenetic Shadow-style reverse drum beat. This opened the door for the genre which would eventually be called "Power Soca" - a marketing term coined in 2005 by William Monroe, the creator of the International Soca Monarch competition²¹. This was to make a distinction between the uptempo "fast soca" (which Shadow had begun to derisively call "speed soca") and the slower-paced "groovy soca" - of which Shadow was equally the master. Shadow, who won the International Soca Monarch competition in 2001 with "Stranger", was uncomfortable with the term "Power Soca". "What power have to do with speed?" he would often ask. I agreed with him. And as I once remarked to William Monroe, Shadow's dead slow "Poverty Is Hell" (1994) remains one of the most powerful pieces of soca music ever created.

Shadow continued to use drum machines in his work, mainly due to the level of control they afforded him. Working with him in the early 2000s he told me of the struggles he

²⁰ At first, some in the calypso fraternity did not accept these performers as "true-true calypsonians". The term "band singer" was often used in a derogatory manner.

²¹ See <https://internationalsocamonarch.com/soca-monarch>.

had with drummers refusing to play the complex beats he heard in his head. And of constant arguments over his “crazy idea” that the drums should be tuned to the key of the song. By then he had acquired his own drum machine, a Japanese Roland R-8 model. He would program it himself or with assistance from his personal arranger Fitz Melo Thomas or percussionist Ronald “Ronnie” Sylvester. Shadow demonstrated this to me a day in Caribbean Sound Basin. He had Ronnie program a simple drum beat and then said, “Listen. Just listen.” I did. “It sounding nice, eh?” he asked. I nodded. “Check this,” he said. Picking up his acoustic guitar he plucked a string and instructed Ronnie to tune the bass drum to that note. Then he plucked another string and instructed him to tune the snare to that note. He selected different notes for each drum in the pattern, then said, “Now play the thing!” It was a revelation. The drum pattern seemed to come alive and breathe. Everyone in the room started to nod their head or tap their feet. It suddenly felt like music. It felt like *Shadow* music.

5. “You Mixing Wrong”

(Or how I learnt the parallel mix trick from The Shadow)

Trinidad, 1999. I was seated behind the 48-channel Neve VR 80 mixing console in Caribbean Sound Basin’s Studio Rick. The VR was the Rolls Royce of mixing consoles. £400,000 of cutting edge, British audio technology was at my fingertips.

“You mixing wrong!” the voice behind me thundered. Then Winston Bailey, the enigma known as the calypsonian The Shadow, stalked out of Studio Rick.

Unsettled and bemused, I pulled down my faders and began again. This was my first time mixing a song for the legendary artist; I had worked previously as a musician and

recording engineer for him and was used to some of his quirks. But now I had the responsibility of getting one of his songs past the finish line.

Shadow was a man of few words. When he deigned to speak, much of what he said didn't appear at first to make complete sense. He spoke often in parables, constantly used misdirection. Listening to him speak was like listening to a radio station tuned slightly off the dial...

About 10 minutes later, he returned. He stood silently, listening intently. (I have no recollection of ever seeing The Shadow sitting down. He was always seemed to be standing over you, towering, looming...). Then he spoke:

"You *still* mixing wrong!" And stalked out again.

When he finally returned at what seemed like an eternity later, he clarified.

"You only using half the mixing board. You should use the whole thing."

I patiently explained that we had only used a single 24-track tape recorder for this song. Thus, I only needed to use the first 24 channels of the mixing console. He sighed. And then spoke slowly, as if explaining to an imbecile: "You think I don't know that? But when them fellas, them white boys, mixing outside, they does use the *whole* mixing board. Even when is only 24 tracks."

Confused, I asked him to clarify. He said, "They take the first track, track 1, and crosspatch it so it comes up on channel 25 as well. Then they take 2, do the same thing, so it shows up on 2 and 26. And so on down the line. That way they get a bigger sound; a *fatter* sound."

I could see where this was going. Or so I thought... "But that would just make it louder. That's all," I said. He sighed again. "You think I don't know that? No, the trick is you treat each side different. So you take the equalizer and make the bass high on this side and low on the other side. You take the equalizer and make the snare fat on this side and thin on the other side. You take the guitar and put one left and the other right. And then you play with the mixing board. You make it dance..."

A lightbulb went off in my head. I tried it. The results were astounding. Years later I was to discover that this was a closely guarded secret of New York-based mix engineers. Shadow had clearly been paying close attention to the finer details in his sessions over the years at KH, Sharc and Semp in Trinidad, and at Platinum Factory and Charlie's Recording in New York. Very close attention.

According to Robin Imamshah, Shadow always drove the production of his records. One of the very few calypsonians to do so. He was very organic, but understood clearly that the sonics of his records were as important as the musical arrangements. He had a clear vision for his music, and would stop at nothing to achieve the result he was hearing in his head, in his sweet, haunted dreams.

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