NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships for instructions.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: A Cultural History of the 1950s Calypso Craze in the United States

Institution: Indiana University

Project Director: Shane Vogel

Grant Program: Fellowships

BLACK PERFORMANCE AND THE 1950S CALYPSO CRAZE

ABSTRACT

This project will be the first book-length cultural history of the "calypso craze" that swept the United States in the late 1950s. *Black Performance and the 1950s Calypso Craze* tracks the popularity of calypso across different types of postwar middlebrow entertainment, including sound recordings, nightclub acts, television broadcasts, Broadway musicals, and films. Across these media, I ask how black performers used the professional, historical, and musical opportunities afforded by this mass cultural event to expand African American history and deepen its relationship to diasporic consciousness.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

For a fleeting year-and-a-half in the late 1950s, middle-class US consumers made calypso music the top selling genre in the nation—for a time it even threatened to supplant rock-and-roll, according to *Variety*, *Billboard*, and other trade magazines that tracked its popularity. The "calypso craze" describes the mass marketing of Caribbean folk music across records, film, and theatre in the late 1950s. This national sensation presented a spectacle of mid-century popular Caribbeana, standardized a world region, and transformed Trinidadian folk culture into a commodity. Like other Jim Crow fads in which black performance was marketed for middle-class white consumption—the so-called "coon craze" of the 1890s and the "Negro vogue" of the 1920s are two well-known examples—the 1950s calypso craze provided black performers with new occasions to intervene in the public sphere as well as new creative and financial opportunities. For these earlier crazes and vogues, scholars such as David Krasner, Karen Sotiropoulos, Jayna Brown, Houston Baker, Jr., and David Levering Lewis have shown how black performers negotiated the tight confines of Jim Crow popular culture to invent cultural traditions. This project does the same for the calypso craze, showing how African American performers engaged with Caribbean music, dance, and history to deepen cultural connections between the US and the Caribbean in the early cold war.

Calypso's origins in the carnival milieu of Trinidad date back to the nineteenth century. This music had made inroads into US recording studios as early as the 1910s, and the end of the US occupation of Trinidad after World War II brought a mini-boom of interest in the sounds and styles of calypso. But when Harry Belafonte's 1956 album *Calypso* unexpectedly became the first LP record to sell over a million copies, the novelty of calypso cascaded into a mass-cultural fad. My book follows this cascade as it moved defiantly away from any attempt at ethnographic authenticity and instead strategically embraced the inauthenticity of calypso kitsch in mood and style. One of my primary claims throughout this book is that black American performers exploited the distance between the ethnographic and the faddish in order to refigure relations between African America and the Afro-Caribbean, using artifice and performance to challenge fixed notions of blackness. Singers, dancers, and actors did this, I show, by simultaneously invoking and undermining claims to Caribbean authenticity in Hollywood films, nightclub acts, and sound recordings.

Building on the work of cultural historians who have demonstrated the importance of middlebrow culture such as Janice Radway, Joan Shelley Rubin, and Christina Klein, I take the phenomenon of fads to be a marker of deep cultural feeling and contradiction. I approach this project from my position in the interdisciplinary field of performance studies, looking not only at the musical aspects of the calypso craze, but also at its theatrical, choreographic, cinematic, and televisual aspects. New developments in distribution networks for mass culture made the calypso craze a national event. Calypso concerts were staged at Carnegie Hall and the Apollo Theatre. Nightclubs

such as the Village Vanguard in New York City, the Blue Angel in Chicago, and the Carousel in Boston converted themselves into "calypso rooms" that featured elaborate calypso revues. Hollywood studios hurriedly released films such as *Bop Girl Goes Calypso* (1957) and *Calypso Joe* (1957). Television specials featured calypso singers and Caribbean dancers in primetime broadcasts. Taking these understudied aspects of the calypso craze into account presents a more nuanced understanding of this cultural phenomenon than previously understood. Again and again, performers seized such ephemeral opportunities to comment on topical political issues such as civil rights, the cold war, and decolonization. Through archival research and close analysis of specific performances, I return to center stage once-renowned performers, including nightclub chanteuses Josephine Premice and Phyllis Bunch, dancers Geoffrey Holder and Carmen DeLavallade, and folk singer Erik Darling, as well as lesser known works by established performers such as Duke Ellington, Lena Horne, Harry Belafonte, and Trinidadian calypsonian Duke of Iron.

The book makes four contributions to the humanities, specifically theater/performance studies, American Studies, media studies, and African American cultural history. First, while there are numerous scholarly accounts of how black performers negotiated mass public spheres such as the 1890s "coon craze" and the 1920s "Negro vogue," there is no such study of this phenomenon for the 1950s calypso craze. This book provides rich detail to locate this postwar moment within a longer trajectory of black fad performance in the Jim Crow era. Second, it locates the calypso craze not solely as a musical fad or a recording phenomenon, as most accounts have it, but within a larger field of performance that includes dance, theatre, film, television, and nightlife. Third, by contextualizing the calypso craze in a tradition of popular performance across the color line, I develop a new framework—black fad performance—for understanding the cycles of repetition and difference that shape race, entertainment, and mass culture during Jim Crow. And fourth, by taking seriously African American appropriations of Afro-Caribbean cultures and histories, I argue that the calypso craze provides new insight into the development of diasporic consciousness in the mid-twentieth century as African American performers engaged with Caribbean musical and performance traditions.

This project extends in new directions the research of my first book, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (University of Chicago Press, 2009). In that book I introduced new archival research on nightlife, cabarets, and cabaret performances of the 1920s and 1930s, tracing African American cabaret culture's relationship to the Harlem Renaissance. In *Black Performance and the 1950s Calypso Craze*, I bring together a largely untapped archive of performances that furthers our understanding of race and mass culture in the mid-century US, particularly as it engages (and disengages) with Caribbean musical history. I intend to write a book that will appeal to both scholars and non-specialist readers interested in the calypso craze, popular music, and 1950s US culture more broadly.

PROJECT OUTLINE

In the first part of the book, I detail the broad historical, cultural, and musical outlines of the calypso craze. Chapter 1, "Being a Fad: Jim Crow Cycles of Black Fad Performance," traces the deep history of the calypso craze as an instance of black fad performance that had precedents in the ragtime craze of the 1890s and the "Negro vogue" of the 1920s. Here I show how the fleeting temporality of the fad created paradoxical conditions for black performers in the mass public sphere. Chapter 2, "The Belafonte Effect, or, How Blackness Became Middlebrow," examines the emergence of blackness in the postwar middlebrow imagination and describes the calypso craze as a key part of that process. As an important civil rights activist, one who spanned the US and the Caribbean, Harry Belafonte introduced into popular culture the global geographies that would be so important in the early cold war. And as the first black male matinee idol, Belafonte played a crucial

role in generating a demand for Caribbean-themed Hollywood films during the calypso craze. This chapter considers a cluster of hastily released musical films—*Calypso Joe* (Allied Artists, 1957), *Bop Girl Goes Calypso* (United Artists, 1957), and *Calypso Heat Wave* (Columbia, 1958)—that all featured Caribbean calypsonians and African American calypso singers in key musical scenes, including Lord Flea, Duke of Iron, Herb Jeffries, and a young Maya Angelou. Through these films, I show how African American musical connections to the Caribbean became woven into the US middlebrow imagination.

The next three chapters look to how calypso appeared in various media—nightclubs, television, theatre—and to specific performances that have been overshadowed by Belafonte's association with the calypso craze. Chapter 3, "Caribbean Niteries," describes the invention of a new genre of nightlife performance—the "calypso revue"—that was developed in 1950s nightclubs (or "niteries" in show biz lingo). The calypso revue incorporated Caribbean music and dance into the standard black nightclub revue and made stars out of women performers such as Josephine Premice, Phyllis Bunch, and Enid Raphael. In Chapter 4, "Duke Ellington's Calypso Theatre," I describe the important role that television broadcasts—such as Belafonte's appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and his folk special *Tonight with Belafonte*—had in promoting the calypso craze. In particular, I closely examine one remarkable broadcast, a live presentation of Duke Ellington's *A Drum Is a Woman* (1957), that featured Caribbean American performers and dancers. This composition used the calypso craze on television as an occasion to visualize diasporic populations in new ways. Chapter 5, "*Jamaica* on Broadway," explores musical theatre's response to the calypso craze, reconstructing the production history of the musical *Jamaica* (1957) within the context of other Broadway Caribbeana such as *House of Flowers* (1954) and *Carib Song* (1945). Originally written as a vehicle for Belafonte, *Jamaica* was rewritten for singer Lena Horne after he dropped out at the last minute. This unlikely revision created surprising paradoxes in the production that, I argue, worked to highlight the artificiality and inauthenticity of the calypso craze itself.

Chapter 6 describes what I call calypso's "anti-craze," the performances of dissent from the mass commodification of the Caribbean that shadowed the fad. Specifically, I examine the dance and writing of choreographer Geoffrey Holder, the visual art of his brother, Boscoe Holder, and the US performances of the calypsonian Duke of Iron. These performers benefitted from the cultural possibilities of the calypso craze, and at the same time they staged a critique of the craze. A coda, "Calypso after Calypso" considers the transformations of calypso in the US in the aftermath of this craze. Taken as a whole, *Black Performance and the 1950s Calypso Craze* introduces original research and analysis that contributes to humanistic inquiry by illuminating the calypso craze as a complex cultural formation and an important moment of mid-century African American performance.

WORK PLAN

Support from the National Endowment for the Humanities will allow me the time and resources to complete *Black Performance and the 1950s Calypso Craze* and submit it to the University of Chicago Press, which has expressed enthusiasm about publishing it. To date I have conducted research at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Yale University's Collection of Historical Sound Recordings, the Paley Center for Media, the Smithsonian Institute, and the E. Y. Harburg Foundation. Over the 2014 – 2015 academic year, I will complete research at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Library of Congress, the Harvard Theater Collection, the New York Historical Society, and the Chicago Historical Society. Chapters 1, 4 and 5 are drafted (versions of two chapters have been published in leading peer-reviewed journals). An NEH Fellowship taken from June 2015 – June 2016 will allow me to draft chapters 2, 3 and 6 and revise the entire manuscript for submission to the press.

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The following is representative rather than exhaustive, and does not include an extensive discography, trade periodicals (e.g., *Variety, Billboard, Back Stage, Stage and Television Today,* etc.), or lifestyle periodicals (e.g., *Life*, *Esquire, Vanity Fair, Ebony, Jet, Hue,* etc.) of the 1950s.

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