

WILMOTH HOUDINI

Poor But Ambitious

ARHOOLE FOLKLYRIC
CD 7010

1. SWEET LIKE A HONEY BEE (7/31/28)
2. SONG NO. 99 (7/31/28)
3. UNCLE JO' GIMME MO'! (7/31/28)
4. TRIFLING MEN (3/25/29)
5. NO MO' BENCH AND BOARD (2/16/31)
6. SWEET PAPA WILLIE (2/16/31)
7. HONEY I'M BOUND TO GO (2/16/31)
8. THE COOKS IN TRINIDAD (2/16/31)
9. ARIMA TONIGHT, SANGRE GRANDE TOMORROW NIGHT (8/13/31)
10. BLACK BUT SWEET (8/13/31)
11. I NEED A MAN (8/13/31)
12. STOP COMING AND COME (8/13/31)
13. TIGER TOM KILL TIGER CAT (3/5/32)
14. THAT BIG BLACK WOMAN (11/17/32)
15. WEST INDIAN SUGAR CROP (11/17/32)
16. UNFORTUNATE MILLEY (10/19/33)

17. TEACHER NOSE GAY THE SHOUTER (10/19/33)
18. MICKEY CIPRIANI'S CAREER (Sports Star) (7/2/34)
19. GLORIUS CENTENARY (7/2/34)
20. CIPRIANI'S AND BRADSHAW'S DEATH (7/2/34)
21. BANDSMAN SHOOTING CASE (7/2/34)
22. AFRICAN LOVE CALL (11/30/34)
23. THE DEVIL BEHIND ME (4/5/35)
24. POOR BUT AMBITIOUS (1/31/40)

Total time: 72:43

Wilmoth Houdini - vocals & scraper with:

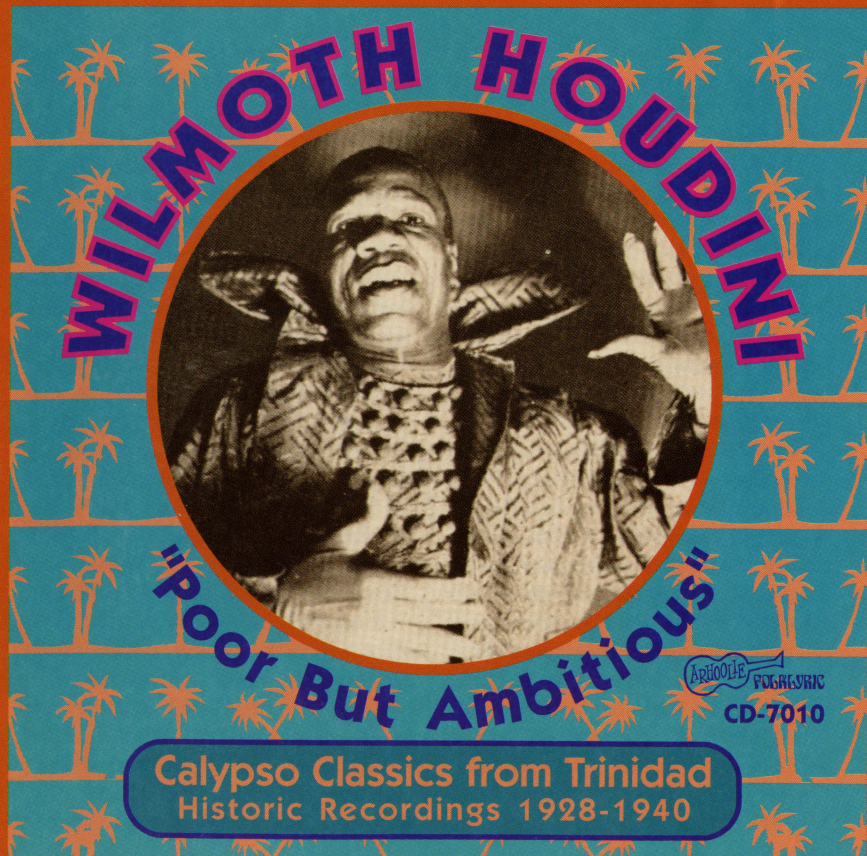
#1-4: Gerald Clark's IereString Band: Cyril Monrose - violin; Berry Barrow - piano; Gerald Clark - guitar; unknown banjo. #5-12: Gerald Clark's Night Owls: Walter Bennett - cornet; Walter Edwards - clarinet/tenor sax; Berry Barrow - piano; Joshy Paris - guitar; Gerald Clark - *cuatro*; Charlie Vincent - banjo; Al Morgan - string bass. #13-24: unknown personnel.

Edited by Chris Strachwitz

Cover by Jil Weil

Recording dates & personnel from Dick Spottswood's *Ethnic Music on Records*

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Afro-Caribbean music has long been an influence on popular music in the United States. Today the reggae from Jamaica is its most obvious manifestation but this follows a long line of previous song and dance forms that include the rumba, habanera, conga, and mamba. But by far the most significant Afro-Caribbean song export has been the calypso from Trinidad.

Recordings by Trinidadians began as early as 1914 when rivals Victor and Columbia both made field recording expeditions to the island. Victor released sides "made specially for Trinidad" that included Jules Sims singing a *Native Trinidad Kalenda* (Vi 67377) accompanied by a *tambo* bamboo group (drumming was banned), and the important early chantwelle (songster) J. Resigna, (Julian Whiterose), singing a *Single Tone Calipso* (Vi 67362). Whiterose was Resigna's Carnival "syndicate" in

which he was the leader of a competitive masquerade band and yard (the latter was an area where masks were assembled and calypso and other entertainments held). The majority of Victor's releases, however, were by orchestra/bandleader-pianist Lionel "Lanky" Belasco. His success led to a New York-based career of longstanding and set the example for others who followed, such as pianist Walter Merrick, and vaudevillians Johnny Walker and Sam Manning. All had recorded before Frederick Wilmoth Hendricks (**Wilmoth Houdini**) made his first session, at Victor's New York studios in 1927.

Houdini, however, became the most recorded calypsonian of his generation, with 136 vocal discs released between then and 1940 and a career stretching at least into the late 1940s — paralleled only by Belasco and Manning, neither of whom were truly representative of the calypso "folk"

tradition. At his first session, Houdini was accompanied by Belasco (piano), Cyril Monroe (violin), and Gerald Clark (guitar/*cuatro*) — each a fellow countryman. Indeed most of the musicians Houdini used on subsequent recordings were of West Indian origin, emphasizing the fact that in this period twenty-five per cent of Harlem's black population were West Indian migrants, mainly from British colonies. Houdini, therefore, had access to fellow musicians steeped in his island's traditions and an assured audience for his recordings, both in the U. S. and Trinidad. This was almost certainly the reason why, by 1929, he too decided to make New York his home and pay only occasional visits to his native island.

Despite his claim to a birthplace in Brooklyn, New York, in 1902, it seems virtually certain that Houdini was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad, on November 25, 1895. His true name is also the subject of some confusion. In 1939, he claimed it was Edgar Leon Sinclair but, as with his 1895 date and

place of birth, Wilmoth Hendricks comes from the most reliable interviews he ever gave (**Trinidad Sunday Guardian** February 11, 1968). Frederick Wilmoth Hendricks is how his name appears in the 1980 ASCAP Biographical Dictionary. It seems he was educated at St. Mary's College of the Immaculate Conception in Port of Spain, and one story has it that he had to leave school for financial reasons on the death of his father. Whatever the circumstances, Houdini subsequently became thoroughly familiar with the art of Trinidad Carnival with its stickfighting and associated Kalinda songs, competing bands of masqueraders led by chantwelles, and syndicates with their own particular "tent" locations for calypso performances. Somewhere between 1916 and 1920 Houdini successfully participated in all these variations of the carnivalesque becoming, like Julian Whiterose before him, chantwelle and syndicate leader of a shrovetide Carnival band.

Houdini claimed his calypsonian

sobriquet from a motion picture serial **Houdini In The Master Mystery**, featuring magician Harry Houdini, seen in 1916. His syndicate band was the "African Millionaires" and, according to Joseph Mitchell's 1939 interview, the group "had twenty-four men and girls. The men wore striped green silk shirts, flannel pants, and white shoes, each had strung to him a camera, a stuffed crocodile, or a pair of field glasses. That was to ape the rich tourists who came to Trinidad. The girls dressed in manner likewise" (*New Yorker* May 6, 1939). As a songster Houdini also won his spurs at *piccong*, an extemporized "war" of sung insults between three or more Calypsonians that took place during Carnival in the tents (then bamboo shacks with palm roofs) of each syndicate. As Houdini explained to Mitchell, "The man who gives out the biggest insults is the winner. I was so insulting in my first 'war' the other men congratulated me. Since then I maintain my prestige and integrity as Houdini the Calypsonian. I got a brain

that ticks like a clock. I can sing at any moment on any matter." Such competitions are an integral part of the Carnival tradition and, like flamboyant masquerade costumes, are within the shared heritage of Mardi Gras, common to any Afro-Caribbean area that has come under the influence of Mediterranean culture and the Roman Catholic church.

All this met with the disapproval of Houdini's family who seem to have had merchant navy connections. At their insistence he commenced travelling as "seaman, cook [or] steward aboard various ships which took him to North and South America, to Europe and Africa, until finally he settled down in New York." With the advantage of regular musical employment and fame as a recording artist, Houdini began living in New York from that time. The selections here come from this period in his life – 1928-1940. On the conclusion of World War II, Houdini commenced recording again and in 1946, one of his compositions *Stone Cold Dead In The Mar-*

ket (He Had It Coming) was a hit for Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Jordan (Decca 23546). In 1947, he and Gerald Clark staged a hugely successful "Calypso Carnival" at Carnegie Hall. Houdini died in New York City on August 6, 1973.

The Songs

Houdini's songs covered a variety of topics and styles; as he told Joseph Mitchell, "I am favorably known for suggestive calypso but I am a true Catholic and I have made many shouting calypsos of a religious nature." *The Devil Behind Me* apart, (sung in patois with *tambo* bamboo style accompaniment), all selections in this collection show the secular side of Houdini's character.

"La Trinity" in *No Mo' Bench And Board* is colloquial for Trinidad itself, the "sly mongoose" having properties as a trickster throughout the British Caribbean; the song's theme appears to be prostitution. *Sweet Papa Willie* deals with the murder of a young girl by a Kalinda stickman,

using his *Poui* staff (cut from the tree of the same name). "*Dudu*" is patois for sweetheart in *Honey I'm Bound To Go* to whom Houdini addresses the song; "*Cumarino*" refers to natives of Cumana on the island and "*didi*" means "sweetie." *The Cooks In Trinidad* is in the tradition of satirical and sometimes more overt protestation that underlies many Afro-American song traditions, from Caribbean calypso and reggae to blues and spirituals in North America; "*macapuchet*" is patois for "leftovers." *Arima Tonight, Sangre Grande Tomorrow Night* is an invitation to celebrate the delights of Carnival in Arima, Sangre Grande, Siparia and San Fernando, all towns on the island. "*Delico*" refers to "pleasure, the height of excitement"; "*deyeyo*" means "is behind them," and "thoroughfare" a "free-for-all." This is the type of song Houdini would have sung in his role as chantwelle leader of the "African Millionaires." *Black But Sweet* celebrates the homeliness of Houdini's black sweetie (*didi*). *I Need A Man* is a boasting statement

of Houdini's songster status that makes him above working for a regular wage and only prepared to accept women who recognize him in this elated position. *Stop Coming And Come* is a call to his woman to stop procrastinating and "deliver the goods." "*Bagaila trop chand*" means "the thing is too hot," and "*lechon*" a pig.

With the exception of *No Mo' Bench And Board, The Cooks In Trinidad*, and *Arima Tonight*, aspects of male-female relationships predominate in the lyrics to Houdini's calypsos from his two 1931 sessions; the other selections here, however, emphasize topicality. *Glorius Centenary* deals with the celebratory promotion, by Captain Arthur Cipriani, of the first hundred years of black freedom from slavery. Emancipation in the British Caribbean occurred in 1833. Cipriani, radicalized by his World War I service in the British West Indies Regiment, was the white leader of black labor in Trinidad at this time. *Bandsman Shooting Case* with its specific reference to ill treatment of bands-

men in Trinidad, an ensuing confrontation between Bandmaster Wallace and a "mad bugler," the bugler's court conviction and Wallace's resignation, is undoubtedly based on a case of discrimination contemporary with the recording.

Uncle Jo' Gimme Mo' is much closer to home, it may in fact refer to the unknown banjo player on this, Houdini's second session in his own name. Two performers identified positively are pianist Berry Barrow and guitarist/*cuatro* player Gerald Clark, a failed medical student who was soon to become one of New York's most consistent West Indian band leaders. *Song No. 99*, from the same session, is calypsonian's song of defiance—war—and utilizes the *sans d'humanite* refrain inherited from Kalinda stickfighting challenge songs. *Trifling Men* castigates men who leave their women but also disparages the women themselves for their fickle ways. In place of *sans d'humanite* the refrain "in this colony" is used, thereby designating the non-defiant

nature of this calypso.

Like his Afro-Caribbean contemporaries in the West Indies, United States and Britain, Houdini was clearly politically aware of the black man's second class status; a fact stressed by his *African Love Call* which deals with the contemporary feelings of disillusioned Marcus Garvey supporters in the U. S. By 1930 the challenge of Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association had been quashed by the white U. S. authorities. As mentioned, *The Devil Behind Me* is almost wholly sung in patois, its English lyrics stressing the confessional of a man with the devil behind him, because he "used to work necromancy." *Poor But Ambitious* is an overt example of a black song of protest. Set at the end of the Depression years, the U. S. economy had still to pick up the momentum it achieved after entering the Second World War. Houdini's case is that of a West Indian migrant in search of work, with his impoverished dependent family left behind in one of the Caribbean

islands. He is not "asking for social equality" but for the right to work on the creed that "every man was born to be free and to be happy from suppression and misery": a sentiment that holds as true today as it did over forty years ago when Houdini first recorded it.

(Notes by John Cowley – 1984 to FL LP 9040 which contained all selections except: #1, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, & 20 which were added for this CD release.)

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Total time: 72:43

Wilmoth Houdini – vocals & scraper, with
Gerald Clark's String Band, Night
Owls, & others.

Original recordings made in New York 1928 – 1940.
#1, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, & 20 previously unre-issued.
All others previously re-issued on Folklyric LP 9040.

Edited by Chris Strachwitz

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Notes by John Cowley (1984)

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using the No Noise system.

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