

Kobo Town - Biography

Founded by Trinidadian/Canadian songwriter Drew Gonsalves, Kobo Town is named after the historic neighborhood in Port-of-Spain where calypso was born amid the boastful, humorous and militant chants of roaming stick-fighters. Situated near the fishermen's wharf, the area was a site of constant defiance and conflict, a place where sticks and stones, songs and verses clashed with the bayonets and batons of colonial rule.

Gonsalves grew up in a middle class neighborhood in Diego Martin, a town just outside of Trinidad's biggest city, Port of Spain. "Diego Martin is a valley in the northern range, which is very green with a little contaminated river running through it, and that was the playground of our youth," Gonsalves recalls. His mother is originally from Quebec City, Canada and had met Drew's father in Barbados on a trip when he was visiting family. A few days later, they were engaged and she came to Trinidad where Gonsalves was born. "In Trinidad, we were surrounded by calypso - Kitchener lived up the street from me - but like most kids of my age, I was not interested in it," Gonsalves recalls. While rock and heavy metal was considered cool by his friends, "I secretly liked calypso, but I was discrete about it."

When he was 13, Drew's mother fled what had become an abusive marriage and he and his siblings went with her to Ottawa, Canada. The sudden move to a new (and cold) world where he didn't fit in led Gonsalves to cultivate a deep nostalgia for the land of his birth. "My curiosity about Trinidad led me to read a lot about the Caribbean and its history, the kind of legacy it bestowed upon us. When I first returned to Trinidad I was eighteen and I went back to visit my father for the summer. Going back with older eyes, I was more able to place in context all of the things that I took for granted when I was growing up."

"On that first trip home my father took me to Lord Kitchener's Calypso Revue tent, held in the Oil Workers Trade Union Hall in Port of Spain," remembers Gonsalves, "I was blown away by the cleverness and the wit of these calypsonians and also their engaging interplay with the audience. I had never experienced anything like it and, from that point on, calypso was always on my mind."

Gonsalves started writing his own calypsos and visiting calypso tents every time he visited Trinidad. In 2004, he put together Kobo Town with some fellow Trini expats in Toronto and some musicians from his first band, Outcry, a rock-reggae group with calypso and West Indian folk influences. Early 2007 saw the release of Kobo Town's debut album *Independence*, which was recorded between Toronto, Ottawa and Port-of-Spain with Trinidadian producer Lyndon Livingstone. Nominated for an Indie award, a Canadian Folk Music Award, and an International Folk Alliance award, the record received very positive reviews from the international music press as well as frequent airplay on the CBC and college stations throughout Canada.

Some traditionalists, however, carped about the new elements Gonsalves included in his music. "I'm not sure I should call it calypso," he says. "It is calypso inspired and derived, but it's a conscious departure from the way it developed back home. Calypso is the folk music of urban Trinidad, but it has always drawn on outside influences, from big band and jazz in the 30s and 40s, to funk and disco in the 70s and 80s. It's hard to pin down pure calypso. For me, the calypsonian is a singing newspaperman commenting on the events of the day, with an attitude halfway between court jester and griot."

Kobo Town's music came to the attention of Cumbancha founder and Putumayo researcher Jacob Edgar, and he introduced Gonsalves to Belizean producer Ivan Duran who had earned acclaim for his work on the Andy Palacio & The Garifuna Collective album *Wátina*. Duran, who runs the label and production company Stonetree, shares with Kobo Town the commitment to revive the folkloric music of the West Indies by taking it in new creative directions. The result of their four-year collaboration is *Jumbie in the Jukebox*, which was recorded in Belize, Montreal, Toronto and Trinidad.

"Ivan and I wanted this album to be a contemporary expression that said something about Caribbean music, our heritage, and the potential for a new voice that resonates with people today," Gonsalves declares. "We made a conscious effort, but one that was quite natural in its own way, to make the music different, a bit more intense. This album is a small, heartfelt tribute to the spirits – both remembered and forgotten – who have gone before us, whose songs and sounds have never lost their power to enchant."

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