

# Building a Home Away from Home

*by Julie Campbell*

Few people fulfill dreams of performing on stage in front of thousands of people, or ever get to make a music video in their home town featuring their neighbors and family. Shammi Salickram, or Mr. Shammi as he is known to his fans in the Caribbean, achieved all that and more. Named one of the sexiest singers in his homeland of Trinidad, during the Carnival fetes of 2003, Mr. Shammi had it all. His hit song, "Soca Bhangra" pumped furiously day and night on all the hot soca stations. He performed his hits to crowds floored by his energy night after night. Nearly any fete, big or small, pumped the tune, whether by CD, by other bands covering the hit, or by the team of Shammi and his co-collaborator Bunji Garlin themselves. Sleep was not an option for Shammi. He dozed now and again between sets, kept his energy up with a swig of a Stag or Guinness beer, and took the country by storm. On this wave of energy, Shammi flew, along with the Godfathers Asylum to New York City, to bring their soca styles to New York, Brooklyn, New Jersey and beyond. (Soca is originally from "soul" and "calypso," similar to dancehall reggae, but truly a blend of high energy musical styles native to the islands of Trinidad and Tobago.) It was meant to be a three month stint in the states. Make a slew of money, and then finally return home to rest some until the next Carnival season rolled along.

But life doesn't always work out the way you expect it to. Shammi met someone. And between shows, they spent some time together. And soon, the Godfathers Asylum returned home. And Shammi stayed. Winter rolled around, but Shammi did not return home. Carnival 2004 came and went. Summer and fall again. And soon, a new Mr. Shammi, his son, came into the world. The elder Shammi had left the hype behind. He took his sabbatical in the heat of his fame. He left the potential sponsorships, the money, the notoriety, and most importantly, his home. He left it, not because he had to, but because it was right for him.

But, be warned. Those who do not know this soca terror, cannot imagine the fire for music that burns within him. He fought for years upon years to be seen as a musical artist beyond the boundaries of race and place. You see, in Trinidad, Afro-Trinidadians (those descendants of Africa) rule soca music. Indo-Trinidadians (those descendants of Eastern India) are expected to sing chutney, a musical derivative of East Indian rhythms and dialect. Shammi just wanted to sing and perform what he pleased. He was told many times, "For an Indian, you're pretty good". Ask Shammi and he will tell you "No one group of people own any type of music. Music is universal. It speaks to us all and its varying degrees of pitch, rhythm and style are open to interpretation to anyone. Blending of sounds only grows the art and opens up the world to those who care to listen. I was lucky enough to be given a chance in the soca world because one man, Bunji Garlin, took a chance and believed in me. Sometimes that's all it takes in life, one person to believe in you."

Now based in the states in Melrose, Shammi works from his own studio. He had to build it up slowly, piece by piece, between payouts for formula, diapers and baby clothes, being that he left the chance for any kind of bankroll behind when he left Trini. And though he dearly misses his native home of Trinidad, which he has been unable to return to since Carnival of 2003, he now has a new musical hurdle to overcome. Taking on the world.

"Being born and raised in Trinidad, I have a great musical base to build on. The blend of Caribbean, African, East Indian and Asian sounds that comprise the music of the island are so unique to Trinidad. And the world has yet to really discover the sound. I really want to work with other local artists to blend my style with other styles like rock, electronica, reggaeton, house, hip hop and more. There are no boundaries really, and that's what makes living here and now such

a great opportunity. Soca is just breaking out of its shell, and now, having lived away from it for so long, I can see the potential it has in the outside world.”

“Living in the Malden area really opens up a lot of opportunities, since there are so many people from all over the world living right in my neighborhood. The more I learn, the greater my potential. I really look forward to working with other local artists to see what musical accomplishments we can achieve together.”

Meanwhile, some studio work Shammi did while he was in New York with King Heart Beat Productions is currently being released nationally in Japan. The exposure to a whole new audience, with new expectations really excites Shammi. “I would love to get the chance to perform in Japan. I would just like to see what kind of a vibe the audience would have and what kind of a reaction I would get. Crowds in Trinidad go wild. I just wonder what kind of energy and feedback I would get halfway around the world.”

So, while studio time is less about sweating in a crowded booth space concentrating on the lyrics and the delivery, and more about fighting to create a whole song himself, from the rhythm to the lyrics to the mixing and mastering, all while fighting a toddler at his legs that wants to “help,” Shammi likes things this way. “I have more control of what I do. And, when I do work with other local artists, they are more open to my ideas. It’s nice to have a certain freedom in my music and control I wasn’t able to get before.”

“I left Trinidad in the heights. And, that’s not so bad a way to go out. But, don’t count me gone. I still have a lot left in me. And this boy, my son, my namesake, he’s bound to be tearing up a stage and picking up wherever I decide, somewhere in the future, to leave off.”

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