

A Taste of Sparrow:

The Rum That Sought to Bottle the Spirit of the Calypso King

BY Rhondor Dowlat, Senior Journalist

As Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean mourn the death of Dr Slinger Francisco the incomparable Mighty Sparrow at age 91, memories are flowing of the music, humour, defiance and unmistakable Caribbean character that defined his remarkable life.

Sparrow died peacefully in New York on Sunday, September 27, 2026, surrounded by loved ones following a brief illness, according to his family.

But among the countless stories being revisited following his passing is one of the more unusual ventures bearing the name of the man celebrated globally as the “Calypso King of the World.”

It came in a bottle.

Mighty Sparrow XO Rum Trinidad Spiced.

The idea emerged publicly in 2024, when plans were revealed for a premium rum carrying Sparrow's name a fitting Caribbean association for an entertainer whose music had chronicled virtually every dimension of West Indian life.

And there was perhaps a certain poetic symmetry to it.

After all, this was the man who gave the calypso world Drunk and Disorderly.

From friendship to a bottle

The story behind the rum began years earlier through an unlikely friendship.

American singer-songwriter Lane Steinberg had long admired Sparrow and discovered that his musical hero was living nearby in New York.

After Sparrow suffered serious health problems around 2013, Steinberg regretted never having introduced himself. Following Sparrow's recovery, he eventually went to the calypsonian's home and knocked on his door.

A friendship developed.

Then came music.

Steinberg began bringing his guitar to Sparrow's home, and the relationship eventually developed into a musical partnership. Sparrow returned to performing with a group of musicians, appearing at venues including New York's Public Theater and Lincoln Center as well as London's Barbican Centre.

Steinberg also had experience in the alcoholic-beverages industry.

Together with childhood friend and filmmaker Lenard Dorfman, conversations about Sparrow, Caribbean culture and aged rum eventually produced an idea: create a premium rum connected to Sparrow's extraordinary story.

Steinberg later described the concept to Newsday as something akin to putting Sparrow's history into a bottle.

Sparrow joins the journey

When news of the proposed rum first emerged in 2024, Sparrow confirmed that he had authorised the use of his name.

Subsequent reporting clarified that Sparrow was regarded by the founders as a co-founder and owner of the venture, and that he participated in development of the product.

Creating its flavour was no overnight undertaking.

Steinberg and Dorfman told Newsday that they, Sparrow and flavour developers spent more than two years working on the formula. The ambition was to create a premium product worthy of carrying one of Caribbean culture's most famous names.

Sparrow's own approach to the project was particularly interesting.

He had been baptised into the Seventh-day Adventist faith in New York in 2022. Asked in 2024 about having his name associated with alcohol following his baptism, Sparrow stressed the importance of moderation.

It was a characteristically Sparrow response—direct, practical and without unnecessary fuss.

“Smooth like velvet”

Today, the finished product is marketed as Mighty Sparrow XO Rum, Trinidad Spiced, an 80-proof, or 40 per cent alcohol-by-volume, aged Caribbean rum.

According to the company's official website, it begins with aged Caribbean and Trinidad and Tobago rums, with the majority of the blend aged for more than ten years in ex-bourbon American oak casks.

The aged blend is then infused with extracts of spices, sweet botanicals and tropical fruits.

The company describes the resulting finish with three words:

“Smooth-like-velvet.”

Earlier information published during the rum's development was even more specific, stating that 51 per cent of the blend was aged for ten years and one per cent for 15 years.

The product is currently promoted through the official "Mighty Sparrow XO Rum website" (<https://reference-url-citation.invalid/7>), where a 750ml bottle is listed at US\$42.99.

There is even a musical connection built into the concept.

During development, the founders said a QR code on the bottle would connect consumers with Sparrow's music allowing people to listen to the Calypso King while experiencing the rum bearing his name.

A Mighty Sparrow XO Rum Sampler was subsequently released in November 2025 in celebration of the rum's 2026 launch, with the project stating that the product had been produced in cooperation with Slinger Francisco.

More than merchandise

Looking back at the venture following Sparrow's death gives it a different significance.

It becomes another small chapter in the story of how Sparrow's cultural identity travelled far beyond the calypso tent.

His name appeared on records across generations. His voice travelled throughout the Caribbean, North America, Europe and beyond. His compositions examined politics, romance, race, sexuality, colonialism, independence, humour, scandal and ordinary Caribbean life.

And his achievements were extraordinary.

Sparrow won the Calypso King/Monarch title eight times and the Road March title eight times, while also winning the Calypso King of Kings competition twice.

In 2014, Trinidad and Tobago bestowed upon him its highest national honour, the Order of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (ORTT), recognising his immense contribution to music and culture.

Even after serious illness and advancing age, the music continued.

After recovering from a coma in 2013, Sparrow returned to public performance in New York in January 2014. Decades after beginning his career in the 1950s, he remained a cultural force.

Now, following his passing, Mighty Sparrow XO Rum takes its place among the many curiosities and keepsakes attached to a career that simply refused to fit within conventional boundaries.

For some, it will simply be a bottle of premium Caribbean rum.

For others, particularly those who grew up with Sparrow's voice pouring from radios, record players, Carnival tents and fêtes, the name on that bottle will evoke something considerably larger.

It recalls a Grenada-born boy raised in Trinidad who became one of the Caribbean's most consequential musical storytellers.

A man whose lyrics could make an audience laugh uncontrollably in one moment and confront uncomfortable social and political truths in the next.

A performer whose voice became inseparable from the soundtrack of Trinidad and Tobago.

And now, with the Calypso King gone, even that bottle becomes another reminder of an extraordinary cultural journey.

The music remains.

The stories remain.

And in recordings, honours, memories and even a Trinidad-spiced rum bearing his legendary name the Mighty Sparrow continues to fly.

First Published on PPSL News 24/7

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Rhondor Dowlat is a prominent, long-standing Trinidadian investigative journalist and senior reporter based in Trinidad and Tobago. Dowlat specializes primarily in crime, law enforcement, national security, court reporting, and social affairs. Over her multi-decade career, she has built a reputation for on-the-ground investigative reporting, covering major crime scenes, high-profile court cases, police beat updates, and community issues across Trinidad and Tobago.