

'Lack of funding': Ultimate Soca Champion off

CARNIVAL 2026 has received another blow as organisers of the Ultimate Soca Champion (USC) have confirmed there will be no competition for soca artistes this year.

The USC, introduced in 2025 as a replacement for the defunct Soca Monarch competition, will not be staged due to a lack of funding.

In a WhatsApp exchange with the *Express* yesterday, USC CEO Jerome 'Rome' Precilla said he hopes to bring the competition back next year with support from the Ministry of Culture and the National Carnival Commission (NCC).

'We would have reached out to the Minister of Culture and Community Development and to the NCC, requesting meetings. We knew the economic climate wasn't the same, and we offered to work with them in terms of a new budget and working with whatever they could afford to help keep the project alive based on the successes that we had last year,' Precilla said.

He continued: 'But up till today we still haven't heard anything from them, and time is getting nearer, so in order for us to put on a proper product of the standard that we had last year, we decided that we will not do it this year, with the hope that next year we could get that support from the ministry and the NCC to put on the project again, because we definitely know that it is something that is needed in the Carnival landscape in terms of developing the artistes and developing soca music as a whole.'

Precilla also highlighted the impact of last year's competition on emerging artistes.

'We saw the success that we had last year with the USC. We saw that graduating class of young artistes who were there; we saw the successes they are having this year. We are seeing Sucre, who is the lead singer for the Evolution band; we saw Anika Berry, who people would not known before last year, now she is really popular and has another hit song this year in the Carnival landscape.

'We are seeing Christo (Jahmike Bonas), who got that platform last year, also have a hit song in Carnival. We see Christina James, who is now one of the front-line singers for the A Team band, and so many of the younger artistes who have benefited from the platform. 'Even the larger artistes, we are seeing that they are getting a lot of gigs outside of Trinidad and Tobago, and these platforms give the artistes the showcase they need to display their talent,' he said.

Precilla described the lack of support as disappointing. 'We were really disappointed that we weren't supported this year with the project because we know that the soca artistes need it.'

On funding, he added, '...It on our own, this is something brand new. We had to develop it from scratch, and in its formative years, you will need government support. The private sector is willing to assist, but the magnitude of this effort will need government support.' The USC was introduced in 2025 as a new national soca competition to fill void left by the long-running International Soca Monarch, which had not been staged in recent years due to funding and organisational issues. Launched with support from the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the NCC, the competition was

produced by Star Global Productions, a joint venture led by Precilla alongside partners including The Lollabee Group.

Unlike the traditional Soca Monarch format, the USC featured a reality-TV-style approach, with pre-recorded episodes and performances leading up to a grand finale at the Queen's Park Savannah in Port of Spain. The event was designed to showcase artistes' journeys and talents, while engaging broader audiences through television and online broadcasts.

The inaugural competition offered a \$1 million grand prize for the overall champion and a \$200,000 prize for a Youth Soca Champion category. In addition, finalists received performance fees, and runners-up were recognised with awards and cash prizes.

At the 2025 finals, Grenadian artiste Blaka Dan (Wrenroy Ogiste) was crowned the first Ultimate Soca Champion, while Trinidadian artiste Sucre (Nkosi Sucre) won the youth title. Several participants, including Yung Bredda and Anika Berry, gained increased visibility and career opportunities following the competition.



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FLASHBACK, FEBRUARY 2025: Ultimate Soca Champion Blaka Dan (Wrenroy Ogiste) during his winning performance of 'Blessing' at the Queen's Park Savannah, Port of Spain.
-Photo: ISHMAEL SALANDY