

'Pan made me a hooligan'

Story and photo by KIM JOHNSON

STEELBAND, as everyone knows, was created and developed through the love of countless young men who nurtured and protected it in its infancy. Less acknowledged, however, is the role of those men who were more sceptical about this great movement and had fewer illusions about its preciousness.

"I did never like steelband, it was a hooligan thing and I was not one," recalls Victor "Sufferer" Hercules, one of the stalwarts of Crossfire steelband in St James. "I became a hooligan through steelband."



Born on May 8, 1929, the one and only child of Hilda Hercules, Victor grew up in a good household. His mother was a registered midwife, which was as decent a profession as a woman could have in those days, and she had grand ambitions for her son. She sent him to Belmont Intermediate when he was seven, and then around 1938 she was transferred to San Fernando and took the boy with her.

"I used to hear bamboo bamboo on the road and might take a little chip behind the band," he recalls. He was going St Benedict's at the time (now Presentation College). World War II came and stopped all that. Still, by 1944 Nurse Hilda felt her son, now a 15-year-old teenager, was getting out of control. So she sent him up north to work with his father, Felix Griffith, an ex-policeman turned house commission agent. Hercules boarded with his aunt in Carlton Avenue, St James. "That," he says, "made me worse."

Had he remained under the jurisdiction of the mother he respected and feared, Hercules feels he might have continued his education and gone on to become perhaps a lawyer like his

cousins Wilton and Ralph. Instead curiosity took him around the corner to the bottom of Ethel Street, where south St James youths congregated to beat in the yard of Joseph "Joe Crick" Christopher, the home of Tripoli steelband.

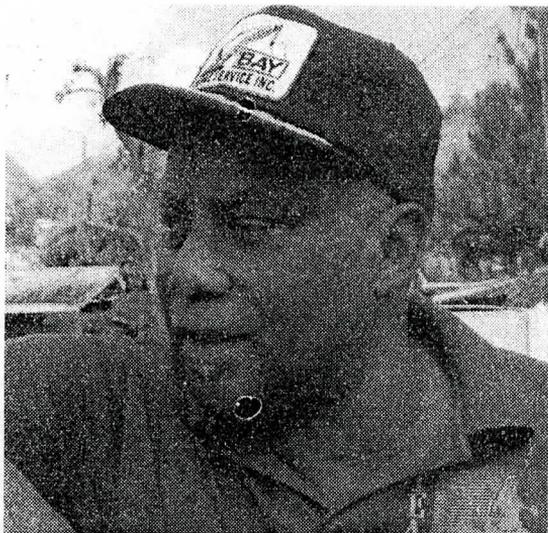
"I went there through fastness, not to learn to beat pan," says Hercules. "I learn five-note kittle and du-dup because it was the easiest thing to play, that's all."

Liming with youths like the Theodore brothers "Shark-bite" and "Vatican", Emanuel Camps, Granville Sealey, Sam and Gandhi Boodhoo, and Sterling Betancourt, Hercules fell into the outcast world of pan. And that is where VE (Victory in Europe) Day caught him.

"It was my birthday, May 8, and I was gambling turn down romeo with 'Cody' and 'Slick' Rollie in a barrack yard when I hear the noise—steelband coming," he recalls. He'd set out that morning with six cents and already had won nearly \$2. "I say that's my birthday present and I gone to jump up. It was Harlem Nightingales."

And when the following year Harlem Nightingales played *St James Sufferers* for Carnival, Hercules, who had no money to play sailor with Tripoli, nastied up an old khaki shirt, called himself "King Sufferer", and went with the Nightingales. The name has stuck ever since.

Still, Hercules was a Tripoli man, and he idolised Joe Crick, the band's martinet of a leader, for his forceful masculinity. "Once he hit a man with a black-jack for coasting—



VICTOR 'SUFFERER' HERCULES

Emanuel Camps, a leading tenor man; if you eh come to practise march he fine you six cents," recalled Hercules of his leader's famous discipline. "Any young fella coulda learn from Joe—self-reliance, how to deal with manhood, he was a true leader."

And yet, just as Hercules's love and respect for his stern mother didn't stop him from breaking away once he got the chance, so too

his admiration for Joe Crick didn't stop Hercules from joining the bunch of young men who broke away in 1949 because they couldn't bear the band's regimentation.

Thus was formed Crossfire with Eric Drayton as captain, and Sterling Betancourt as tuner/arranger. They moved to the Hyderabad Street yard of Cyril Jackman, a place they called the house of

'I learn five-note kittle and du-dup because it was the easiest thing to play, that's all'

Shuvay Morgan after a Raymond Massey civil war movie *Santa Fe Trail*.

Still, the band was on the rise. They had the support of saxophonist and bandleader Sel Duncan, who lived nearby in Gandhi Street, and a gifted arranger, Emmanuel "Eamon" Thorpe, who got both the band and himself into the 1956 finals of the Steelband Festival.

"The band played 'El Mambo' with a lot of bass and the adjudicator, Dr Herbert Wiseman, disqualify we—he say bass don't play tune," says Hercules. Indeed he was waving flag on the 1957 Jouvert morning of their greatest musical achievement—bettering the great Trinidad All Stars.

It was after playing all night in the Rainbow Terrace Club with Sel Duncan, and they were hot to trot with "Another

Night Like This", when they came upon All Stars in Prince Street waiting for Invaders. "We caught them flat-footed now trying to form up, and we hit them with 'Another Night Like This'," he recalls. "They clap we, and then we went back home. That was our moment of glory."

It was that victory which spurred Neville Jules to secretly rehearse Beethoven's "Minuet in G" the following year and wait for Crossfire to demolish their "Indian Love Call", in the process creating the Bomb competition. By then Crossfire was on the way down, however.

The baton passed to Nathaniel's Symphonettes, in whose Benares Street panyard a little no-pants four-year-old boy would play any tune they called for. His name was Boogsie Sharpe. •