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Man with the widest smile in pan

By KIM JOHNSON

WHEN Director of Culture Hollis Liverpool nominated Sterling Betancourt and Ossie Campbell for last weekend's Sunshine Awards in New York, he couldn't have chosen two more dissimilar men. For if Campbell was a strong-arm man for one of the most combative steelbands ever, Betancourt's life



STERLING BETANCOURT

was defined by the broadest smile you'll ever see.

Born in March, 1930, Betancourt's infancy was spent in Laventille where he went out from age five with the bamboo band. He moved to St James shortly after, however, and by the early forties Betancourt was beating paint pans, breaking biche after lunch to tune them under a *downs* tree near the transport savannah by where Fatima College now stands.

His mother took him out of school and paid for him to have private lessons but Betancourt continued cutting classes to go to Joe Crick's Tripoli down Mucurapo. Until one afternoon his mother was passing by on her way from work. "Sterling—look your mother coming!" a friend shouted and the boy made a dash for cover but it was too late. Stella Betancourt shouted, "Don't bother to run, you little so-and-so!"

Betancourt walked back, head low, to get his "buff" but all she said was, "I not paying money while you only tuning pan. Is pan you want, I go buy pan for you." So she took him out of classes and bought a pan for him. And the boy just got better and better, both as a player and as a tuner.

The older Granville Sealey was Tripoli's main tuner and a kind of rivalry grew between him and Betancourt until, at the band's post-Carnival fete in 1947, Sealey threw a drink in his face.

He just walked away and formed another band in Hyderabad Street. The old Tripoli badjohns referred to it as "Shuvay Morgan", which implied they were "hennish" but the new band, Crossfire, quickly became a top St James band. And when the selection of top players was made for the Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra (Taspo), Sterling was chosen to represent Crossfire.

As the band was leaving for England, Betancourt's brother told him, "If you come back here, you is a damn ass!"

And although Tony Williams from North Stars, Ellie Mannette from Invaders, Philmore "Boots" Davidson from City Syncopatens and Orville "Patsy" Haynes from Casablanca all planned to remain in England, too, only Betancourt actually did so.

"Up here eh have no badjohn, you know," Kitchener had dissuaded the young men. "The cold is the badjohn."

But that badjohn was preferable to the kind back home, thought Betancourt, so one evening in a Parisian winter, he waved goodbye to his friends in the Gare du Nord, brushed away a tear, and headed back to England.

That was in 1951 and Betancourt has lived in Europe ever since, playing and teaching pan to adults and children. It was Betancourt, along with Russell Henderson and Mervyn Constantine, who turned an annual garden party into the grand Notting Hill Street Carnival. For his work in teaching pan to schoolchildren, Betancourt was awarded an honorary doctorate last year shortly after Oetlishausen, a village in Switzerland, one hour from Zurich, held a two-day festival in his honour.