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Army in battle of steel

Defence Force pans ramajay

By KIM JOHNSON

IT MIGHT have raised some eyebrows when the Defence Force Steelband, having placed fifth in last year's Pan Ramajay, moved into first place in this year's preliminary round.

But it wouldn't surprise anyone who knows the members of the band, starting with its leader, Sgt Cecil "Jimo" James, a man born into a steelband family if there ever was one.

James's father and uncle, Ancil "Sonny" and Fitzroy "Gaga" James, were founding members of Casablanca and their sister Daisy played with the band in 1944 when she was six, making her perhaps the first female pannist.

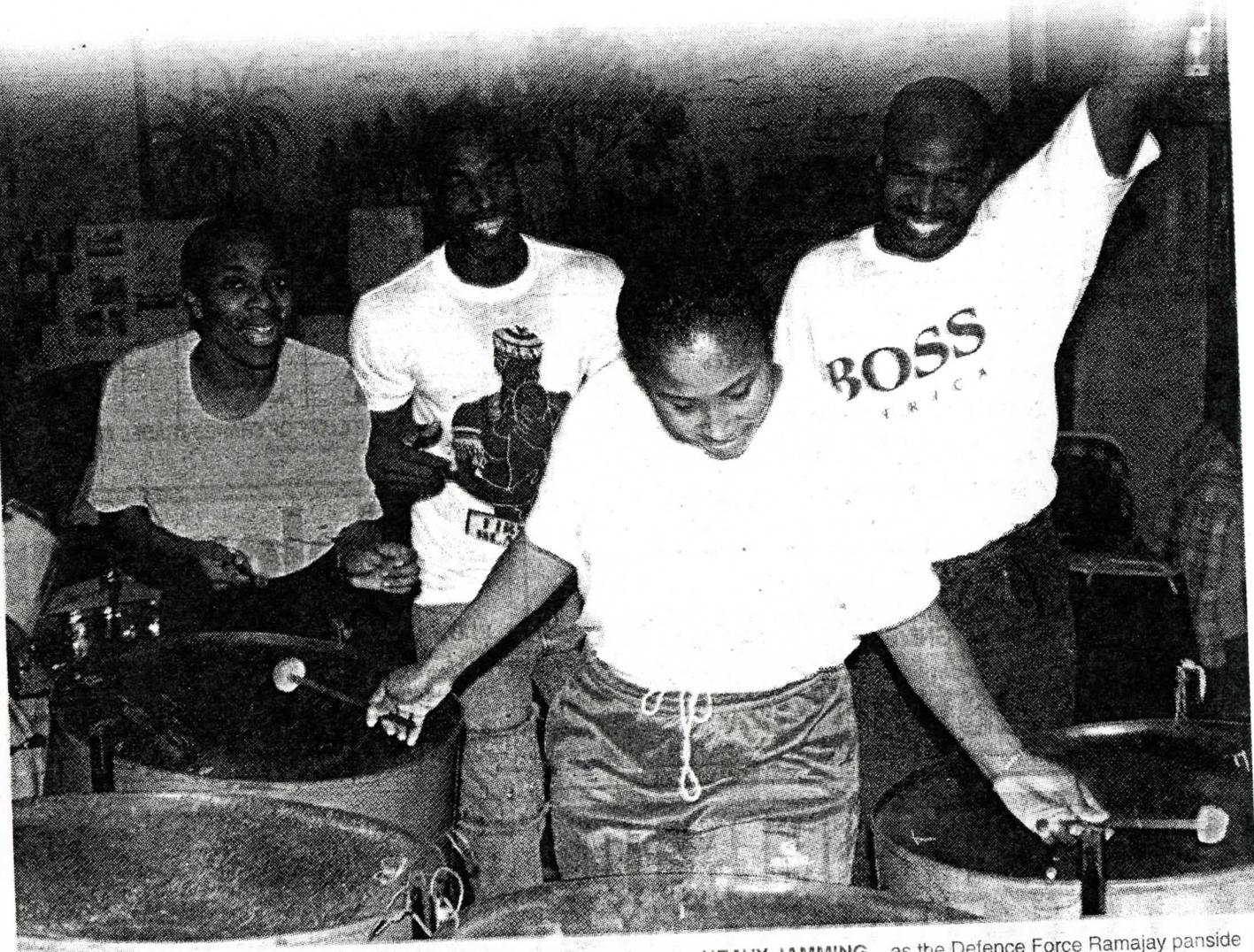
And when a 1950 faction sheared off from Blanca to follow Philmore "Boots" Davidson and Kenny Hart and form City Syncopators, the fledgling band was allowed to nestle under the Jameses' house.

As a child, Cecil also spent time with a relative in Tacarigua, where he signed up for music lessons at the orphanage (St Mary's Children's Home) specialising in French horn. His main focus was on pan, however, and from the sixties he played with the "Synco" stage side, right up until 1981 when he captained the band. (For Panorama he played with Dixieland, then Tokyo, All Stars and Invaders.)

He can still remember that memorable year when North Stars' "Poet and Peasant Overture" just edged out Synco's version of the same piece for first place in the Pan Festival. "That same year I remember there was a Regiment band in the Festival," says James.

Not only does the Defence Force steelband leader come from a family with a musical tradition, so too does the band's director and arranger Earl Wright, a former director of the Regiment band.

With his two brothers Orville (who now heads the Symphony Department of the Berklee School of Music) and Wilbur, Earl learned both piano and pan as a child and began playing and arranging for Hilltones steelband around 1961, when he was 16 years old. In the seventies he arranged for Birdsong when that band was a regular Panorama finalist and then moved on to Nocturne Symphony, whose former leader, Aldwyn "Madman" Jordan, had first



taught him to play pan.

He left Nocturne Symphony in 1994 when he began arranging for the Defence Force Ramajay side.

Wright had been in the Defence Force since 1968, however, having joined the same year his brother Orville left—the same year the first Regiment Steelband collapsed through attrition.

HEAVY JAMMING... as the Defence Force Ramajay panside puts in some practice time at Teteron.
Photo: COLIN SHEPHERD