

HOW STEELBAND MUSIC CAME INTO BEING

More and more people are becoming involved in pan ...



Superintendent Anthony Prospect



Archbishop Anthony Pantin

Ellie brought pan out of dark ages

SOMEBODY STOLE Fish Eye's "Mary-had-a-little-lamb" iron triangle from Hell Yard and he went to get it back from behind the bridge, it is said.

He went with a side, prepared to fight for it.

They fought for it.

For a long time after that bands fought with other bands and the worst thing a young lady could do was to have a boyfriend who beat pan.

There was no steelband association, no sponsor and steelbandmen didn't know about electing a president, a public relations officer and chairman and making releases with letterheads.

They fought their fights and improved their pans and their music.

They beat a biscuit drum without notes then they beat a paint drum from the inside so that it looked like someone had tried to blow it up like a balloon and they got notes on the hump and called it a ping pong.

Winston "Spree" Simon has been credited with inventing the first melodic pan.

Repeat this in a crowd and you'll get an argument.

You will also get an argument for saying that Fred Corbin of Gonzales made the first ping pong or that it came from Alexander's Ragtime Band.

But it is a fact that Spree Simon did play a primitive Ave Maria and won some measure of respect for pans as a musical instrument.

Then along came Ellie Mannette of the sweet pan who produced the basic layout for seventy percent of the pans used today.

Ellie put more notes on the ping pong and rubber on the beating end of the sticks.

He tuned the oil drums and formed Invaders and gave the steelband movement new stimulus.

And he brought the panmen and pan music out of the dark ages.

SOMEONE GRABBED UP AN EMPTY GAS TANK . . .

THE BAND STOPPED.

The spell was broken.

An American tourist spoke his first audible sentence since he entered the panyard and glued himself to the rail beyond which "MEMBERS ONLY" were allowed.

"That rhythm is fantastic. Really FANTASTIC."

In another panyard: The comment came from a Trinidadian who knows pan like a good Trinidadian should.

"Dey have rhydum to kill, dis year."

You can't ignore the rhythm.

CLANGING

Some psychologist or other - ologist suggested that the continuous clanging by iron-men was a form of mass hypnosis.

Maybe. But that is not why rhythm is half or more of steelband music.

It is the origin of steelband music, coming to us in slave ships and running in the veins of indentured labourers and sustained by tamboo bamboo and Hosein drummers.

ROOT

Tamboo bamboo, however, has been recognised as the root of steelband rhythm music.

Pan was an outgrowth of the symphony created by thumping one end of a bamboo pole on the ground and striking the side of it withastick in syncopation

The favourite story about the birth of pan is set in Gonzales in 1945.

As the story goes, a bass-bamboo belonging to "Mussel-Rat" broke up in the heat of a session and its owner grabbed an empty gas tank.

METALLIC

And there, rhythm of a metallic resonance began replacing the CLANKETY-BAM-CLANKETY of the bamboo band.

When Hitler's army fell to the Allies later that year, the tamboo bamboo boys were unprepared.

Metallic containers - dustbins included - were snatched up for the revellery that followed.

That, tellers of the favourite steelband story say, was the birth of the first steelband. Still, there was no melody, only rhythm.

STEEL

Then a man known as Fish-Eye from Hell Yard bent a piece of steel into a triangle and got enough notes to play the first line of "Mary Had A Little Lamb."

All this is said to have happened in East Port-of-Spain - Behind the Bridge.

But there are other accounts which have the time that metal began infiltrating bamboo bands as the early 1930's and the birthplace of steelband as Woodbrook.

Maybe we'll have another commission of inquiry into which story isn't the nancy story.