

# Bridget Brereton



## From tin pan to TASPO

**T**HE countdown to Panorama is underway. So this might be a good time to notice another important book from pan researcher Kim Johnson: *From Tin Pan to TASPO: Steelband in Trinidad, 1939-1951*, published by the UWI Press.

It's quite different from his *The Illustrated Story of Pan*, which UTT published in 2011. For one thing, it has no illustrations; and it covers only a brief—but formative—period in the history of pan. And it is a more academic book, as we might expect since it began its life as a UWI doctoral thesis. At 350 pages it's quite long, and it includes 60 pages of notes and bibliography. But the writing style and general approach make it a very readable book. The research is deep and the references and citations are professionally done, but Johnson writes in the vivid, straightforward style of the journalist (which he was for many years).

The book falls into the category of social and cultural history. But Johnson is less interested in what academics call “structural” history or sociology—or what social scientists call “macro” analysis: the approach that concentrates on broad groups like classes or ethnic communities, collective ideas or ideologies, and long-term trends and changes. Not that these are unimportant to Johnson; but his approach is to focus on the role of individuals and particular steelbands and to tell their stories.

Above all, in this book Johnson celebrates individual achievement and variation in the evolution of the steelband: how individual panmen's creativity, and the special characteristics of particular bands, pushed the music forward. He doesn't think that panmen created the new musical form in order to escape poverty or low social status, or to resist authority or colonialism—both typical “structural” explanations of pan's emergence. Rather, they wanted to make new kinds of music and

to astonish people with what they were creating.

Indeed, music making forms the crux of Johnson's narrative, and the musical creativity and decisions of individual panmen, and particular bands, are seen as mainly responsible for the development of the new art form.

To tell the many stories of the persons and bands involved in this process, Johnson relies very heavily on oral history: interviewing people about their memories of the past. He has conducted hundreds of such interviews over the last 20 years, tapping into the spoken memories of pan pioneers, many of them no longer with us. The book includes vivid quotations from these interviews, in which we can hear the actual voices of the men who created pan music.

**O**f course the oral history method has its problems, and Johnson always tries to corroborate what he hears by comparing a piece of testimony with other accounts, and with documentary evidence, especially newspapers. But in the very early years of pan, there are few documentary sources available, so the oral accounts—carefully compared and critiqued—must be the foundation of the history.

The evidence tells Johnson that the origins and evolution of pan music were dispersed. There's no single origin, no unique pioneer, no one ground zero. The new art form was created by a whole generation of young men, most but not all living in various districts of east and west Port of Spain, who were born in the 1920s and were teenagers or in their 20s during the crucial period (1939-51) his book covers.

If there was a single, prototype steelband, it was the Newtown based Alexander's Ragtime Band, which astonished and enthralled people when it came out during the 1939 Carnival. It was an all-metal percussion band, and it so

excited its hearers that within a year, metallic bands took over from bamboo in the city. Yet the newspapers never even mentioned it, illustrating the need to rely on oral accounts to tell the story, especially during the early years.

**J**ohnson starts his account with the startling appearance of this band in 1939 and what had led up to this event. He then considers developments between 1939 and 1942. Though World War 11 began in 1939, the carnivals of 1940 and 1941 were not banned and all-metal percussion bands proliferated everywhere, diffusing out from the city.

Between 1942 and 1945, when all street processions including carnival were banned, the movement went “underground”. Tuned pans capable of playing a melody were developed. This was neither planned nor foreseen, and was achieved by several different individuals and bands in many different locations, though mainly in the capital city. It was during the two “carnivals” to celebrate the end of the war in Europe and in the East (May and August 1945) that the public first became aware of these new developments, and the term “steelband” became part of public discourse.

Post-war developments and the creation of TASPO, the Trinidad All-Steel Percussion Orchestra which took the new music to Britain in a triumphant tour in 1951, are discussed in the last chapters of Johnson's book.

I can't do full justice to this fascinating, densely written and comprehensive narrative of the origins of steelband in a short column; but it will be the definitive account of its subject for a long time to come.

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