



The old days: Starlift Steel Orchestra, sponsored by Angostura Ltd between 1964-1969, on the streets on Carnival day.

## '\$\$\$...jumping up in steelband'

D ANTHONY BLACKMAN

**The nine-day wonder has passed, and the focus on the Merry Monarch has been speedily transferred to the country's hierarchy. Our bandleaders have responded with the usual disappointments, and still insist that they do not make a profit.**

There must be something amiss with such statements, because of the increasing size of the prize monies, and the consistent advice from the researchers and analysts, urging the stakeholders to take this Carnival thing to that other level, before it slips totally from our grasps, since T&T Carnival is a lucrative international business still waiting to happen.

It has been said that Carnival is a profitable venture with the potential to wake up and greatly assist the diversification of our sleeping economy.

Interestingly though, the keepers of this bedridden economy and their multicultural gurus who seem to share the said view, have cleverly summarised this year's investment in the above venture as, billions \$\$\$ jumping up in steelband. This old school Trini slang when translated means, that one has invested in something which is not worthwhile, and this has resulted in wastage and/or loss of one's precious monies.

The cunning use of this local saying by the hierarchy, also confirms the inevitable negative aura and lack of respect which surrounds the steelband movement, and by extension the national instrument.

Digging deeper, the phrase clearly connotes that such activity, jumping up in steelband, is not really as acceptable as we believe.

Out of this 2012 after Carnival experience, let's take another look at the loss or disregard of the foundation formula, Carnival equals steelband, calypso and mas. Steelband has been lost to Panorama and trashed by the big trucks, mas is somewhere out there, although most of the portrayals are very Brazilian, and calypso has been replaced by

soca.

In an effort to revive and build on this basic formula for Carnival, let's for a moment reflect and indulge in the profile of one of the successful, though struggling survivors of this cultural holocaust, hailing from Woodbrook, the Starlift Steel Orchestra.

Inadvertently, throughout this steelband's 56 year existence, they have been better known for their music, and panorama victories in 1969, 1971 and 1978. Greatly overlooked, is Starlift's mas presentations and ranking during this period, which were also quite impressive.

In fact, the band was recognised as one of the better fancy sailor bands of the fifties and sixties, because of creative portrayals, such as, Undersea Kingdom 1957-5th; and Nursery Rhymes 1958-4th; placing Starlift in the top five of the Band of the Year competition, back in the glory days of George Bailey, Harold Saldenha, Edmund Hart and Cito Valasquez to name a few.

Among the other notable presentations were Moods of Progress (fancy sailor); Ceremony of the Red Men (American Native or Red Indian); Of Feasts and Festivals; Splendour among the Himalayas (historical); and, Feather Fantasy (fantasy). These productions were mainly the work of Alva Maund with assistance from the late Lloyd "Pecker" Woods, and Merton "Dicko" Ellis.

Monday evening mas has been, and still is, their trademark experience. For the young folks of the sixties into the early seventies, the band to hang with was Starlift. Back then they were the cool guys to roll with, if you wanted to be with the in crowd, to be hip, check out Starlift, they are what's happening. The then youthful Ray Holman, David Waddle and later on, Len "Boogsie" Sharpe and the breakaway Phase II posse, all revolutionising steelband music.

Like pied pipers, this music mesmerised the revellers into serious role playing of their very trendy mas. Roll back the clock to visualise the sweet pan jamming and street theatre to themes such as, Rock Around the Clock,

Teenage Millionaire, Shindig '66 Sports and Games and Woodstock.

The migration of a number of the Starlift stalwarts to the United States, the panorama phenomena, and the transition from traditional mas to the modern BBF behind the big trucks of electronic music, has incalculably affected the Tuesday mas. There has been a severe decrease in the number of masqueraders, and the band continues to be in danger of becoming a steel orchestra only.

Thanks to the efforts of their foreign-based members, led by Norman Hunte and assisted by others including Selwyn Sharpe, Dorian Busby, Trevor Olivache and Ian Best, the Starlift Old Boys Association of the USA was founded, with the primary purpose of ensuring the survival of Starlift in general, and to revive the mas traditions, hence the continued strength and presence of the Starlift Monday mas.

They have succeeded to the extent that for the past 20 Starlift has won the Band of The Day competition run by the Downtown Carnival Committee, on several occasions, and have had nine consecutive victories between 2005 and 2012.

An interesting feature of this resurgence is that Starlift has successfully resisted the temptation to switch to electronic music from the DJs, to accompany the thousands of players they continue to attract.

Regrettably though, these numbers do not include a sizeable percentage of the nation's youth. Nevertheless, their proactive steelband and mas ideas continue to set trends and create record breaking history.

They have been also entrepreneurial in this regard, and have financially assisted other steelbands, by consistently employing as much as six single pan/pan round neck steelbands, per presentation, over the past ten odd years. They have therefore; set the stage for the retention of steelband music on the road, at least from a Carnival Monday perspective. Next up, a peek into what the future holds and the strategic plans of Starlift.