

THERE WE WERE, reminiscing, and me trying to find words to put down this history, when Spree came calling at my two-room house cluttered with pieces of metal, tools and the general confusion made by my friends who insist on keeping the drawing-room of the house like a snackette and the outside like the back of a chinese kitchen.

Around me, men who were with me from the very beginning, and now that we had reached the period of the sixties everybody was remembering some incident in which he figured prominently and which was deserving of a place in this story. Voices raised to screeching heights and I trying to exercise control until I reminded myself once again that Trinidadians does talk in gang.

THREAT OF FORCE

Spree put paid to all this, not with a threat of force as he might have done in the old days, but with an articulateness acquired as a result of touring so many different parts of the world.

Much of his talk couched in the terms of the 70's, showing quite clearly that the old man was aware that his 30-year-old struggle with pan had continued in one unbroken line up to the present time.

I have described him as old. But I speak relatively for the face in front of me and the boys didn't bear out the years of strain and excitement that were the lot of he who was in fact the father of all that is steelband.

So to hear him talk, today, of the need he feels to spread his talent "for the use of black brothers and sisters", is to sit and listen, straining the ear as he agonised over the future of the art while offering encouragement by recounting the troubles and hardships of the past, seeming to say that if we had reached this far, then, the depressions of today were but detours in the path of an already programmed future.

ANECDOTES

We talked about the sixties, the era that we knew best, and he knowing them both - the 40's and the 60's - was able to argue that the connections were there all the while.

Picking up the threads of the past and weaving them with the present, while we in tent on the anecdotes, and in deference to one who knew it all, were silent. The gang, now humbled to size.

Using as a springboard the ensuing discussion of the '65 riot in which we were involved, he spoke of the fury of the 40's and of his own stature in that strange world of creativity and destruction out of which the modern pan was born.

Now for him the bad-john days are over, but I felt I caught more than a trace of satisfaction in his voice as he said:

PREACHERS

"Other handleaders used to run into a fight just so. Not me. My band was divided into two distinct divisions. On one side the beaters themselves, on the other my riot squad. Man, I used to drill the men like soldiers and that is why up to today Tokyo's reputation is such that no band will trifle with them."

"We fought among ourselves and we fought the police. We would roam the hills beat-

# In the footsteps of Spree Simon



ing-pan, knowing that police were going to make a raid that night, but the law didn't care about us so we didn't care about the law. And on these same nights the preachers would be out with their candles, bells and marked circles, prophets of doom, really, telling us about dreams that foretold destruction not in the well-to-do areas of St. Ann's and St. Clair, but always in John-John.

"I wasn't selfish. I used to show other panmen where and how they should thief pan, acting as guide and conductor,

showing them the narrow ledge leading from the drum factory to the stinking mud in the La Basse, watching, shaking with laughter as the panmen, scared once by a watchman shooting into the air, swayed and scrambled on the narrow ledge, trying to run along a path, narrow enough for creeping.

"If that was adventure it was only an extension of the adventure of life, itself, that I was living in 29 Old St. Joseph Road.

Barrack-yard, panties hanging on the line, the in-



By Keith Smith

evitable cussing and steam come from living too many in a room, toilets and bathrooms, makeshift things in the yard to be shared, but the humour, too and the friendships formed that are preserved to this day, borne as they were out of an intimacy forced on us by years of seeing each other in various forms of nakedness neither scars nor deepest thoughts being hidden.

"And if anybody hearing me drumming on the pans were to ask what I was looking for I wouldn't have had the words to tell them. All I knew that in my heart I was looking for something and it was that looking that produced the beginning of the note range in pan today.

CALYPSO

"And you talk about your supporters. Which band today has a supporter like Abdul, Rouff's father who on the night when we lost in the first island-wide steelband competition met me in the road and cried in his high, lispng way:

'Pree, come here!'

'Wha happen Abdul?'

'Wha all yuh play in the competition?'

'Stardust, Abdul.'

'And who tell all yuh play Sawdust.'

• "And using his stick he destroyed every single one of the band's pans.

"Characters like bush. Like Thick Lip who when he drink used to ketch a spirit. And one time I see him with mih eyes, big, big, big, standing like Odysseus and holding on to the top of a young tree, struggling with it and tearing off the top, breaking it with a crack.

"And with all your intricate arrangements, we have lost something. How many steelbandsmen today are able to improvise on the spot at the moment. Like in the 40's so we have lost the ability to get up and solo on the spot. More skilful with their hands perhaps, but everybody sticking to the lines that the arranger draws for them."

We heard Spree say that he couldn't be positive that he was the first man to beat a pan. All he knows is that he was the first to put notes on it. But the point when he elaborated was that many people had made many contributions, or as he put it "there have been many turning points in pan".

TALKING IN GANG

Spree, Elic Manneke, Tony Williams, myself. And I would have been less than human were I not satisfied that this giant of the 70's approved my experiment with the Bertfone to the extent that he sees it as the single greatest innovation in pan of the 70's.

And when I come to talk about that particular innovation, and show those who have been following me a step-by-step description of the pan - broken down into its various parts and assembled together again, I will do so, assured by Spree that I am following the course of adventure and experiment started not by me but the men who began it in those "dread" but exciting times 30 years ago.

"CATANO"

But Spree was out the door and the house was empty. The moment ended. Before he left "Catano" who had come with Spree showed us what he could do. The younger steelbandsmen listened and from the smile that played on their lips it was clear that he had made Spree's point about the lost art of improvising.

And the discussion then followed as to whether in fact improvisation was really necessary meant that the atmosphere was as before. Screeching voices on the floor and all men talking all at once in gang.