

Saga of the steelband

ML1040 1990

SELWYN TARRADATH begins today a series of articles on the History of the Steelband.

DOCUMENTATION of the history of the steelband is always a controversial and popular subject. Calls for this exercise to be done have been made since in the 50s when the art form was still in its early stages of development.

A few people have been brave enough to attempt to write on this subject, and have felt the wrath of the pioneers.

One such person is Sylvia Gonzales, a leading educator, who wrote an account that was given to her of the birth of the steelband and had it published.

Readers took this version to be factual, and I am sure Mrs Gonzales now regrets that she had not done some more research into the matter.

I was asked in 1984 to write a brief history of the steelband as a foreword for the Steelband Music Festival brochure. This task scared me, as fools rush in where angels fear to tread, and I was about to walk on slippery terrain.

I took the easy way out, and did a very concise but abstract piece, where I was sure that I was always on solid ground.

I was born at the time when the steelband was fighting for survival in the late 40s, and I have lived most of my life in the bowels of the steelband movement.

But there are many mysteries that I have not been able to unravel, even with the help of those who were there while it was happening. This is what I wrote.

The story of the steelband has developed into a saga where myth, legend, fact and fantasy have been interwoven. Various claims and counter claims have shrouded the birth and earliest development of the steelband in a web of mystery.

Provided The Medium

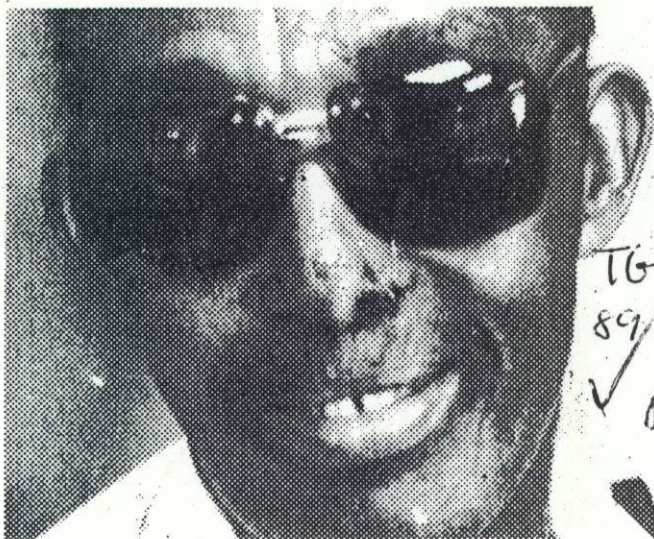
It happened around the period of the Second World War from approximately 1935 to 1945, and it was during this time that the bamboo bamboo and metal bands underwent a radical transformation.

These bands provided the medium for the dispossessed descendants of African slaves to pursue their love of music and rhythm, and were chiefly identified with the street parades of the annual carnival celebrations, where the strongest influences were those of the French Creole and African traditions. This celebration was banned for the duration of the war.

The bamboo bamboo bands consisted of pieces of bamboo cut to different lengths so that a variety of pitches could be obtained. These provided the rhythm for a percussion band which was accompanied by a chant, usually a call and answer refrain.

Around 1935 some of these bands began using metal containers as substitutes for the bamboo instruments.

The accidental discovery was made that changes of pitch occurred where the surface of these metal contain-



GEORGE GODDARD ... contract

ers were hammered and stretched.

The young innovators experimented feverishly, and soon the first pan, called the ping pong, appeared with sufficient notes to carry a simple melody.

The war ended and the rival bands of the Port-of-Spain ghettos took to the streets to celebrate VE and VJ days, and to introduce to the world a new, exciting and exotic sound.

Further experiments through the years resulted in the development of the full range of the steel orchestra as we know them today.

The history of the steelband must be completed now before the pioneers all pass away. These are the persons who were involved from 1930, and before and most of them who are alive will be in their late 70s or 80s. George Goddard did substantial work in this area, but his untimely death left many gaps to be filled.

Most people believe that this project should be an undertaking of Pantrinbago, but we lack the necessary expertise to carry out such an enterprise, as it needs the skills of anthropologists, ethno-musicologists, historians and other specialists in the field.

There is also a huge cost factor involved.

His Contract Expired

Pantrinbago recognised that this is a national project, and approached the Ministry of Culture in 1985 to have George Goddard begin work on the venture.

The then Minister of Culture Ms Muriel Donawa McDavidson agreed with the idea, but she wanted Michael Anthony to be responsible for the project.

A compromise was reached where Goddard would be responsible for collecting the information, and Anthony responsible for the production of the book.

George went full speed ahead knowing that he was suffering from terminal cancer, and that it would be only a matter of time before he would be leaving us. He contacted as many of the pioneers as he could, and sent them questionnaires which would be used to get a balanced account of the development of the art form.

He also conducted interviews with as many of the important people as he could find.

Goddard was working on a contract basis, and just as he was about to conclude his interviews by going abroad to meet those pioneers domiciled in foreign lands, his contract expired and the new Minister Ms Johnson informed us that they could not identify funds to continue the project.

We made several approaches to her finally bringing Goddard himself to a meeting where he was able to convince her of the urgency of the matter as he had little time left. The contract was renewed, but time had run out for George Goddard, one of the few persons that had the history of the steelband at his finger tips.