

*This is the start of how newspapers reported the history and evolution of the steelband...*

**Evolution, History And Future of the**

# Steel Band

**By OSCARET CLAUDE**

During the days of slavery, musical instruments were few in the West Indies; the greed for wealth had made the finer arts almost obsolete, as slave masters used every inch of shipping space for only necessities and their more profitable human cargo. Instruments like the violin and piano were exceedingly rare, and even if they were not, the half-naked, poor and hungry slaves could not have afforded to pay the price they then cost.

In those days there were no places for recreation and life was a monotonous and dreary existence; so to relax their troubled minds the slaves assembled and had what was called "Callender" or "Cam-

of steel were played but never was there any proper organisation to warrant recognition. Quite a few years before a popular sportsman nicknamed "Joe Ralph" played a bucket and members of a city store beat utensils, but this was looked upon more or less as advertisement.

The remarkable success of the experiment on Coronation Day set the "scientists of steel music" busy in their junk-heap laboratories, straining the music out of the pans and bits of iron, in an effort to make a worthy contribution to their cherished tradition, and in 1938 the portable piano (known to steel musicians as the ping-pong) was invented.

so to relax their troubled minds the slaves assembled and had what was called "Callender" or "Camboule." There they sang, played sticks, spun yarns and danced to the strains of the humblest and rudest of musical contrivances—the Bamboo Band—and such other music as their spirited voices produced.

The leader of the singing was called the Chantwell who, upon composing a delightful verse about any member of the congregation or any recent occurrence, was applauded "Caieso," later "Careso"; this, as pointed out by Mr. Edric Connor, is responsible for the name of our Hollywood-famed balled, the Calypso.

As time rolled on and the whistles of slavery became smoother, the personality of the slave-masters improved and they spent more time on academic subjects. The current of finer arts then gradually flowed to these remote shores; but by that time the Bamboo rhythm was already implanted into the souls of its originators, and remained the choice for big festivals such as Carnival and Christmas, which were heralded by its beat.

## Fete Of Callender

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## Bottles Were Scarce

That year bamboo, gin and rum bottles were scarcities in this epoch-making symphony, and bands came out with bits of steel of confusing sizes and descriptions that almost gave one the impression that the new scrap-iron dealers had removed the La Basse into the city.

Hardly had the rhythmic sounds and vibrations diminished from the minds of the ecstatic masqueraders before Mr. J. Hamilton Holder published his poem "Carnival Street Band" from which the name "Steel Band" originated:

Hear them as they come,  
Marching down the street,  
Rolling out a rhythm  
Seductive to your feet.  
Ting, Tong! Bang  
Bee-dong, bee-dong boom!  
That's the noisy rhythm  
Of a Carnival band.

To persons who understand the bamboo rhythm, like Mr. Hubert Charles (Lion) and others who held Jour ouvert competitions on Carnival Monday mornings, this transition was an indication of a new birth in West Indian folk music; a new birth it was. It is now possible to play almost the

## Fete Of Callender

Due to the various inter-marriages, "Callender" became the fete of the various races that comprised the then community and was a true reflection of its cosmopolitan structure. Its spectators and participants represented every section and class; and some of the most prominent men, a few of whom are still alive, joined in the fun.

In May, 1937 the news of the King's abdication filled the air, and was swiftly followed by that of the Coronation of a new King. The calypso, "It's love, love alone caused King Edward to leave the throne" was a favourite, and whether the new monarch's enthronement should be celebrated with Carnival was a little controversial as Carnival had already passed.

The final decision caught the public somewhat unawares, so very little time remained for the preparation of bamboo instruments. The ink of the proclamation was not well dried before throngs of revellers crowded the streets to pay homage to their new ruler. The old motor-car and cycle which had lain in Tauntie Willie's yard—the rendezvous and opera house of Gonzales Place—fell victims of circumstance to frontal attack of the revellers which resulted in a hair-raising rhythmic tintinabulation.

This form of folk music using "steel" instruments instead of bamboo appealed to the taste of Bamboo musicians:

- because of its superior tonal qualities;
- because of the durability of the instruments;
- because of the inconvenience saved of felling bamboo on distant hills far away from the district opera-house where it had to be again cut into suitable lengths.

Before 1937 however, instruments

NEW ORLEANS, LA. (AP)—A new birth of music; a new birth it was. It is now possible to play almost the whole scale, a nursery rhyme and a few choruses on one of these instruments.

The history of the steel band proves that like all other arts, music is an evolution of something rude to something coarse before it becomes pleasant and refined. While it is felt that the intense enthusiasm of the learner to practise too frequently should not be by persons raised in other cultures who find it but a strange and bewildering disturbance, there are quite a few instruments that can, in my opinion, successfully hold their places in any orchestra and is it felt by the humble musicians that sufficient opportunity should be given for their improvement and the further development of their creative ability.

## Much 'Old Iron'

Many local bands, including the Police Band, use their bits of "old iron." What great difference is there between the cymbal, bugle, the Spanish castanet and shack-shack, the tambourine, the bass and the kettle drums, the Indian dhanta—and instruments of the steel band?

It is doubtful whether any sincere music student would completely despise such a form of music. It takes a great musical soul to extract music from old pans. Stokowsky would very probably be astounded to hear "Mary had a little lamb" played on an old pan!

Wasn't Pythagoras inspired to make the music scale by listening to the various sounds produced by a blacksmith's anvil? Isn't the music of the piano produced by a succession of blows on its wire strings from little hammers? Didn't Learie Constantine learn to play cricket with coconut bats?