

ML1040

PAN: A MOVEMENT THAT BEATS WITHIN OUR HEARTS

THERE was only one thing I found irritating about the steelband. In retrospect I am ashamed to admit it. Although I suppose, I can hide this indiscretion under the proverbial impatience of youth. It had to do with the long pause between tunes in the panyard and the time constraint occasioned by the compulsion to visit all the panyards.

This, of course, was not peculiar to any one band. The piling ping pong, ping ping pong! and the resulting cacophony used to drive me up a wall.

I would shift my weight from one foot to the other, or lean on any available and accommodating object. If it was an unfamiliar band I would mumble under my breath, "Play the jiggerboots tune nuh!" But if it was a familiar band I would fill my lungs with air and my voice would rise above the bands emboldened by familiarity.

"Hear nuh man what happen now, all you go take the whole crew cut night to start a tune? Man stop the fat pants chinksing and beat something!" There would normally be a babble of approval. My kind of impatience was as infectious as the music.

Then after what appeared to be an eternity three knocks on the side of a pan brought players and listeners to attention. The band would strike up a tune and the beating mouths then gave way to the critical ear, standing as erect as an antenna.

The steelband breeds uncanny loyalty. On my block even though the famous Boys Town and the Village Spellbound existed the loyalty was to Shell Invaders. My block also supported Malvern. But while I was permitted to lime on the block and support Colts, the Belmont Battalion, there was no such allowance with Shell Invaders. I supported Colts because everyone else was a Malvernite, but to carry that daring to Invaders would have led to instant ostracisation. The loyalty was so fierce that it engendered rivalry. The band was the Community which gave it birth and to which in turn it imparted life. But the



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community was not always limited by time or space. Men and women came from everywhere bound by allegiance. From the four corners people converged on their favourite bands.

Invaders was one of the most difficult bands to get moving on a J'Ouvert morning. Men and women sit scrubbing the pavement outside the Queen's Park Oval. It was all right to sit outside. Those were the days when promoters favoured the steelbands and bands played the amoeba to satisfy demand. All the disparate parts had to assemble, as a whole again, before the band could move. The sun would catch a slow moving Invaders going to do musical battle, to drop a bomb, on its arch rival — All Stars in its very own lair on Charlotte Street. Invaders was to All Stars what Malvern was to Colts. Invaders was known for its mellow tune and characteristic style so difficult to change even today. All Stars was known for its background pans and its supporters, especially the females, complimented that tradition, some even competing with the pans.

The bomb tune was a closely guarded secret. The tune would sometimes be practised by placing sponge on the sticks or with feathers. Sentries were posted to spot the spies seeking to infiltrate, and over-enthusiasm often boiled over into war. The stencilled jersey — that badge of belonging — was capable of attracting both love and hate. But the dropping of the bomb was the gem of J'Ouvert. It was not easy to disengage from one band and to find a vantage point on Hart Street to take in the competition. It was easy to lose the vantage position near the pans. You would start out close behind the pans but as the crowds swelled, without even being jostled, you would find yourself so far behind, you could hardly hear the music. But even in the crowd, or, maybe because of the crowd, leaving the band was not easy. That could be construed as perfidy and you never knew who was watching.

The adrenalin started pumping nights before. Those who failed to make the band, the competition for pan beaters was very keen, and lacked the ability to storm had to brave the cold winds outside the Queen's Park Savannah. Inside the pans generated enough heat to energise an entire nation, and so it did with some exceptions. There were those who

went to Miami while pan lovers lacked the meagre means to hear and support their bands at Panorama. Men and women out in the cold straining their ears to catch the strains of steelband music. The compensation lay sometimes in victory as you followed your band to its yard. I was there on Park Street when Rosary swayed to the rhythm of *Let Every Valley be Exalted, Elizabethan Sere-nade, In a Monastery Garden*. It was then that honey dripped from the pans and people swarmed like bees.

I was there in the vicinity of Memorial park when Hasely Crawford, Ben Johnson, and Carl Lewis combined would have seemed like crawlers. World records were broken in the sprints, long distance and high jump as people ran not for medals — 'take a bow Phase II' — but to safety. Desperadoes came to the rescue with the famed Marabuntas, but Highlanders never really recovered.

Highlanders was the second generation band. The band with the "Chinee music" that attracted the youth. Bertie Marshall, himself then a younger man, pioneered the amplified pan and men and women broke ranks to follow this Laventille Guru. Jealousy may have been the cause, but Highlanders pans were certainly the targets.

I was there when class raised its divisive head and Dixie Land and Silver Stars made music with and for the privileged, or so it appeared at the time. A point that Arnim Smith still makes in the present context and he ought to know as president of Pan Trinbago. I was there when Tony Williams and his spider web pans started the Pan Am North Stars musical revolution. It was a system that I had seen taken from Spellbound's use before.

Most panmen were unemployed and not too high on the social ladder. Sparrow's *Outcast* makes the point. This frustration and fight for recognition manifested in self-destructive gang wars. And the gang wars, the result of non-acceptance was the excuse for social distance. The steelband movement was and is the closest approximation we have had to class struggle. Its position in society today exemplifies the tremendous social mobility of the last 30 years. But born in struggle as symbolised by the heating, the sinking, the beating and faced now by newer and more

subtle forms of prejudice and rejection, the battle continues. The struggle must go on, but with increased vigilance.

The destructive gang wars ceased when special employment opportunities were created for pan players. They moved from the periphery to the mainstream of society. The Steelband Association under George Goddard and later Pan Trinbago under Roy Augustus, Bertie Fraser and now Arnim Smith played a great role. This was of course facilitated by a sympathetic and understanding regime. But no one should deny the important roles played by George Yeates, Ralph Moyou and the late and legendary Rudolph Charles in this regard. However, employment led to more time away from the pans for the many. This meant that the time spent in yards was reduced to periods of leisure. It was love and sacrifice that kept the pans going. It was self help and self reliance, no new concepts, just an intrinsic and indispensable virtue possessed by the selfless contributors to the glory of pan.

I was there when Prime Minister Chambers insisted that All Stars should return to its home in Hell Yard. I applauded when Trintoc spent part of the people's wealth to stave off commercial interests bent on evicting Invaders. I cried when certain interests saw the cost but not the value of saving that panyard. The panyard — where great and small assembled under the breadfruit tree. Its foliage thinned by the hands of men and the hand of time but still faithfully bearing fruit. I made a political enemy of the man whose parlour occupied the lands on which Merry-tones Pan Theatre was constructed. I looked on bemused as the representative of the party he supported cut ribbons and made complimentary verbal noises at the opening of the same pan theatre he opposed.

And I was there to witness the formal opening of the Birdsong Pan Theatre last Saturday amidst well deserved pomp and ceremony. I listened to Teddy Belgrave's lament. The lamentation of the panman driven from the university campus, the one place in which he thought he should have found sanctuary. In the land of the steelband an unpleasant encounter with administrative and intellectual insensitivity or maybe to be

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