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ML1040

PANMAN extraordinaire

‘If yuh iron good you is king’

By KIM JOHNSON

TONY WILLIAMS moulders in St James, his hammer silent; Neville Jules is a watchman in New York, living behind a steel door in a dark, run-down Brooklyn tenement; but at least one of the great trinity of pan heroes is receiving his due: **Ellie Mannette**. This year is being celebrated the golden anniversary of Mannette who tuned a 55-gallon oil drum 50 years ago.

So far there have been concerts, festivals, workshops and lectures in Ohio, West Virginia, Missouri, Mississippi, Arizona, Nevada, Utah and Washington to commemorate Mannette's anniversary.

The great man himself, who has lived in the US since 1967, opened the celebrations with one of his own compositions, "Little Girl" at concert of Miami University Steel Band in March. And at West Virginia University where he works, Mannette will unveil a newly designed pan on July 27.

When Ellie Mannette tuned his first 55-gallon oil drum in 1946, he wasn't necessarily the first to do so. Tony Williams from Sun Valley in St James had already done that. The drums were readily available and

moulded Invaders into a fighting force to stand up to the four other war machines known as Red Army, Destination Tokyo, Casablanca and Desperadoes, on that Carnival Monday when Invaders swung from Charlotte Street into Duke Street, only to confront the big T flag, the Woodbrook boys were just youths incapable of handling the John John badjohns.

"Hold on to your pans," shouted Mannette before the rout.

"They played Ju Ju Warriors; we didn't play no mas—we was just in town the night," recalls Francis Wickham of that clash. "Usually we never used to go in town; we used to beat pan all around Woodbrook alone. That year we went down in town and that was it—they eh want we in town, they mash we up flat...That time we was little, we didn't know nothing about no cutting up man. So we had to run."



ELLIE MANNETTE and some of his students at the Western Virginia University tuning project

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When Ellie Mannette tuned his first 55-gallon oil drum in 1946, he wasn't necessarily the first to do so. Tony Williams from Sun Valley in St James had already done that. The drums were readily available and any imaginative youth could have tried it. But Mannette was already the tuner for his band. So whereas Williams's precocious experiments were rejected by the Sun Valley skipper Sonny Roach, Mannette's was adopted by Invaders.

How Mannette came to tune the famous pan was a result of a clash with Destination Tokyo in Duke Street on the first Carnival after the war. Mannette wasn't captain of Invaders yet, not in 1946. The band's first captain was the older Stanley Hunte who came from a small nameless band on Luis Street shortly after the Tokyo debacle.

Before that, however, before Hunte

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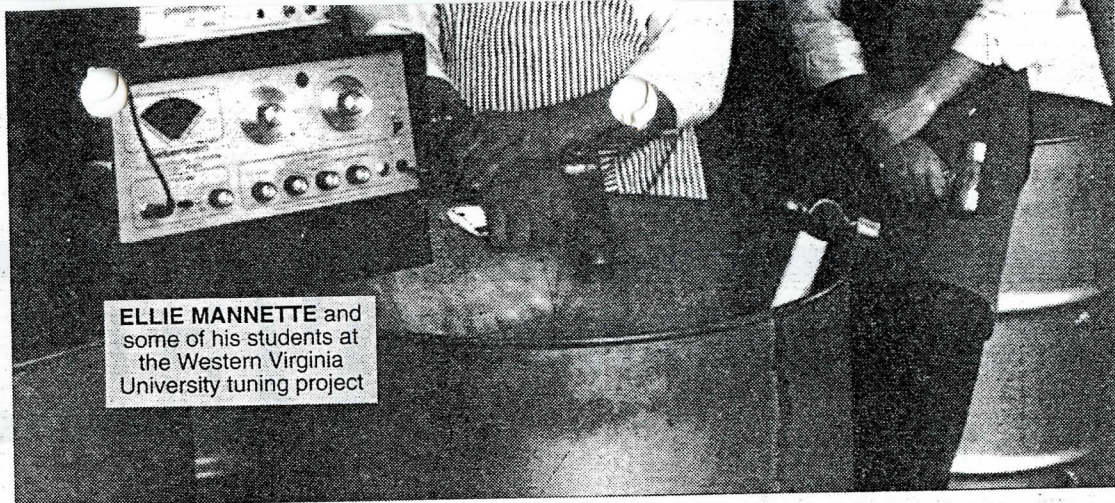
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AND TOKYO carried off Mannette's pan, the Barracuda, as a trophy back to John John where they strung it from a tree. Come and get it, they dared Mannette.

He wasn't captain yet, but Mannette was the tuner for Invaders and during the war had already developed a reputation for the sweetness of his pans. Ellie had started late, joining the band after older brother Ossie and younger brother Vernon "Birdie" Mannette. He'd got a scholarship to move up from Woodbrook Presbyterian to Ideal High School, and concentrated on his books.

He apprenticed to the East Iron



ELLIE MANNETTE and some of his students at the Western Virginia University tuning project

Foundry as a metal turner, quickly becoming one of the island's top metal workers—an expertise he brought to tuning. Once he joined the band—this was during the war, when they were still called Oval Boys—Ellie supplanted Ossie and Birdie and became the band's tuner. And immediately he began to invent, wrapping the pan sticks with rubber.

Formerly, pan sticks were simply made out of a soft wood. Sometimes the tips were pounded with a hammer to further soften it, but the tone was still unsatisfying. "Then in 1943, I could remember exactly, I

used rubber tips," Mannette told pannist Andy Narrell in 1986. "I wrapped my sticks with a bicycle tube. I cut it and I wrap it."

In those days, up until the Fifties, special pans were named, and indeed were well known. Tony Williams had the famous "Spider Web", Herman "Rock" Johnson had the "Rose", Francis Wickham had the "Yellow Hand", and so on. Well, before them, in 1946 Ellie Mannette had made from a 35-gallon sweet oil tin, his "Barracuda"—until Tokyo beat them and took it.

"Out of that frustration I became determined to build another instrument bigger and badder than the last," Mannette recently told Kaethe George, Project Manager of the West Virginia University Tuning Project. "In my father's backyard I spied a rusting 55-gallon barrel..."

Mannette went on to tune the sweetest pans in the country. Wearing the cork hat which still sits in the panyard, he led the Invaders against all east Port of Spain bands which sought to keep the west out of town.

Playing the irons he'd tuned for himself, Wickham, Kent Jones, Maifan Drayton, he created the most powerful Jouvert steelband to this day.

His design of tenor pans with a large F in the centre was the first widespread styling, although at present Mannette tunes along Tony Williams's "Fourth and Fifts" design.

And come July 27 we'll see if the man who made the best iron is still king.



Oval Boys in the yard, Mannette second from the left.