

Anthony 'Muffman' Williams a true T&T

By KIM JOHNSON

IT'S A MARK of the man's stature that when Pan Trinbago North Zone passed a hat around two Saturdays ago to help Anthony Williams build a soundproof workroom, nearly \$1,500 was collected. And yet this is but a drop, because the fund has a target of \$90,000; a fitting tribute and no less than perhaps the greatest all-round panman ever, deserves.

After all, it's Tony "Muffman" Williams' "Fourth and Fifths" arrangement of notes which has become the standard design on most pans. It was also he who created the modern steelband ensemble by putting pans on wheels. And, in addition to his seminal technical innovations, he was also one of the greatest arrangers when he worked with North Stars, the band he captained for 20 years. And still his list of contributions to the steelband movement goes on and on.

Born in 1931, he grew up in the same spot on Nepaul Street, St James where he now lives. But it was up in Kandahar, north of the Western Main Road, that Williams first heard pan and it was there he took root and blossomed as a steelband man.

Towards the end of the war he tramped around Bombay Street with an unnamed steelband of five or six boys, joining up with Harlem Nightingales in Guthrie Street for that first 1946 Carnival, moving on that same year to Nob Hill and then Sonny Roach's Sun Valley—winners of the first island-wide steelband competition.

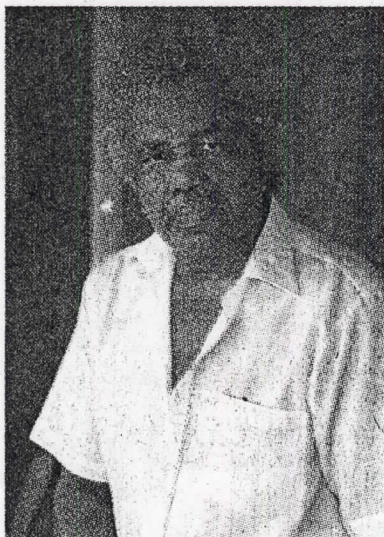
Already Williams' innovativeness was apparent, and just as quickly was it overlooked.

"When the war was over the Americans had a lot of drums that they dumped down Mucurapo, so I went there with a friend and we rolled out two drums and we started to tune those drums, but Nightingale didn't want them," recalls Williams. "They found that they were too large, heavy, because they were accustomed to the small 'ping pong'; they used to hold it up in one hand and play 'Mary had a Little Lamb' and some simple calypsoes."

Within two or three years everyone was using oil drums for their ping pongs, but Williams had moved ahead by inventing the tenor boom. By then he'd left Sun Valley with the breakaway North Stars, led by the talented Roy Harper who surprisingly chose Williams, not himself, to represent the band in the famous Trinidad All Stars Percussion Orchestra (Taspo). "I must be the only jackass who was captain and choose somebody else to go Taspo," says Harper with a laugh. "All the others was captains."

Immediately, Williams made himself useful: "I introduced the oil drum to the tenor boom because it had a biscuit drum there," he explains. "The biscuit drum was too thin and it used to sound like galvanise."

All of the Taspo youths were tuners in addition to



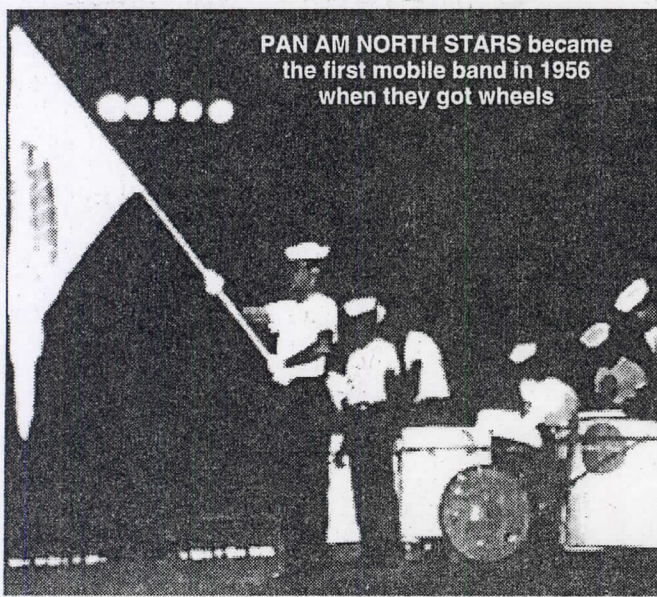
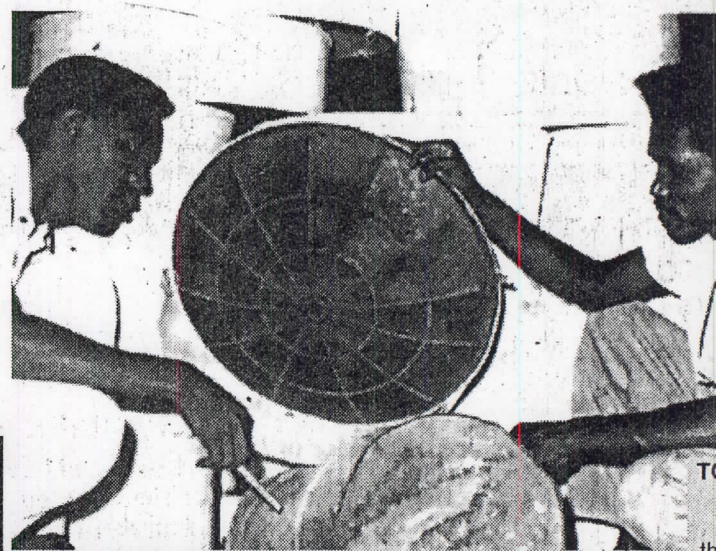
TONY WILLIAMS

being virtuoso players: Sonny Roach, Ellie Mannette, Spree Simon, Dudley Smith, Boots Davidson, Andrew de la Bastide, Belgrave Bonaparte, Theo Stephens, Patsy Haynes and Sterling Betancourt. And only four—not including Williams—were official tuners for the band. In those days, and for long after, Ellie Mannette from Invaders tuned the sweetest pans by far. But it was Williams who discovered how to put the octave within a note so that when you hit it what you hear is really a harmony. An octave of a note, you see, is the same note but higher; a man and a woman, for instance, naturally sing an octave apart.

"In Taspo I was tuning a tenor boom... I was working on two Cs—a middle-C and the octave C fit below," he recalls. This technique is now standard practice for all tuners.

"I heard the sound of the octave C in the lower C—it produced a brilliance in tone that was different, so I realised the octave must be inside the note for it to sound true and clear. I told the members in Taspo about it. Nobody really said anything about it."

Although they had long known that you didn't place any note next to any other note, different tuners in those days had different stylings. For every note on the outside circle, Williams was placing its octave on the inside circle. He didn't stop



PAN AM NORTH STARS became the first mobile band in 1956 when they got wheels

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there, though, but pushed the logic of his discovery to its conclusion.

"The ping pong had developed from a tenor kittle beat that was a major chord—So, Do, Me," he explains. "That is C, F, A; so I counted the semitones from C to F and found six. I counted from F to A and found it was five, so I put B-flat there and kept skipping six semitones all the way around. Without knowing it I had discovered the cycle of fifths."

Describing this innovation as "ingenious", Swedish physicist Ulf Kronman, author of *Steel Pan Tuning*, concludes: "In this way the harmonics of the octave, the fifth and the fourth, will surround each note and help up the harmonic spectrum of the tone."

Taspo returned from England in 1952 and the following year Roy Harper left North Stars. Surprisingly, in light of his subsequent accomplishments, Williams tried to avoid leading the band. "I didn't want to take it over because I used to see the hard work Roy had," he admits. "Whenever we had to play out, Roy still in his old clothes."

When we dressed, come to play, Roy still there pounding pan—I didn't want that kind of hard work, I wanted to be able to go and play and just be a performer."

The band prevailed and Williams became captain, arranger and tuner for North Stars—the vehicle for both his apotheosis and his downfall. Still, he continued experimenting, trying to put on the road the beautiful orchestration of the Taspo stage side.

"The stage side had developed chromatically, (conductor) Griffith introduced the chromatic (scale) to steelband in Taspo, he made all the pans chromatic," says Williams. "But the road band wasn't chromatic because they couldn't bring a bass, three drums, to bring a chromatic pan. I wanted to bring the chromatic steelband on the road so I started with the bass and put wheels onto the drums."

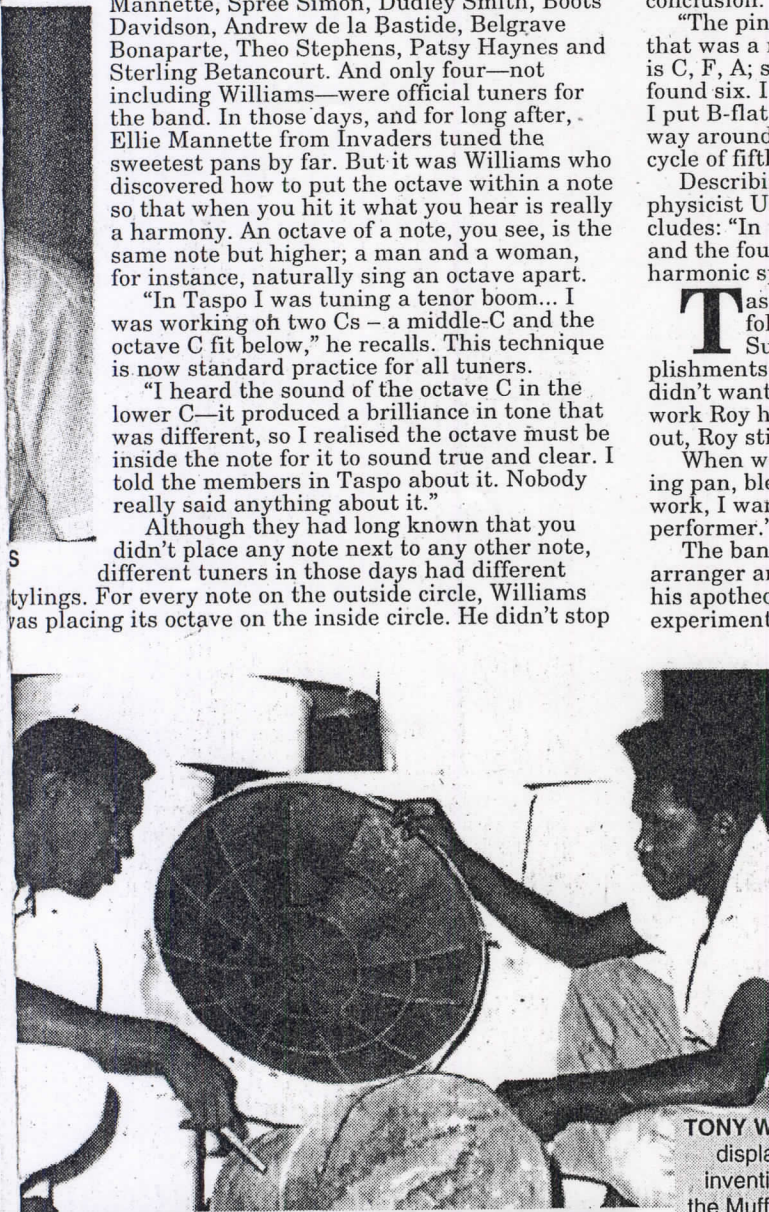
If the fifties was his decade of invention; the sixties crowned him as a captain and arranger, and his band went on to win the Pan Festival in 1962, Panorama in 1963 and 1964 and the Festival again in 1966. But perhaps North Stars' greatest moment was in 1968, when they held their famous "Ivory and Steel" concert with world-renowned concert pianist Winnifred Atwell.

But it would be the decade of the seventies which laid Williams low, starting with his departure from the band in 1973 and its collapse. "Someone had been sabotaging it, mashing up the pans and the drums, so I resigned," he says. That same year the police stopped the greatest tuner from practising

his craft at his home in Nepal Street because it was creating a nuisance! He began tuning for Valley Harps at the Princes Building, all the while experimenting with a larger, 29-inch pan he'd made himself of sheet steel.

In 1979 the Princes Building was destroyed by fire and with it went Williams's experimental 36-note pans on which he'd tuned 30 notes already. And the great man succumbed to what some have termed "pan tabanca", a mental breakdown from which he is yet to recover. "We hope that making him comfortable, building a room to do his research and tuning, would help bring him back," says Keith Simpson, Pan Trinbago North Zone Treasurer.

"After all, he was the ultimate panman and he still has a lot to offer."



TONY WILLIAMS displays his invention: note the Muff, observe the Spider Web

