

Theodore Lewis

When Bobby Mohammed and Cavaliers came to town

IN the early days of Panorama, for the semi-finals the bands used to have to start playing at the entrance to the Savannah near Memorial Park, and they would continue along the track, pausing in front of the Grand Stand, before leaving the stage. They used to be judged as they moved along. This is the stage I wish to set for the Panorama semi-finals of 1965. I wasn't there for it, but that is beside the point, because what happened on the track that semi-final Sunday was the arrival of Guinness Cavaliers and the legend of Lennox "Bobby" Mohammed.

I am rekindling that moment in history because I have a mortal fear that there are citizens who are pan lovers today who may never have heard about the band and its great captain, and worse, never have heard the rendition of the tune they played that day, which was "Mas" by Lord Melody, known since as "Melody Mas".

Now in 1965 the band I was supporting was Southern Marines. If you were from Marabella as I was then, that is who you supported. Guinness Cavaliers was from San Fernando, a new band that was a splinter from Gondoliers. The captain (and tuner) of Southern Marines was the legendary Milton Lyons (Squeezer), who in his own right had won the national ping pong soloist competition in one of the great steelband music festivals held at Queen's Hall.

In the southern Panorama of 1965 there had been fierce competition between Marines and Cavaliers. Now these two bands had to make the trek to Port of Spain to compete in the national semi-finals. The custom when the band returned to Marabella from a big competition was for mem-

bers to gather at the corner where they reflected on how the competition went for the band, and which performances stood out.

To my surprise that year, the men were unanimous in praise of Guinness Cavaliers. They said that "Guinness" was the last of 42 bands that year to perform, and that people were already leaving the Savannah in droves, no one giving any credence to a southern band. But that once the band had struck the first memorable bars of the tune, the deadly bases unleashed, people scampered back to the Savannah from as far as Renegades panyard and Jerningham Avenue, accompanying the band along the Savannah track for the entire duration of their performance.

Here were Southern Marines men effusive about the performance of their great southern rival, and predicting that they would be a force in the finals the next week. Indeed, when the finalists for the Panorama were announced the next day, Guinness Cavaliers had the highest points. Southern Marines, playing Sparrow's "Solomon", were also included among the ten finalists.

Throughout the week of the finals there was fervent talk everywhere, and much excitement at the prospect that an unknown south band had taken the semi-finals by storm, besting powerhouses like Desperadoes, Pan Am North Stars, Silver Stars, Invaders, among others. I was attending John Donaldson Technical Institute at the time, and to my surprise, my friends from town, all steeped in pan, and ordinarily quite dismissive about south bands, were saying that "Guinness" was the band to beat.

Come final night and Guinness Cavaliers, led by Bobby Mohammed with his famous bell — used to get the band started and to signal changes of key — destroyed everybody, with what to my mind, was the greatest Panorama performance ever. The victory began with his choice of tune. Lord Melody was not known for authoring tunes for the steelband, and in 1965 Cavaliers was the only band playing his "Mas". Bobby had heard something in the tune that other arrangers could not. And what he did to it was very little, except of course for the wonderful introduction, then those splendid little escapades that he invented as he moved from one passage to the next. Then there was the tension he created before the basses dropped thunderously. The tune was magical, and North Stars, winner of the first two Panoramas in 1963 and 1964, as well as the music festival in 1962, had to settle for second that night, beaten by a performance for the ages.

With that victory Cavaliers, and south, had arrived. They had come into town taking on some of the greatest bands we have produced, at the top of their game, and had won in a landslide. Following their victory the country witnessed one of the most wonderful gestures to be seen in the steelband movement at the time, which was that Renegades allowed Cavaliers to store their pans in their panyard over the Carnival period. The band had decided after the victory to play mas in Port of Spain that year, and needed a place to store their pans and from which their mas

would originate. Renegades obliged. This is Renegades of 1965, who had the Lawbreakers gang with men like "Papito" Bostock, Dr Rat and Little Axe as prime supporters. And they took Guinness Cavaliers in and the band was able to play its music on the roads of Port of Spain throughout that Carnival.

The next year 1966 with Kitchener's "My Brother" Cavaliers came second and I would be tempted to say the judges cheated, except that the winner in that year was Despers playing Sparrow's "Melda". Let's leave that alone. In 1967 Guinness came again, playing Kitchener's "Sixty-Seven" and winning the finals. In 1969 they came back yet again with "Mas in Brooklyn" coming second but winning the "People's Choice". These two winning songs can be heard on YouTube.

In the early years after 1965, one could hear the Panorama version of "Melody Mas" by Cavaliers played on the radio. Then that playing stopped. And I have not heard that tune again for 40 years, nor seen the music on sale anywhere. This is a great tragedy. This performance by Cavaliers on final night in 1965 was inspired, and we as a people should have to account to the generations if we cannot produce for their pleasure one of the very highest expressions of creativity we have seen on a Panorama stage, when everything was on the line, and the very top bands in the history of the country were on their game.

We have to find this music and make sure that it is properly archived, along with other great Panorama and Music Festival performances. People would have their

own opinions about what have been the great final night performances or the greatest Panorama tunes of all time. For me, the great performances besides "Melody Mas" would include "Pan in Harmony" by Despers; "Rebecca" by Despers; "Woman on the Bass" by All Stars; "Niggerman" by Silver Stars, "Gold" by Third World, "Pan Rising" by Phase II, "Natasha" by Starlift.

Lennox "Bobby" Mohammed, in a purple period in the 1960s, drew upon his boundless creativity to give to south Trinidad and this country one of the glorious periods in pan, when on final night you had to wait till you heard "Guinness" before you could say who won the Panorama. In 1965 this great man gave to the country in "Melody Mas" the greatest Panorama performance ever, on a night of heavyweights when he dethroned the great Pan Am North Stars with his previously unknown band. This man was iconic. There he was with this impassioned look on his face, seemingly oblivious to everything, holding up his bell, and signalling with its chimes the impending change of key or tempo.

Someone told me that he was at the funeral of Bertie Marshall and that he had gone up to eulogise him. I was happy to hear that. Bobby belongs in that company. He is one of the great panmen. He could do wonders with the minor chord. In San Fernando, except for the excitement and great anticipation with which people greeted Southern Marines of Marabella (I'm being shamelessly partisan here), there probably was no greater anticipation in the 1960s than that which attended the arrival of Guinness Cavaliers at Library Corner on Carnival day. Long before you saw the band you heard their vaunted basses, as I did one Jouvert morning, when, with the band still on Lord Street, and me at Library Corner, I could hear the dramatic bass line of "Is Paris Burning", the theme song of the movie by that name.

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