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Evolution of the steelband

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The famous Shell Invaders steelband on the move.

Why hasn't govt done anything for this pan pioneer?

BY AN
EXPRESS
READER

LET'S TAKE the steelband from its origination. In 1935, the first steelband to be heard playing was Alexander's Ragtime Band on Carnival Day. The leader of that band was Carlton Forde.

There were others such as TOKYO, led by "Spree" Simon; Red Army, led by Leonard Morris; Sun Valley, led by Sonny Roach; Casablanca, led by Oscar Pile; and Desperadoes, led by Wilfred Harrison.

These young men really did something to improve Carnival. Spectators and masqueraders had a good time and they approved of the change from "Tambou Bambo" to steeldrums.

That went on until about 1958. Then Trinidad All Stars injected flavour into their music on Carnival day by playing such tunes as Liebestrun. A few bands did likewise.

What happened next? A young man living in the east who happened to be in the steelband world for the past 14 years, appeared on the scene. He organised a band by the name of ARM FORCES, playing at Chaguaramas by contract for the Americans.

Dissatisfied

A few years later after the contract ended, he and his members, with other members of Highlanders a band from around the Bridge united to revive Highlanders which was falling apart. The band began to sound good, but it was not what the young man

wanted. This young man happened to be Bertie Marshall.

He realised the tenors were not getting the support he wanted; also, he was dissatisfied with the range the steelband had then. So he did something about it - he invented a new pan - the Double Tenor.

'Sweet' sound

By doing so he was forced to make changes to his tenor pans, sinking them to six and one half inches in depth and applying higher notes to the pans.

The band began to sound very "sweet." But on Carnival day when he stood on the pavement by Memorial Park listening to the band, he realised it was not sounding as "sweet" as in the panyard.

So, after Carnival, he put on his thinking cap and went to work. Next Carnival he hit the road with canopies over his pans and that "sweet" sound was there.

When asked what was the reason for the canopies his explanation was: Having to sink

the pans that deep, the heat of the sun on both Carnival days caused the metal to expand, the note resulting in a muffled sound.

But that was not all. He noted his band was moving much too slow, all because of the many pans used. So he decided to do something about it. The following year he came out with amplified pans, making the band smaller and the sound louder.

These achievements were accomplished between 1962 and 1965, when they first won the Bomb Trophy donated by First National City Bank. But Marshall did not stop there.

'Resonators'

A few months ago, after experimenting for about five years to get a required effect that no ordinary pan could give, he came up with the idea of "resonators." This unit helps to linger the sound of the notes and that was something new to the Steelband.

With these resonators he still found himself in difficulty because

whenever he struck a note, it lingered too long and he found himself having to beat into another note while the first note was playing.

A damper

So he had to think harder and he hit on the idea of dampening the note whenever he wanted. Pleased with the outcome, he was able to produce the "Damper Pan" which he intends to put out.

Marshall thinks of the steelband as a culture of the land but finds that Combos are dominating the musical scene. He wants to bridge the gap between the steelband and the combo; by so doing he believes he can please the young generation and even the elders.

Now if this is not improvement to the steelbands, what is? Incidentally, why hasn't the government done anything for this young man who is constantly trying to raise the standard of the steelband?