

Pan development controversy

WHOSOEVER takes upon himself/herself to do a definitive document on the history of pan development, shall indeed be faced with tremendous difficulty separating fact from illusion, and mere marketing and self-promotion from actual reality.

Most times, the results of mere casual or chanced observation may have little or no significance to the subject matter. For example, someone said that he saw "a man, in the middle 1940s, playing a pan while walking along a beach in Point Fortin."

It was the very first such musical instrument that this commentator from the southern borough had seen, and from that casual sighting he, decades after, concludes thereby that "pan" started in Point Fortin.

Much of what passes as pan history, to date, consists of such individual sightings. Who is to say the pan player seen on the beach in Point Fortin was not a pan pioneer from Hell Yard in Port-of-Spain hiding out from the law? Who is to say?

It in fact happened on many occasions that pioneers and early virtuoso players ran afoul of the law in Port-of-Spain and had to seek temporary refuge and anonymity in other parts of the island. Without evidence of a process of experimentation who is to say who did what?

The two earliest pioneers whose lives became inextricably committed to a process of focused technical experimentation with the instrument were undoubtedly Jules and Mannette, with others like Tony Williams, Boots Davidson, Roach, Patsy Haynes and later Bertie, Gervais, Wallace, etc following the trends, all the while fine-tuning and expanding the scope of the

instruments from the point of view of engineering and musicality.

In this regard Jules' conception of the "Bomb" and Tony Williams' "wheels" were the two most fundamental departures that set the pan "free" from parochial, percussive chains. But we must always be mindful that the very first tenor pan was made from a biscuit drum; the oil-drum came after, and consisted of five notes, then eight, and that set off a flurry of efforts all over with pioneers in rivalry searching to get more and more notes with greater tonal quality and pitch.

The virtuoso players of the bands worked hand in hand with the pioneers testing the instruments critically and suggesting areas of improvement. That was happening all over. But in addition these "stars" were the roving ones, following most times affairs of the heart, moving from band to band, taking ideas with them, facilitating thereby a kind of transplanting and cross-fertilisation that led to various improvements whether in tone or note placements.

It is this process that we have been seeking to portray and that is why in our last column on pan we had, by necessity, to answer that absurd article that appeared out of Granville, West Virginia, crediting Ellie Mannette with the responsibility for creating all the instruments and alluding to his greatly exaggerated sense of bitterness against T&T and its government and people.

It was also the reason why we asked our readers to comment on the issue. And indeed, quite a few comments came from all around the world, some adding fresh insights and dimensions to the issue.

In order to further incite the interest of our readers and allow



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them to make their own judgments, we shall mention a few and seek to categorise them:

(1) On Ellie's delusions and bitterness against family and society:

"The unproductive and uncreative use of disappointment or bitterness tends to exaggerate the level of wrongs committed, and even invents much that never occurred, thereby exacerbating the original condition. This has always been Ellie's problem as good as he is. Perhaps the problem was with his father, certainly not with the society at large..."

"Maybe Nicky Inniss, Junior Pouchet (Silver Stars) and Curtis Pierre (Dixieland) had a lot more to lose socially when they, in essence, said 'away with Fah' (short for 'Father' - dem priests at CIC), steelband is we thing', and made it their business for the bands to pass in front of CIC on both days of Carnival, singing out, 'come out and wine, Fah...' It was the college boys who helped steelband onto the 'all ah we is one' stage..." (New York).

"Found that the sentiments, expressed by Ellie, were of a man who was bitter and felt that he was worthy of more recognition... Surely Ellie suffered from the stigmatisation that pan carried with it during that period but so did all steelbandmen... Was taken aback by that ... and what concerned me more was how some people can carry a grudge for so long... surely it must be a stone around one's neck... Talk about toting ants... Found your piece interesting! Do you mind if I post it on my web page?..." (Canada).

"Ellie's bitterness comes from when he went to Puerto Rico to tune pans for the American Marine Steelband. He was called a 'Judas' of the steelband, selling out his birthright, by the public relations officer of the Steelband Association - see the *Nation* paper, Friday, May 27, 1960. Is it really 'lies and distortions' or 'jealousy and envy' from you..." (PoS West, Trinidad).

"I think that Mr Rennie showed admirable restraint in dealing with the Ellie article. He corrected that record as he knows it, but he did not try to destroy Ellie..." (Maryland-USA).

"Ellie Mannette has created an entire mythology about his achievements and tribulations in the steelband movement. And, yes, it was a very collective experience, with different men and different bands contributing to different aspects of the technical, musical, organisational and political phenomenon known as the steelband movement..." (POS, Trinidad).

(2) The pan development process:

"Well done, sir. It needed to be corrected... Perhaps he (Ellie) may feel that in his 'neck of the woods' no one will ever learn the real truth about pan as you so accurately outlined its history, but he has to live with a great deal of guilt..." (Trinidad).

"Mr Rennie, about your column on Ellie Mannette: overall you are absolutely correct, although I'd disagree with this or that empirical detail..." (PoS)

"I only hope that it was the reporter's exaggeration and not Ellie's stupidity that was responsible for the nonsense. You know how the Americans like this 'bs' about an individual who triumphs against all odds and adversities. The kind of crass individualism that Hollywood glo-

ries... And, of course, since Ellie left Trinidad in 1967 steelband collapsed and has just been flourishing in the land of the brave and the free..." (Toronto).

"What about south? Just as a beginning, south fellahs have always had some claims on creativity and innovation, quoting the inclusion of the Bonaparte Bros etc in TASPO when the first steelband went to England..." (Chicago).

"In that time, '54-'59, Invaders was one of the top bands and Ellie was the captain and was recognised as one of the top tuners in the business. The tuner at North Stars from Upper Bournes Road, St James, was also one of the best. However growing up, Neville Jules was always recognised as the founder of pan..." (Canada).

"All Stars, 1935-1985 (50 years of existence). Basic point there at that time was to date to 1935 with Sagator, the genesis of the organisation and its integral role in PoS Carnival and the incipient steelband movement. No claim to being a steel orchestra then was/is intended! (my emphasis). So the natural conclusion with the Y2K tantanah is: All Stars 1935-2000. Not quiet arrogance! Just history! ..." (New York).

At this point we shall leave this issue alone. There are those who have committed themselves and others who have been promised commission to write the definitive history and in so doing shall have the onerous task of sorting out the incidents or "this and that empirical detail".

It is enough that we have sought to set the parameters indicating clearly that everything else outside of the said framework will just be bells and whistles.

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