

ML 1040

EARLY YEARS OF THE STEELBAND

FROM the perspective of the steelbandsman, the early years of pan were years of frequent prosecution (in the Courts), of social rejection — and of violence. The social rejection and violence may well have been connected. I am not a sociologist, so I am not equipped to explore that point.

But anyone who was involved with the steelbands at those times would have strong and lasting impressions. Looking back, one remembers the harsh treatment that our society meted out to young men who were ready groping for self-expression, whose essentially is what the steelbands was about.

I shall speak later that there were years read in defence of the art for the young men, who were the Canon Farquhar, the Eric, and Albert Gomes. The politician, come to mind — but neither are voices drowned out by the righteous hostility of those who reject the society and set its standards.

In the eyes of the steelbandsman was regarded by many as an outcast, a law-breaker, and the steelband were regarded as 'disturbers of the peace' with their 'noisy instruments'. Sometimes, as we shall see, the magistrate who imposed fines and sometimes jail terms for 'parading in the streets without police permission' used uncomplicated terms to describe the steelbands.

Criminal Acts

It was not uncommon for the magistrate to deal with some of the steelbandsmen brought before them, 'rogues', 'vagrants'.

I should emphasise that I am not implying associated with the steelbands did not commit criminal acts or that they should not have been punished for criminal acts committed. But as I reflect on the situation it was then, the impression I have is that as far as some of the people were concerned, steelbandsmen were criminals, or at least, potential criminals.

The Magistrate's social environment of the calypsonian, and those years of the 1940's.

Calypsonians really ketch hell for their own sake. To ascribe to them with crime. If your bandmate want to break...

Shame on you! Put teeth in his 'Passi' You're a young man, you're a young man, you're a young man...

Another thing, the last impression of the steelbands was that of war. It was as if, enraged by the treatment of the law by society, they had turned their fury upon themselves in acts of fighting.

Up'

Let us consider the issue of prosecution in the Courts. The Court streets, those from those times, were customised to parade and 'jump' rhythm on the bands during (although not).

During the Christmas season of young men from the San Juan areas were the police for 'being in excess of 20 or more persons' in a public place.

meant, that the men had taken pan to the streets for a 'jump up'. The first of many episodes took place on Boxing Day, December 26, of 1941.

The incidents were reported in the Port-of-Spain Gazette of Sunday December 28, under the caption, 'No Drum Beating Processions'.

Belmont and San Juan youths: fined and warned. (Belmont): "This drum beating has definitely got to stop," remarked His Worship Mr B.W. Celestain in the District Court yesterday when he sternly rebuked four city youths who appeared before him on charges of being found in a procession of 20 or more persons without the permission of the Commissioner of Police on the night of the 26, last.

He ordered them to pay fines and compensation totalling \$12 each or 30 days imprisonment... It was disallowed to go up here. The youths denied the allegations, pleading that they were not among the crowd, but failed to substantiate their story.

Sticks And Pans

They stopped a motor car... along Pelham Street and considerably damaged it with sticks and pans. Two occupants of the car suffered slight injuries. (A witness told the Court): "They stopped me exclaiming, 'This is the U.S. Empire's Band and no one is allowed to go up here'... The youths denied the allegations, pleading that they were not among the crowd, but failed to substantiate their story."

You must find some other means of enjoying yourself. You are not to beat drums and disturb other people," said the Magistrate.

(San Juan)... The beating of drums and loud cries, arrested the attention of Lance Corporal Bailey which led him to find at Don Miguel Road, San Juan, on the night of Christmas Eve, what he described as a "carnival band."

This story was related to His Worship Mr Celestain who convicted four San Juan youths... on charges of being found in a procession of 20 persons without the permission of the Commissioner of Police...

His Worship remarked, "It is prohibited by the Government under special regulations to go about blocking the traffic and causing obstruction."

ear after year, from 1941 to 1945

Excerpts from Chapter 2 of the Manuscript (Forty Years in the Steelbands, 1939-1979), written by GEORGE GODDARD.

soon to be published as a book. Editing of Mr Goddard's manuscript is being done by Dr Roy Thomas, of the University of the West Indies.



these episodes were repeated. Here is another report, one year later, carried in the Trinidad Guardian of February 17, 1942, under the caption "Four Carnival Players Jailed"

Four (men) were sent to prison for 21 days by Mr A.J. Hamilton in the City Magistrate Court, Port-of-Spain.

The men were members of a band estimated at 150. The policemen who intervened were stoned. Major Knights who prosecuted, told the Magistrate that a band about 150 strong was parading on Duke Street about 6:30 o'clock jumping and shouting to music provided by biscuit drums, bottles and spoons...

Mr L.L. Roberts, Solicitor, speaking (for the defendants) said, "These people are under the impression that they cannot disguise, but they can still come out on the streets as they are. They ought to know better. Ignorance of the law is no excuse, but I am pleading in fairness to them, that that was their belief. They thought that because they had to disguise, they could jump about."

No Carnival

The magistrate in convicting the men said: "This is a serious offence. These are not ordinary times; you must know there is a war going on and for that reason, people cannot go about as at other times."

To avoid needless expense, I believe, Government has stopped and there is to be no Carnival this year. This is under the defense regulations and for this there is a penalty of £100 or six months or both.

If I find there are others who are going to disregard the law like this, I am going to inflict severe penalties. You must do 21 days."

A straight case of social rejection court-prosecutions and warfare

I find difficult 40 years afterwards to convey to the reader the senselessness of the steelband clashes. There has to be some sociological explanation above the head of a layman like myself. The violence left the society bewildered. Lord Blake, a popular calypsonian has left us this impression:

It was a bacchanal, ah! 'So Carnival, ah!

Fight for so, with Invaders and Tokyo.

When the two bands clash Mamayove, if you see cutlass Never me again.

To jump in a steelband in Port-of-Spain.

Lord Blake was singing about a clash during the Carnival of 1950, but the violence had begun in earnest at least a year earlier, in 1949.



WITCO DESPERADOES in action at this year's Panorama.

The Report

The newspapers gave extensive coverage to these steelband clashes.

Sometimes the incidents were reported in a sensationalised style. In the Trinidad Guardian of March 3, 1949, there is this report: "Steel Band Clash Creates Short 'State of Emergency'"

"A State of Emergency" existed at Gonzales last night following a steelband clash in this area earlier in the day, in which two men were reported injured. The incident (which was) the aftermath of a misunderstanding the night before, took place shortly after midnight, when flying missiles had residents confined indoors..."

The violence continued unabated throughout 1949 and well into 1950. As the incidents made the headlines and as high officials, especially magistrates and judges expressed their disapproval and condemnation, a particular theme began to recur in their comments.

That theme had to do with their amazement at the wonderful uniqueness of steelband music and their lack of understanding of why steelbandsmen had to be so violent.

One of the well-known magistrates of the day, Mr Fabian J.

Camacho, put the point in this way: "The music of the steelbands is very, very excellent. I never dreamt it could be played like that. But these foolish fights... You are an outlaw! You don't mind where you are, even in the courthouse..." The defendant charged with assault and battery was fined \$15 with an alternative of 21 days (Trinidad Guardian, August 5, 1949).

Behind The Curtain

The violence, the arrests, the convictions, the fines and jail terms continued. But in the midst of it all, voices of understanding were raised. I mentioned Canon Farquhar and Albert Gomes.

Here is an extract from Albert Gomes' column "Behind The Curtain," published in the Sunday Guardian of January 8, 1950. Gomes, under his article "Public Should Discipline Steelband Prejudice"

During the last four or five years our community's attitude to the steelbands has altered perceptively. Fear and hostility have given way to understanding and appreciation. The change is perhaps the most significant development in the social field in years.

The great problem in Trinidad is that of improving the relations between the underprivileged and the rest of the community. It is true that this purpose can only be satisfactorily achieved by a substantial improvement in the economic circumstances of the poorer classes. There are other ways, short of this, in which the existing tensions may be eased.

A little more sympathy and imagination on the part of the more comfortable classes would go a long way to improve the social atmosphere.

If some of this sympathy and imagination had been forthcoming during the days when the steelbands were in their infancy, many lives and much suffering would have been spared.

Instead of trying to understand the phenomenon, those in authority used force in an attempt to obliterate it. The results of this

inept policy are too well known to require delineation in an article for local consumption.

The community overlooked the simple truth that the behaviour patterns of persons nurtured in an ambience of poverty are of necessity different, yet as much an integral part of the psyche of this underprivileged class as the more refined mores are of social constitutions sculptured by a less harsh environment.

The affluence of the steelbands were absolute and ineradicable because intimately and inextricably intertwined with the sensitive emotional fibres of those who found in this bizarre form of orchestration an outlet for fierce hunger of the spirit.

Better Times

It was a way of escape from the ugliness and brutality of their world, and nothing short of destroying them would destroy their desire for it.

In the face of these stubborn facts, the attempt that was in fact made to suppress the steelbands would be regarded as perverse and tyrannical.

But the 1950's were to bring better times for pan. Peace overtures among the warring steelbands finally succeeded after many unsuccessful attempts. A Steelband Association was formed and these developments were crowned by "Operation Britain" — the Trinidad All Star Percussion Orchestra (TASPO) who took pan to the Festival of Britain in 1951.

Thousands braved the weather to give a grand send off to TASPO members leaving for Britain on the S.S. San Mateo on July 6, 1951, to perform at the Festival of Britain. The Invaders steelband, whose captain — Ellie Manette — was one of the 11 members of TASPO, serenaded their leader on the Port-of-Spain docks. As the S.S. San Mateo pulled up anchor, Invaders brought tears to the eyes of many with their rendition of the popular song:

My heart cries for you
Sighs for you
Dies for you
My heart cries for you
Please come back to me.



CATELLI Trinidad All Stars Panorama champs in 1986