

EXTRACT from the manuscript (Forty Years In the Steelbands, 1939-1979), written by the late George Goddard, soon to be published as a book.

Steelband: The early years



1967: The late George Goddard

My recollection is that the first time I had the experience of seeing a steelband was during the Carnival celebrations of 1939 and that steelband was Alexander's Ragtime Band of New Town, Port of Spain. Alexander's Ragtime Band was at that time comprised of a number of young and middle-aged men from New Town and surrounding districts.

These same men, as I was later told, were the players of the New Town Boys Calvary Bamboo Band whose home was a yard on lower Picton Street, near Tragarete Road in New Town. However, by the time that I had seen the band for the first time, their headquarters had been removed from lower Picton Street to the corner of Woodford Street and Tragarete Road—property lots numbered 2, 4 and 6 Woodford Street and 58 and 60 Tragarete Road. These lots, called "the Big Yard," with about a dozen small rooms for dwellers, were not divided by fences. The "Big Yard" today would scarcely be recognised by anyone who knew it in those days. It is now the site of a branch of the Republic Bank of Trinidad and Tobago (formerly Barclay's Bank).

Because of my age (I was 15 years old in 1939), and my interest in other activities of boys of my age, such as pitching marbles, top spinning, kite flying

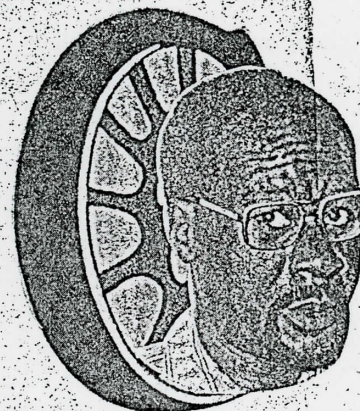
and cricket; at first I did not pay much attention to the existence of Alexander's Ragtime Band. It was not until the Carnival of 1941 that I played mas' for the first time in Alexander's Ragtime Band as a sailor. After this debut, I became a regular visitor to the "Big Yard" and by the end of 1941 I was considered to be more or less a bona fide member of the band, as by that time I was able to beat the whole range of instruments (i.e. Boom, Dudup, Ping Pong and Iron).

The war-time ban on Carnival, imposed in 1941, was relaxed for short periods in 1945 when the people were permitted to parade the streets in Carnival fashion in celebration of the Allies' "Victory in Europe" (V-E) over "Hitler's Germany" on May 5, 1945, and again for the "Victory over Japan" (V-J) on August 14, 1945.

A few days before the celebrations for V-E, realising that permission would have been granted to parade the streets, we printed on all of the instruments of Alexander's Ragtime Band (not including the car brake hubs), the "Hammer and Sickle" emblem of the U.S.S.R. We had done this because the name "Alexander's Ragtime Band" did not sound attractive enough at the time, as other bands had by then more adventurous names like *Invaders*, *Bar 20*, *Her Yard*, and so on.

Though the name of the band was not changed, we nevertheless played "Red and White Russians" on the streets for the V-E celebrations. For our banners we used two flags, one with a red background with the Russian Hammer and Sickle in yellow, and the other made of two light shades of blue (one a little darker than the other) on which was a "Star of David" in white. Perhaps our knowledge of history was somewhat muddled, but that did not matter then.

'It was not until the Carnival of 1941 that I played mas' for the first time in Alexander's Ragtime Band as a sailor.'



1975: The late Spree Simon

We made no costumes, but wore our shirts or jerseys outside of our trousers with our belts or pieces of rope or cord around our waists over the shirts or jerseys. Those who wore socks or tall rubber boots put their trousers into them.

During the war years while I was in Alexander's Ragtime Band, we did very little apart from beating the instruments in the Big Yard during Carnival season in particular, and this we did more or less to accompany "Stick Fighters" who would gather at the Big Yard on afternoons to engage themselves in the dangerous sport of "Stick Fighting." At Christmas time, we also took the chance to parade on the streets although that was against the law. I was arrested for this offence on Christmas Day, 1944.

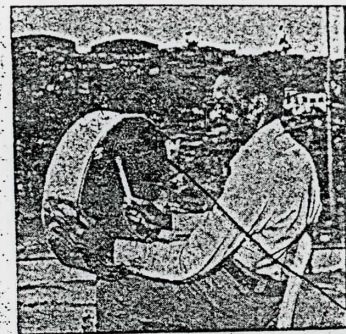
Though Carnival was banned during the war years, steelband competitions were still organised and held in various places. One such competition was held at the Queen's Park Oval in 1942. This was won by Alexander's Ragtime Band with *The Oval Boys* (later *Invaders*), led by the veteran Stanley Hunte, placing second. I did not attend this competition but I cannot remember why I did not. In fact I never attended any competitions until 1952 when the Steelband Class was introduced in the Trinidad and Tobago Music Festival.

While in Alexander's Ragtime Band, I was really no leader as such, everyone showed respect for the advice of Freddy Maroon, who though regarded by everyone as being the toughest man in the whole of New Town, was really a most decent and non-violent gentleman. I could testify to that if I had to.

By the time the ban was removed and the celebration of Carnival was given back to the people in 1946, a number of the steelbandmen in Alexander's Ragtime Band had left the band. Some of the younger ones from New Town joined the Woodbrook *Invaders*, and a number who were from uptown Port of Spain, who had played with Alexander's Ragtime Band, played in their own steelband, *Red Army*, which was organised in time for V-J.

Because of these changes, all activities in Alexander's Ragtime Band had ceased as the old timers could not by then cope with the younger generation that came to be the nuclei of all steelbands, because of pride, I decided that a steelband must come out of New Town for the Carnival of 1946, even if I was the only player in that band.

After discussing the matter with a few of the old timers like Freddy Maroon, Victor Wilson, Roy "Buddy" Colston, Seon "Poyack" Cummings and a few of the youths like Morris Bernard, (one of the "Blackhead" brothers), and Clarence Joseph, I decided to bring out the band from where I lived at 24 Picton Street, New Town. However, I changed the name from Alexander's Ragtime Band to that of...



1976: Spree Simon at home with his pan.

"Count Basie" for the Carnival Monday and "Construction Battalion" ("C B") for the Carnival Tuesday. (According to the *Trinidad Guardian*, March 2, 1946, the Registration Number of "Construction Battalion" was No 42 and of "Count Basie" (sic, No 43). For the Tuesday Band, we painted "bee" on the grey painted instruments and a large "C B" (in capitals) in black, bordered in silver.

Carnival of 1946 was the first time that a steelband had come out of New Town playing well-organised mas' on Carnival Tuesday, for while Alexander's Ragtime Band had played "Sailors" in 1941, it was anything but disciplined and well organised as "C B" (Seabees); we were awarded the third prize at the Marine Square competitions.

Only a few persons played "C B's" with us in 1946; we numbered no more than thirty and the majority were old timers from Alexander's Ragtime Band. I decided a few weeks after the 1946 Carnival to join *Invaders*, which was led at this time by a man who was to become a "pan genius"—Elliot "Ellie" Mannette.

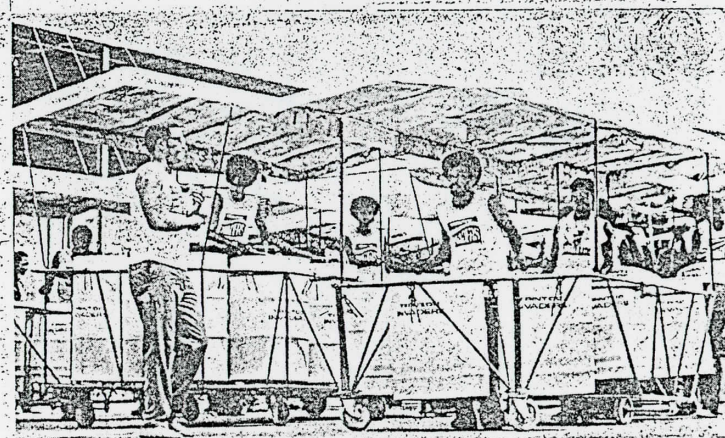
Invaders by this time with a strong following among the youths, was further ahead as a steelband than we were in New Town. For me, fitting in with *Invaders* was not easy, though I too was in my early twenties, because *Invaders* had more than a few techniques of the "ping-pong-ping" which we were still playing in 1946, in Alexander's Ragtime Band.

For the first year or so, my role in *Invaders*, apart from occasionally beating "Iron" or the "Biscuit Drum Boom" or being the flag waver in front of the band, was more or less that of an adviser, as Ellie Mannette, the leader, Clarence Gulston, the secretary, and other members of the band, seemed to have had some respect for my opinions and views.

I started playing mas' with *Invaders* in 1947 as an "S.P." in their Sailor Band. In the following year I played "Commander" in the English Sailor Band "HMS Vanguard." In the years following I played other mas' in the Band—once year it was "Samba Dancers," another year, "Lumberjacks."



Ellie Mannette, dubbed "pan genius" by the late George Goddard.



CARNIVAL 1975: TRINTOC *Invaders* made a big impact with the Savannah crowd with their "Tribute to Spree Simon" in that year.