

Panmen struggled to make something out of nothing

THERE WERE no wine and roses during the glory days of the steelband movement, according to Prince Batson, a senior panman aligned with Catelli Trinidad All Stars. But the period from the late '30s through the '60s achieved particular significance in the steelbandmen's struggle to "make something out of nothing," and simultaneously cope with society's unwillingness to recognise pan as a cultural art form.

Prince, as he's commonly called in pan circles and on the docks where he works as a truck operator, was born on July 28, 1923, in Manzanilla. In the following Q & A he bares his soul about the panman's lifestyle during the steelband's teething period.

Q. The birth of the steelband has been traced back to Africa. How do you account for that?

A. The evolution of the steelband relates directly to bamboo orchestras. Bamboo music was an offspring of the drums. Bamboo was always part of Carnival. The man pounding the bucket in the bamboo band was actually beating pan.

Q. How about the rhythm?

A. Purely African. When Neville Jules (one of the principal steelband pioneers) used to hold the pan to one side and do the double stamp, he gone back to Africa. It was a big high. The shuffling of the feet, too, was important to road music.

Q. Why was society so defiant toward this "new" music and its proponents?

A. Certain art forms are against the principles of Christianity and the white people. Stick fighters, drums, the chantwell (people who could sing) were a throw-back to the mother country. Anything that was taboo

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to the ruling class was suppressed.

Q. How did you get involved in pan?

A. I was part of the crowd that actively got into pan around 1945. I played under Rudolph (Fisheye) Olivieri in 1946 with the old Cross of Lorraine (All Stars' early name). Fisheye was the best steelbandman in those days. I remember him playing the first tune on pan on VJ Day 1945.

Q. Where was Winston "Spree" Simon (another pioneer) then?

A. Spree was active, too. I remember him beating Fisheye in a competition on Marine Square during the 1946 Carnival. Spree played Ave Maria and God Save the King before the Governor. Spree appeased everybody by appealing to the church and the State with his renditions.

HARD WORK

The Governor got up and marvelled at this fella playing such tunes on a primitive instrument. From then, they saw Spree was the first to play a recognised melody on pan.

Q. Was that a fact?

A. I have to refer to Bing (Kitchener) who used to sing about Bitterman (Ulric John), Pops and Battersbea, players who beat a semi-tone melody. Then he ups and sings about

Spree beating the first pan tune in Calypso. He contradicted himself. Kitch was quite in England but he had the nerve to sing about "Trouble in Arima," a fight song. That wasn't good for the steelband movement.

Q. But the early days saw much action and blood during steelband clashes. Are you ignoring the negatives?

A. Not really. It wasn't only the steelband players involved. Wild Indians would fight. Peirrot Grenade, Jab Jab and French-educated people used to fight on Carnival day. It was all a communal war — areas against areas. Disputes were settled for sure on Carnival day.

For the steelband especially, pan and alcohol never mixed well. I remember stopping a big fight under Stephen's clock because I was one of the few fellas who were sober. People were fighting over a straggler who didn't pay his band fee. Clashes also were inspired over a woman. But Carnival wasn't really brutal.

They fight, they riot, is all people used to say about the steelbandmen, but they don't say how hard the fellas work. They don't think about how these guys make something from nothing.

Q. The ping pong played a principal role in the evolution of the

steelband as an orchestra. How did the first tenor fit in with the basic road band?

A. The ping pong was born during the war when no pan was allowed on the street. The term came from the sound, ping pong, ping pong. Your mother would say, "Boy whole day you only ping ponging, ping ponging".

In the beginning, the pan had just four notes. We had only one ping pong in the band and a couple of skating men (lesser known ping pong players). But we had three or four bugles that were backed up by the African beat of the bass kittle.

The bugles played a military tune which went well with the rhythm. We had high, low and middle range bugles, a slap boom (beaten with the hand), bass kittle, tenor kittle and iron. The first ping pong was made from a edible oil drum 26 inches high and 12 inches in diameter. It was cut to about 6 inches and beaten with an ordinary stick. It was pounded outwards.

IRON SECTION

Q. Why did the iron play such a crucial role in road music and subsequently the steelband?

A. When iron still ringing in your head on Ash Wednesday, you've heard a complete band. Iron is the essence of road music. A road band sounds completely different without its cadence.

Q. How about the potential side effects of impaired hearing?

A. True. I realised I had impaired hearing when I couldn't hear

my watch tick one day. Ironmen should wear ear plugs, for the vibration of the steel is of a higher tone than that of other instruments.

Q. What was development like regarding other pans in the old time steelband?

A. Well, Ellie Manette (Invaders' celebrated innovator) changed Jules's styling of the drum surface from concave to convex. In other words, Ellie sunk the face inwards, thus starting a trend. Jules never had a tuner who tuned for him. He wasn't conceited at all, but respected by everyone in the business.

About new instruments, I recall Oliver Joseph one day taking Jules to a barber shop on Duke Street that was owned by some Spanish people. They were playing the mandolin and the cuatro. You know, when Jules heard the sounds he decided right there to invent the cuatro pan. How many drums he spoiled in the process is insignificant to the fact that the second pan evolved from the cuatro.

Another thing, regarding playing style, Jules had all his pans working, not strumming like the other bands did in those days. He was always a thinker; and some say he and Kitch were the only two men who could arrange from the bass.

Q. You alluded to the Cross of Lorraine earlier. How did All Stars achieve its moniker?