

The steelband movement was launched in 1939 by Alexander's Ragtime Band. Previous Carnival percussion bands comprised bamboo stamping tubes, although there had also been sporadic metal percussion bands. Alexander's Ragtime Band, however, started a craze for all-metal percussion, and within two years there were similar bands all over Port of Spain and in San Fernando. Even in a few country towns young men began forming gangs to drum on metal containers for entertainment.

Carnival and street processions were banned between 1942 and 1945 because of Second World War austerities, but underground the steelband movement continued spreading throughout the island. Bands broke the wartime regulations against processions, dodging the police or even attacking them. Experimentation with the instrument began.

The end of the war was celebrated in Carnival-like fashion and steelbands took to the streets legally for the first time. Thereafter they dominated the Carnival and became central to the debate on what constituted national culture. Over the next three years steelbands explored the principles of melody and harmony as the instrument became capable of playing more notes.

As the instrument grew more complex, steelbands turned into more tightly-knit primary organisations. The gang warfare that had always been an aspect of Carnival was amplified by the steelbands, which provoked fear and loathing on the part of conservative elements in the society.

By 1948 a few Port of Spain bands were embroiled in long-lasting, violent feuds, which were sensationalised in the press. The social dislocation caused by the end of the wartime boom fused with the fear of steelbands, which became synonymous with moral and cultural degeneration.

Despite alienating large sectors of the society with its combativity, however, the steelband movement also attracted new supporters and patrons through its musical accomplishments. The demands of music, and its drawing power, brought new groups into the movement, who had hitherto not been a part of street music ensembles: women, children and white and coloured middle-class young men.

Political and cultural leaders from the middle class assisted the steelband movement's efforts to end the gang warfare, which seemed to be out of control. The product of these efforts in 1950 was the Steel Bands Association of Trinidad and Tobago, whose first major campaign was to create and secure sponsorship for a steelband to represent the colony at the 1951 Festival of Britain.

The campaign was highly successful. The Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra (TASPO) was formed with eleven of the country's most talented pan players, under the leadership of an experienced musician. A wide cross-section of the society was mobilised to morally and financially support the band. Concentrating the best of the steelband movement with a trained musician

achieved the quantum leap: TASPO was the first steelband to be musically compatible with any other musical instrument or ensemble.

The trajectory of the steelband movement, its birth and spread, the technical and social obstacles it met, and its transcendence over them, were a product of the dynamic between the nature of African traditions of music-making and the heterogeneous nature of Trinidad society.