

All Stars not fifty years old

THE EDITOR:

I refer to claims made that Catelli All Stars is celebrating its 50th anniversary. If this is so, it would mean All Stars came into being some time in 1935.

In the GUARDIAN of Sunday, October 13, Prince Batson, steelband historian and former leader of All Stars, wrote among other things: "The band really began in 1946, that is to say the orderly organised aspects were about the time enunciated. But in reality the whole thing started nine or ten years before, around 1937, in a place known as Hell Yard..."

"In 1941, Carnival on the road was stopped, but this did not stop the pan beating. It was customary to see everyday the fellows in the river beating pan..."

"When the band hit the road in 1945 it was strange, because a lot of people had never heard the new sounds which came from the pans..."

It would seem however as though the writer of the lesson, "The birth of the Steelpan," published in the secondary school textbook, "Language For Living," Gray and Gilchrist, does not share the views of the members of All Stars in so far as its 50th anniversary is concerned, or that of Prince Batson — that All Stars had its beginning around 1937. Following is what is stated in "Language For Living."

"May 6, 1945 ... the night of victory in Europe ... The sirens were blowing, the populace had been promised a jump-up to celebrate victory and the end of hostilities in Europe ... But no sooner had the sirens hooted the joyful news that a huge crowd gathered as if by magic around the portals of 'Hell Yard,' traditional headquarters of the 'Tamboo bambooist' ... Old bamboos from former occasions were hauled from under the houses ... they began to burst. As each was discarded, the jubilant revellers took up whatever came to hand, preferably something metallic for the tunes and vibrations necessary to keep the original rhythm and tempo of the bamboos..."

The members of Casablanca, too, are reported to be celebrating this year their 46th year as a steelband. This would mean that Casablanca was given birth some time in 1939, many years before the motion picture by the same name, "Casablanca," which starred Humphrey Bogart and from which Casablanca got its name was even filmed.

THREE STEEL BANDS

Six years after Casablanca is alleged to have come into being Lord Kitchner, in singing the calypso, "The Beat of the Steelband" in 1945, made mention of the names of three steelbands — Poland, John John and Bar 20.

"Well I heard the beat of a steelband, not a thing I couldn't understand. It was hard to make a distinction, between Bar 20, Poland and John John..."

Poland, however, was a liming spot around the Globe Theatre — Green Corner area not a steelband. The majority of the Poland limers i.e. Black Shirt, Black Boy, Bird, Spider, Mack Kingsale, Lance, George Baird, Theo Coleston, Easy Money Charlie, calypsonian Popo, etc. played with the New Town Alexander Ragtime Band. John John became Tokyo and a number of the Bar 20 members i.e. Barker, Ossie, Ziggy Bitterman, Battersby, etc. went on to form Casablanca.

They will show that up to 1945 when Kitchner sang "The Beat of the Steelband," Bar 20 and not Casablanca, if Kitchner is right, was the steelband then in existence in the area.

Kitchner also made mention of the names of nine steelbandmen a flautist, Ziggerly Bitterman, Pops, Battersby, Fisheye, Black James, Barker, Ossie Chamberlain and Boboloops. Following is what Kitchner sang about these people, inter-alia:

"Ziggerly, leader of the ping pong, had people jumping wild in the town ... Bitterman, Pops and Battersby,

started with a semi tune melody ... Black James, Fisheye and Barker, Bar 20 leading little beaters. Well Bomb was beaten by Ossie, a foreman bomber from Bar 20 ... Chamberlain that man had me crazy, a say we still fighting Germany. When the man sound the bugle call, a say they lie, the war ain't over at all ... Boboloops with flag in she hand, begging the police, don't stop the band."

NO MENTION

It will be observed that there is no mention of Spree in this calypso, but then that is another story.

As if in some way to destroy the claims of All Stars and Casablanca, the late sociologist-historian, Pete

Simon, in the book "David Frost introduces Trinidad and Tobago," edited by Michael Anthony (recently appointed by the Government to write the history of the steelband) and the late Andrew Carr (folklorist), wrote:

"On Carnival Monday morning, — Jour Ouvert 1937, a band from New town swept into the city. Paying tribute to the then current film hit, the banner proudly proclaimed 'Alexander Ragtime Band'. With branches waving in the air, a mass of jubilant humanity reacted ecstatically to its ample rhythm and noise. All sorts of improvised percussion instruments had been co-opted by the band — buckets dustbins, pitchoil pans, soap boxes, motor car hubs, and other noise making de-

vices ... When it reached Frederick Street, nearly the whole city was jumping up in Alexander's Ragtime Band.

The clear metallic ring of steel was the dominant feature of its sound."

Sylvia Gonzales (nee Figaro), in a Ministry of Education and Culture publication "Steelband Saga" in 1978, seems to be in agreement with Pete Simon in so far as the name and role of Alexander's Ragtime Band is concerned, though they differ on time. Following is what is written by Mrs. Gonzales, among other things:

"On Carnival Tuesday night 1934, the New Town Tamboo Band ... on swinging into Prince Street, a bottle of rum fell ... the revellers took

to flight ... Later, the players ... reassembled ... One of the players, Victor Wilson ... took up a green paint pan ... that had been serving as a stand of a fruit vender's tray which was overturned ... and started to beat the pan with a bamboo beater ... Everyone agreed that the pan was much richer in melody and louder in volume than the bamboo, so they decided to collect pans ... by obtaining a number of paint pans ..."

There are other stories by Anthony Mark Jones in "Steelband — Winston 'Spree' Simon's story," Anthony E. Rouff in "Authentic Steelband Facts" (both of whom

CONTINUED ON PAGE 34

All Stars not fifty years old

FROM PAGE 12

give credit to Spree Simon as having started in 1939 the steelband), George Yeates in the "Humming Bird" magazines of 1962 published by the late Aubrey James and in which Yeates gives credit to the youths of Laventille in 1937, and by George Goddard in the "Humming Bird" magazine in 1964 who, in a story headlined "The steelband in 1964," wrote inter-alia:

"These writers (referring to earlier writers) who seem to be more interested in their own selfish, personal glory appears not to be very concerned about truth and facts but rather to draw attention to themselves from the public as persons of importance and intelligence ... They have all done quite a lot of damage and injury not only to the true origin of the steelband, but to Trinidad and Tobago ... No one can

argue against the fact that the first steelband ever to hit the road was that of the New Town Boys ... Alexander's Ragtime Band ... It would be a good idea for the Ministry of Culture to get the correct story as to the origin and progress of the steelband from these persons now that they are still alive."

No, the steelband did not start with All Stars, or Casablanca, or Spree Simon. All Stars is not 50 years old, neither is Casablanca 46 years old. Anyone saying otherwise is wrong.

However, without the involvement and outstanding contributions of All Stars, Casablanca and to a lesser degree Spree Simon, the history of the steelband could not be as colourful as it is today and as a result would have been less glamorous and interesting.

**AN OLD STEELBAND HISTORY
STUDENT, OF DIEGO MARTIN.**