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The Soul

By KIM JOHNSON

IT WAS an unlikely invention, the steelpan: a single metal drum, a piece of industrial waste on whose face you could play a range of nearly three octaves of precise and distinct notes. Why, even the extremely difficult to learn Indian tabla, which does give different tones, cannot play a melody. Logic protests—the vibrations from one note must surely infect its neighbours, whose sympathetic vibrations in turn would raise a cacophony.

But the unlikely inventors of pan, uneducated in both music and science, positioned the notes so that each is enhanced by the vibrations of its neighbours—a solution requiring a mysterious technology still inexplicable to scientists. The steelband therefore is a range of percussion instruments made from steel drums and capable of a chromatic range from soprano to bass.

This invention of the steelpan in Trinidad and the growth of the steelband movement, then, were two separate but inter-related events which together comprise one of the multifaceted examples of creolisation in the Caribbean.

The invention of the instrument took place within a social movement that had many other dimensions to it. The gangs which nurtured the embryonic instrument, and the warfare they fought amongst themselves or against the police, were a sociological case of a youth sub-culture. But steelbands were not only gangs, they were also—and perhaps more importantly—musical ensembles. How these ensembles metamorphosed as the instrument was elaborated, how they shaped its voice, the music they drew from in these processes—all of this ought to be the subject of detailed musicological study.

STEELBANDS, individually and collectively, soon became significant in the politics of the period, thus adding another dimension to the phenomenon. That was their role as subjects, but the steelband movement was also an important object in the politics of nationalism. In the context of the squabbles between Afro-Trinidadians, Euro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians, the steelband movement's ideological role also acquired an ethnic dimension.

Despite these immediately obvious dimensions of the invention of the steelpan and the growth of the steelband movement, they have only been the object of very limited, uni-dimensional scrutiny. The best examples of this, best in all senses, are also the most recent: Ann Lee's PhD thesis *The Steelband Movement and Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago* and Steven Stuempfle's recently published *The Steelband Movement in Trinidad and Tobago: Music, Politics and National Identity*.

Incidentally, both Ann Lee and Steve Stuempfle are very good friends of mine, and I consider their theses to be thoroughly researched works of scholarship. Indeed, now that Stuempfle's thesis has been published as a book, it is definitely the most important study of the steelband available to the public. And yet they are both very limited accounts which do not do justice to the phenomenon of the steelband movement in Trinidad and Tobago.

Here is where I must confess I have a problem with the academic approach to culture in the West Indies. Long ago in the West Indies, "culture" was a matter of black people's family structure or religion, and retentions from India. In the metropolitan countries, "Culture" was a higher affair found in concert halls, art galleries, theatres, bookshops—and that was pronounced on by specialists in the respective fields—art critics, literary critics, drama critics.

The Sixties brought youth movement, counter-culture, black power and so forth, and all of a sudden "culture" included "popular culture"—cinema, science fiction, pop music, football, whatever. Immediately, arts faculties grabbed anything with words and hitched it on to literature.

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NEVILLE JULES — tuning a guitar pan

In Trinidad calypso found itself in the literary camp, which resulted in Gordon Rohlehr's magnum opus *Calypso and Politics in Pre-Independence Trinidad*, as well as the more pretentious writings of other literary practitioners.

Steelband, however, fell to the social scientists by default. As if beating pan was some quaint folk practice, an aspect of ethnicity or national identity or pluralism—anything but a serious modern art form.

Anthropology and sociology might have been insightful when focused on lower-class family structures or lower-class cultural persistence. The anonymity they favour, the fictitious names they enjoy hiding people behind, are perhaps useful, or at least not nugatory, when dealing with social phenomena which change very slowly and where any single individual can have little impact. When the anthropologists' cultural terrain includes the popular arts such as the steelband movement, it becomes in cases downright bizarre.

These ideas might never have occurred to me had I not decided to write an article for the *Sunday Express* in February 1993, focusing on "the badjohn roots of steelband". In the previous year I had already written about the background of the 1992 Panorama champions, Exodus Steel Orchestra; the 1992 Pan Ramajay champions Potential Steel Orchestra; and the Casablanca Steel Orchestra on the occasion of the film's fiftieth anniversary. Additionally, I had interviewed the Swedish physicist Ulf Kronman on his pioneering research into the acoustics of pan. And yet,

for whatever reason, it was only in 1993 that I was struck by the inadequacy of how the steelband movement was studied. It seems obvious now, at least to me, just as no one would dream of limiting jazz to its function as Afro-American identity, with not a mention of Louis Armstrong or Duke Ellington or Charlie Parker or any of the many

other men and women who created the music.

As I said, it seems obvious now; and how I arrived at the realisation was quite simple too: I walked over to the nearby Tokyo Steel Orchestra pan theatre to chat with a handful of old-timers about the fighters in their band. I could have scoured the library, but I suppose the journalist in me preferred to speak to the actual people who did the deeds. And as I sat in the hot sun on a bench in John John, listening to the reminiscences of one Aldwyn George, I grew more and more enthralled by the stories he told me about various Tokyo fighters: Bake Nose, Spree, Lil Drums, Dana, Mud Mouth, Dewa, Badji.

THE SINGLE FEATURE article immediately burgeoned into a five-part series, to which I have continued to add whenever the opportunity presented itself. This was due to more than the anecdotal wealth of that first group of steelband veterans with whom I spoke. Rather, it was the different focus forced upon me—despite the fact that, in retrospect, the article was not particularly insightful—for I had to confront the specificity of the Tokyo Steel Orchestra, originally known as Destination Tokyo, and the specificity of those old men I had chanced upon, for they spoke about their lives and their band in a way that permitted no extrapolation into a vague "steelband movement".

All of a sudden the undifferentiated and rather monolithic "steelband movement" of the anthropologists and sociologists parted. In the gap I caught a fleeting glimpse of such incredible hurly-burly that was the steelband movement in its manifold human variety. Before me was a specific band made up of specific individuals who did specific things.

Yet the first discovery which necessitated my original article be extended into a series was the generality of the steelband phenomenon.

Within a year of the end of World War II steelbands had sprung up in every nook and cranny of Trinidad and Tobago, wherever there were Afro-Trinidadian youth, from Point Fortin to Santa Cruz and from Point Cumana to Sangre Grande.

on writing the history of pan in iron

OVER A HUNDRED BANDS paraded the streets on Discovery Day 1951, 59 of them in Port of Spain, estimated the Trinidad Guardian, but the number was no doubt far greater if one counted the more informal groups of youths which had a few pans and knocked on them without calling themselves a band or coming on the road or even having a name.

This explosive growth of the steelband movement raised several important issues.

First: how did it take place? A tentative answer might be found in the following examples: Wellington "Blues" Bostock from Red Army in Port of Spain was sent to live in San Juan by his mother after he got in trouble with the law. There he founded San Juan All Stars. Carlton "Zigilee" Barrow left Bar 20 in Port of Spain and went to St James to get away from police harassment. Ivan "Skull" Henry migrated from Port of Spain, first to Point Fortin and then to Arima, to evade warrants for his arrest. In Arima he started Melodians. And so on and on. Examples such as these suggest general tendencies, but they could only be arrived at through detailed research into specific bands and specific individuals scattered throughout the country.

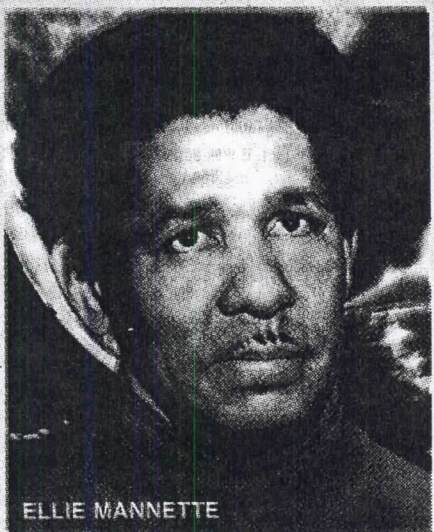
Second is a hypothesis rather than a question prompted by the universality of the steelband movement: that is, it encouraged and supported, both morally and physically, the embattled youth.

This leads to my speculation as to the naming of the steelbands: Desperadoes, Night Invaders, Shores of Tripoli, Crossfire, Destination Tokyo, Boys Town, Free French, Five Graves to Cairo, Sands of Iwojima, Bar 20, and so on. They were for the most part derived from the movies, and this is generally explained as being due to the centrality of the movies to working-class fantasies, especially those of aggressively masculine black youth. This is usually taken to be irony in the extreme, because here was the most intense creativity wearing the garb of Hollywood mimicry.

An additional impulse—which I must emphasise is speculative—occurred to me when Rudy "Two Left" Smith of Red Army referred to the steelband movement as "a revolution". Perhaps those young men had intuitively recognised that the movement they had created was bigger than anything else in the society, bigger than their colonial opponents—bearing in mind this was in the days before the tidal wave that was the People's National Movement. Perhaps the youths knew in however inarticulate a fashion that they were a part of something larger than their otherwise narrow lives. Larger and stronger than anything else in the society at the time, steelband had evoked in them passions deeper and more noble than any they had ever felt before. As such they chose names that carried an appropriately epic grandeur.

That's just a bit of speculation en passant, and it might seem a minor issue. But the self-confidence it represented was of major importance, for without such tremendous self-confidence those youths would have been unable to challenge both the law and the strong disapproval of their parents. It must be borne in mind that those were not times when young people did as they pleased like nowadays. "We were disobedient," Kenny Hart from City Sincopaters told me, "but we had respect."

And they suffered for it. Carlton "Zigilee" Barrow from Bar 20 had 23 convictions associated with the steelband by the time he was 17. Cyril Goddard from Hell's Kitchen in Tunapuna was locked inside his house and beaten unconscious by his father. Ethelbert "TB" Brown from Casablanca could not return home because his mother, on hearing that he was seen in a steelband, was waiting



ELLIE MANNETTE

with boiling water to "scald him into a white man".

NEIGHBOURS shunned them and, as Sparrow sang, "If your sister talk to a steelband man/the family want to break she hand/put she out, lick out every teet in she mouth." And the police weren't easy either. Under these onslaughts, a few of these youths stopped playing pan. Most, however, continued and indeed they became more defiant—they tattooed onto their arms the names and insignias of their bands.

All of this so far fits into the general mythology of the steelband movement which academic researchers have taken as their starting point: that is, the narrative of a chance discovery of one or two notes on a metal container causes



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EARLY RED ARMY from Sackville Street



"ZIGILEE" CONSTANTINE

The men behind the music

the bamboo percussion used at Carnival to be supplanted by metal; the instrument is elaborated through rivalry between bands which also leads to gang warfare; state repression and social ostracism of the steelband men escalate the violence until enlightened leaders deflect the competitiveness into musical channels and national acceptance.

THIS NARRATIVE is not only contained in popular accounts; it also forms the backdrop of the few extensive scholarly studies of the steelband. Even accounts written by men who were involved in the steelband movement in its formative years subscribe to this narrative, men such as Lennox Pierre, who almost single-handedly created the first steelband association in 1950, and George Goddard, a stalwart of the movement from the beginning and its leader throughout the Sixties. And no wonder: it's an appealing narrative with a Cinderella-type romance which gives Trinidad and Tobago a heroic sense of national culture. Besides, it contains much that is indeed true.

Dismissing the stories of individual men and women, however, leaves the mythic account inanimate: there is no sense of the struggles, the defeats and victories, the creativity and achievements of the men who invented the steelpan and whose movement nurtured it. And creativity, collective and individual, is the motor of creolisation.

This lacuna aside, the mythic narrative omits the exceptions, and these are as important as the rule. For instance, as far as the repression aspect of the narrative goes, there are equally important exceptions. Often, for instance, parents—usually mothers—tolerated their teenage sons joining steelbands provided they remained in sight. So after "Zigilee" was first convicted and put on probation for playing in the Hell Yard band, his mother allowed him to form Bar 20 across the road where she felt she could keep an eye on him. Similarly, the Mannette brothers, Ossie, Birdie and Ellie, were allowed to form Oval Boys, which became the legendary Invaders, because the band was in a vacant lot next door. Even respectable middle-class girls were allowed to join Girl Pat Steelband because the band was housed in the living room of their leader Hazel Henley, and never played on the road.

The story I would like to be able to give you and cannot is that of Ellie Mannette, the leader and tuner for the Invaders. He has lived for many years in the US and to interview him is beyond my means, which is unfortunate because he's probably the single most important man in the invention of the pan. It was he who sank the pan into a concave shape—they were convex before—and opened the way for the proliferation of notes. He started using the 55-gallon oil drum with its harder steel and larger face. Some say he was the one to put rubber on the tips of the sticks. His pans had the greatest number of notes and the "sweetest" and most distinctive tonal

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quality. His placement of notes was the first style emulated by other tuners. Even today, when there are many very good pan tuners, some virtuosos still insist that a Mannette pan is still the best.

To overlook the achievements of such men, especially in the field of tuning, is perhaps the greatest dereliction in studies of the steelband movement. I say "tuning" because that is what it is called, but the word is fatally misleading because a pan tuner does not tune a pan the way a guitarist or a violinist tunes his instrument—by turning a key. Rather, pan tuning means the actual fabrication of the instrument, which includes making the notes give off their distinctive tones. The development of the art of tuning is synonymous with the invention of the instrument.

In this Ellie Mannette was the master, and although his stature must not be taken to diminish the genius of other tuners,

Johannesburg Fascinators and Neville Jules of Trinidad All Stars.

And yet in this company Mannette stands out in being the only one who didn't arrange for his band. When I asked Birdie Mannette who used to arrange for Invaders, his reply was, "We didn't have no special arranger. Everybody did a little thing. We'd listen to the radio and I'd try to remember a part, somebody else would try to remember another part, and three or four of us would try to put the tune together."

Perhaps this was why Invaders, famous for their improvisational style on the road, never won a Panorama, never won a Steelband Festival, even though it has always been acknowledged as the greatest Jouvert band. The idea appears more persuasive when Ellie Mannette and Invaders are contrasted with Neville Jules and Trinidad All Stars. Jules, whose forte was the background

(bass) pans, couldn't put as many notes on his tenor pans as Mannette. So to get the same range he multiplied the types of pans he tuned. Likewise, Jules couldn't abide with individuals improvising. All of these tendencies inclined Jules to orchestrating every note played by every player in the Trinidad All Stars. So proprietary was this creator of the Bomb competition about his arrangements that he rehearsed the band secretly, having the players use their fingertips, so the tune could not be heard by spies.

CONSEQUENTLY, Trinidad All Stars has won the largest number of steelband festivals, where European classical music is performed.

The Trinidad All Stars was known for its self-discipline and was the only major band never to have rioted with another band. Indeed, that is why they never joined the first steelband association, which was formed to curtail the fighting. Their pacifism not only accorded with the band's extreme self-discipline but also with necessity, for it never represented a community. "If you live in the heart of town you can't have a district, people keep going and coming," explained the band's martinet captain, Prince Batson. Also, the band's catchment area, which included Charlotte Street, Duke Street and George Street, although they were adjacent to one another, somehow experienced strong centrifugal forces. Some time in the Thirties, for instance, a fight in Hell Yard over a pack of cards sent men scuttling back to their respective streets.

The archetypal community bands were Desperadoes from up Laventille, and Destination Tokyo from John John, and although their musical contribution to the

steelband movement in the Forties and Fifties was insignificant, they were the ones which forged the relationship between their communities and the early People's National Movement.

Still, these two bands differed in how they acquired and maintained their status as representatives of their respective communities. In the case of Laventille, smaller bands such as Serenaders, Joyland, Caribbean Hit Paraders and Spike Jones were incorporated—with an unstated coercion—into Desperadoes. George Yeates came from Caribbean Hit Paraders and Spike Jones was from Spike Jones. Yeates forged the band's link with the government and had the band placed in the district's Community Centre. Charles turned the band into what it is today—one of the most important steelbands ever, and the staunchest supporter of the PNM.

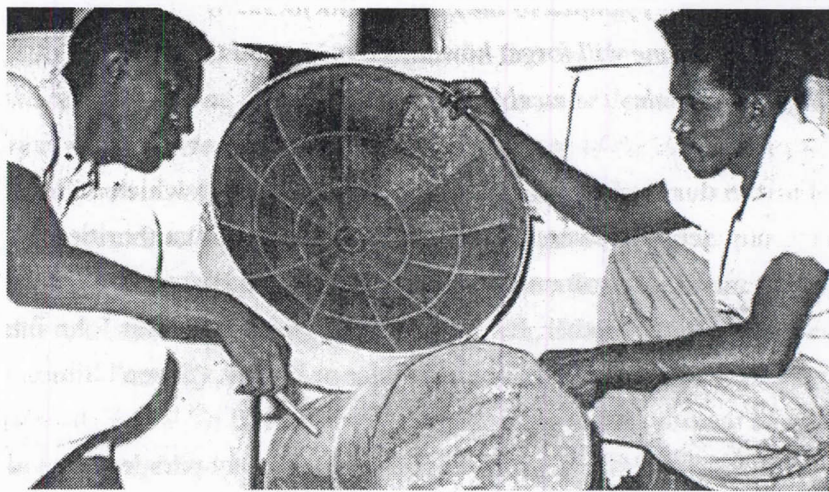
TOKYO, on the other hand, appears to be quite different. It seems that John John tolerated several different bands' co-existing once they all joined together for Carnival. Thus, for instance, the famous Winston "Spree" Simon left Tokyo for Johannesburg Fascinators, but continued tuning for Tokyo. The two bands joined together to go into town.

Neither Desperadoes nor Tokyo was of any musical significance in the Forties, when the leading bands were Casablanca, Trinidad All Stars, Invaders, Sun Valley, North Stars and Southern Symphony. The pre-eminence of the others is owed to the assistance of musically trained people who were in the bands or sympathised with what they were attempting. Casablanca's tuner and arranger Croppy Simmonds, for example, had an uncle who was in charge of a brass band. Simmonds arranged for his uncle to give music lessons to interested members of the band such as Patsy Haynes, Art de Coteau and TB Browne. And that's not counting the many boys who came from the nearby orphanage and were trained in music—it was they, taught and led by Clyde Holdip, who made Casablanca's buglers the most formidable.

Invaders, of course, had the assistance of both amateur violinist Lennox Pierre and choreographer Beryl McBurnie. Sun Valley had "Bajan Cecil" Waithe, who was trained in music; next door was the sympathetic Akal family who allowed them to use their piano. After he returned from his 1951 tour of England with the Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra, Tony Williams, who had already left Sun Valley for North Stars, took a course in vocal music. "I didn't take piano because I thought the fingering would take too long to learn," he once told me.

He was walking from the market one Sunday morning in St James when I recognised and stopped him to ask where he learnt music.

It was not a formally recorded interview but a brief sidewalk conversation. Although I was curious about the question, I had not got around to interviewing Williams, as I have not got around to interviewing dozens of other steelband pioneers. But the urgency of this project made even the fleeting conversation important. For these men are old and unless they are interviewed soon, their stories will disappear forever. And yet another injustice, only a more permanent one, will have been done to the steelband movement and the men who made it happen.



TONY WILLIAMS (right) and friend with the Spiderweb Pan

Mannette was the Antonio Stradivari of the steelband movement.

And whereas Mannette's pans had the greatest range of notes and the richest tones, his band, the Woodbrook Invaders, had the most virtuosos, many drawn from other bands in the western suburbs of Port of Spain. Emmanuel "Cobo Jack" Riley joined from Green Eyes, Othello Mollineaux came from Symphonettes. Then there were Kelvin Dove, Ray Holman, Ellie's brother Vernon "Birdie" Mannette, and many other talented Invaders players. Why?

Bands were captained by men with a flair for organisation, or by those with a musical gift. The first group included men such as George Yeates of Desperadoes, Oscar Pile of Casablanca, Prince Batson of Trinidad All Stars. These men were relatively educated, articulate and all had jobs.

The second group, to which Ellie Mannette belongs, included Sonny Roach of Sun Valley, Tony Williams of North Stars, Aldwyn Jordan of Nocturne Fascinators, Spree Simon of