

1975



Bertie Marshall demonstrates the "Damper" pan while George Goddard and a band member look on.

Bertie Marshall on

THE PERFECT PAN

as told to
JEROME TANG-LEE

THERE WAS a busy look about the room: ashtrays half filled, beer bottles nearly all empty, a mass of electric wires and electronic gadgets cluttered one side.

The boys were talking: "They can't beat this one." "It will make going on tours easier." "Congestion during the "Bomb" competition will no longer be a problem."

The room belongs to Bertie Marshall, the hero of Laventille, the captain of the famous Highlanders Steelband and the man who made the amplified pan.

The raves were for his latest innovation- the Damper pan.

With this, Marshall and members of his band see a glorious new future for the steelband - one that, in the words of Marshall, will save pan from what at the moment appears to be certain death.

In the centre of the room stood the Damper pan - its spider network of braces, springs, pedals and amplifier made it a standout.

Marshall comes across and quickly knocks a few bars of a tune.

"Hear the tone? You can't get that on any ordinary pan," he says.

He says: "Many people still find it appropriate to criticise my experiments in pan but they lack the foresight to realise what will happen to pan if there experiments are not carried out.

DISSATISFIED

"I made the damper because I am totally dissatisfied with the progress pan has made over the past years. Pan should be made to match modern times to play the music of the 20th century and not that of hundreds of years ago.

Marshall pauses, takes a drink, knocks a few more bars and warms up about the instrument he intends to launch and change the world of pan.

"The Damper," he says enthusiastically, "is one of a number of instruments I intend to use, of course through experiments, to bridge the gap between the steelband and the combo.

What are some of the current pan men's problems he thinks the damper will solve?

Marshall: "It will get rid once

and for all the great volume of pans we use on Carnival days. Less pans will be used in dance halls and at the same time pan will be giving off the same effect that is heard in today's combos.

"We need to play modern because this is what the people want - soul, pop, the works. Anything contrary to this will certainly end in failure. With the Damper pan you can linger, stop or carry the sound anytime you want. Normal pans can't do that.

"A week ago I had a long discussion with Goddard (Steelbands Association President, George Goddard) on pan. I told him what I was trying to do to save it from dying an unnatural death because no one wants to help it.

Back to the "Damper": "A pan like the damper must realise a high prize, strictly because its development resulted in three stages: mechanically, electrically and electronically.

PATENTING

"As for my sponsor, Reed, if it were not for them, the "Damper" would have been yet to come. And in agreement with them, I will be in the near future, patenting all my experimental instruments.

"It will not be as in the past. Anybody who wants my idea must get my permission or face prosecution."

Bertie Marshall stopped talking. There was a knock on the door. George Goddard came in and joined the boys. He was very interested in the "Damper."

He said: "Bertie's achievement could be considered rather amazing. If he can reach this height without any financial assistance from either government or private enterprise, one can imagine the heights to which he can carry steelband provided he gets the financial assistance."

Marshall started playing again. Once more the raves started.

Said one: "Remember the Damper, it will revolutionise the steelband."

Of course, that remains to be seen.