

False 'bottle war' launched the steelband



GEORGE GODDARD



LENNOX PIERRE

by
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CITY Attorney Lennox O. Pierre, self-appointed authority on the steelband, in an article "From dustbins to the classics," in the supplement of the Guardian's Independence Issue published on August 26, 1962 (page 107) wrote:

"...Now what is the steelband? This brings us to the modern story which, it is generally accepted, began in about the middle of the 1930s...

"...Here is what Carlton Forde has to say... 'It was Carnival Tuesday in the year 1934 that the New Town Bamboo Band was coming down Nelson Street. On swinging into Prince Street, the beaters were passing rum in a bottle. The bottle fell and with the noise I and the rest of teenagerfs who were behind the band ran down Prince Street and hid in different gateways.

'After seeing that there was no danger, we rejoined the band. I could not get a cutter, so I took up a green paint pan in the canal. This pan was the support for a tray eariler in the day.

'We started beating the pan with our bare hands, turn after turn in "foule" fashion.

'Now I was not so known to the Bamboo giants, so I figured that if I could get my clique together only with pans the next year, which was 1935, we would be on top.

'So I started gathering pans. Anywhere I saw a pan answering the description of the one we used that night it was taken into my custody

Alexander's Ragtime Band

'January 1935, the bamboo specialists started practising for Carnival. We went to the yard watching, empty handed the first day. The second evening two of the boys went with two pans.

'The next day I went to the years and told them we could surprise town this Carnival if we let go bamboo. They fussed and grumbled, but Freddie Maroon said he liked pans, and we moved our instruments to the big yard at the corner of Tragarete Road and Woodford Street.

'The name of the band which was Alexander's Ragtime Band was taken from the picture by the same name which was showing at the Empire Theatre at the time.

'When Carnival came on Monday morning we lined up. I as Alexander was the leader of the band...and, of course, I had my baton.

'The rival bands for 1937 were Alexander's Ragtime Band, Spitfire, Gonzales, Hell Yard, George Street..

'That is Lennox Pierre's story. I knew Alexander. As a resident of New Town I played Jourvert with his band."

That is Lennox Pierre's story as given him by Carlton Forde whom he referred to as Alexander.

Similar stories were given by Carlton Forde to Sylvia Gonzales, author of "Steelband Saga" published by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 1978 and Ellie Manette, veteran steelbandsman and former leader of the famous Invaders Steelband in a story carried in the Sun newspaper for nine weeks (March 21 to May 16, 1986), "The Story of Pan" written by my nephew Peter Blood and in the April 1986 issue of the magazine "Percussive Notes" (volume 24 4), published by the Percussive Arts Society Incorporated of the North Texas State University, to name but a few.

Following is what Sylvia Gonzales, based on information she received from Carlton Forde in 1959, wrote, inter-alia, in her "Steelband Saga":

"On Carnival Tuesday night 1934, the New Town Tamboo Bamboo Band...on swinging into Prince Street, a bottle of rum fell and broke...many of the revellers took to flight thinking there was a fight...common in those days.

"Later the players seeing there was no danger reassembled and began to play once more. Victor Wilson alias "Mando" took up a green paint pan from the canal and started to beat it.

Gathering Garbage Cans

"This pan had been serving as a stand for a fruit vendor's tray which was overtuned during the excitement. Young Mando started to beat the pan with the bamboo beaters..."

Ellie, in reply to questions put to him by "American steelband expert" Andy Narell, is quoted as having said as published in the Sun (March 21 - May 16, 1986), among other things, the following:

"Let me give you a little history of the art form called the steelband. It originated in Trinidad. It came about in the year 1935. The person I know to have started this art form is a gentleman by the name of Alexander Forde...they called him 'Hamburger'"

- in an interview conducted by Gary Gibson of the Percussive Arts Society Inc., Ellie is again reported to have said in reply to questions put to him by Mr Gibson, the following:

"When Carnival came around 1935, the boys wanted to play. And they had no skin drums to parade with; they had no bamboo to parade with.

"So Alexander Forde went around and started gathering garbage cans prior to the celebrations..."

"But Forde brought out a band of entire steel garbage can tops, grease barrels, biscuit drums, paint tins, whatever he could find to create rhythm. His band was called Alexander's Ragtime Band."

American Steelbandsman Jeffrey Ross Thomas of the Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, as his thesis for the M.A. degree, "A History of Pan and the Evolution of the Steel Band in Trinidad and Tobago," wrote:

"Dr J.D. Elder has devoted a portion of his anthropological research to the question of the origin of the steelband. In his 1964 Ph.D. dissertation, he cited statements by Lennox Pierre (attorney and steelband supporter) and Bo Nackie (Duke Street barber and observer of early steelband activity):

"Elder writes: 'Both Lennox Pierre and Bo Nackie agree that steel, pan-of-such origin around 1938 at New Town, Port-of-Spain, with Alexander's Ragtime Band, a Carnival band led by Felix Alexander

But riddles on origin of pan still unsolved

James Alexander, the proprietor of the "New Town Boys' Bar," who used to contribute liquor quite reasonable to the boys; secondly, Hamil Alexander from Woodford Street used to help us to get permission to beat in the yard and also assist the boys with finance.

"The band was called "Alexander and His Boys" before the picture was advertised which caused us to move "His Boys" and place "Ragtime Band," calling it "Alexander's Ragtime Band."

"On Carnival Tuesday night 1936, the New Town Tamboo Bamboo Band turned into Prince Street, some of the followers in the back were passing a bottle of rum, something happened and the bottle fell causing a stampe in the band..."

"There was a vender on the pavement with a tray of fruits on a paint pan. As the boys rushed past, the pan was kicked. Mandopicked up the pan; a piece of wood was got by somebody in the band, and various boys from the same band started fouleaying on the pan in turns.

"I happen to get the home stretch beat, instead of following the band to the Big Yard in Woodford Street, I turned into the Boulevard with the pan, went into Belish Mama yard to hide the pan under the clothes bleach.

"As January 1937, the big men started preparing for their Callender. The boys started giving moral support. One Evening a paint pan was eased in by one of the boys, the next evening a piece of bedstead post.

Day Pan Was Born

"The boys started amusing, keeping the same timing as the men with their Bamboo, a little later on Haynes Biscuit drum was brought in.

"Freddie Maroon, who tried out the bedstead post, got to like same, so the following evening a couple more pieces were brought in."

In an article, "Birth in the Boulevard," by the same Carlton Forde, under the sobriquet "Lord Humbug," published February 18, 1968, "Ford wrote:

"Carnival Day 1936 - that was the day Pan was born.

"A Bamboo Tamboo band from New Town was parading downtown Port-of-Spain. I was in the band. We were drinking and passing the bottle from hand to hand.

"Then the bottle slipped from somebody's hand and fell on the ground and mash up and with that noise is to see how the crowd start to scatter, just like if there was a bottle war.

"In the scramble, they knocked down an old woman's tray that was on a paint pan. The boys picked up the pan and started to knock it and pass it from hand to hand.

"After Carnival was over, the boys took the pan down to their yard at the corner of Woodford Street and Tragarete Road...they took it to a yard in Cipriani Boulevard.

"I always remember how it started that day in 1936. I was the leader of the band."

Carlton Forde in yet another article published in July 29, 1972, under the caption "Man who formed the first steelband," is reported to have said among other things:

"When as a youth jumping along behind the Tamboo Bamboo Band in Carnival, I picked up a metal pan, began banging it with a piece of wood, I found I could make musical notes."

This newspaper went on to say, "Mr Carlton Forde in 1937 in Port-of-Spain formed the Alexander Ragtime Band, the first steelband in the world."

Lennox Pierre has given two different years, 1935 and 1938. The year 1935 in the 1962 supplement of the Guardian Independence Issue and 1938 in Dr Elder's dissertation. Which one of these two years given is the correct one, 1935 or 1938?

Romantic Description

Pierre also claimed that in 1935 the motion picture "Alexander's Ragtime Band" from which the New Town Steelband took its name, was then being shown at the Empire Theatre.

But according to Jeffrey Ross Thomas's "A History of Pan and the Evolution of the Steelbands in Trinidad and Tobago," the following is recorded as having been written by Dr Errol Hill in his book, "Trinidad Carnival - Mandate for a National Theatre":

"Errol Hill offers three accounts of the introduction of pans into Carnival bands..."

"Carlton Forde, leader of Alexander's Ragtime Band, is the second claimant. Forde is well-known for his romantic description of the detailed incidents that led in 1935 to his band discarding bamboo for metal instruments..."

"But the movie entitled "Alexander's Ragtime Band" was not shown in Trinidad until late 1938, and the name could not therefore have appeared in Carnival before 1939."

The motion picture "Alexander's Ragtime Band" was copyright by Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, August 11, 1938.

Pierre's story says "the beaters were passing