Controversy

Louis B Homer
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IT was the economic depression in Trinidad in the 1930s and the latent musical talent of young Afro-Trinidadians that gave birth to the steelpan as a unique musical instrument in Trinidad and Tobago which was to provide in later years musical entertainment to the world.

For many years, steelband music was regarded as music of the unprivileged who were debarred from self-expression because of social and economic disability.

But during the period 1938 to 1945, steelband music emerged in full force, replacing bamboo drums with bits and pieces of metal capable of producing non-melodic but highly rhythmic sounds.

Faced with outright condemnation of African drums, conch shells and horns, the musicians turned to other percussion forms of instruments. The trunks of bamboos were used. Different lengths produced different sounds. This invention was known as tambour bamboo or the bamboo orchestra. From the tambour bamboo, the steelband music emerged.

During the early years of its existence, both pan and players faced many social challenges.

But in spite of the challenges, the movement overcame them in 1951. In that year, the movement came centre-stage in world entertainment when Trinidad All-Steel Percussion Orchestra (TASPO) travelled to Britain, took part in the Musical Festival and emerged as the first steelband to play in that country.

Many stories have been told about the origin and part played by the movement and its early players in early years. After eight decades in existence, there is still conflicting information as to where it started, and when and who discovered or invented it, and who beat the first tune on a pan. Also which was the first organised band, who tuned the first pan, and who invented the iron band.

What we know as a fact is the first tune played after the "Do Ray Me Fa So La Ti Do" was "Mary had a Little Lamb".

In the early years, steelband players practised their musical skills in open sheds, under trees and in old buildings to produce percussion music. They were not allowed to parade on the streets because it was illegal.

With the start of World War II in 1939, Carnival activities in Trinidad and Tobago were suspended by police for security reasons. The war ended in 1945 and it was only natural the victory called for a celebration.

When victory in Europe was proclaimed, the drummers spontaneously took to the streets on VE Day (Victory in Europe) to celebrate with metal drums, pieces of old iron and biscuit tins.

That was the start of a new musical era that would later capture the rhythm which has enriched our Carnival celebrations since then.

Controversy mars first Panorama in 1963

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VE Day was celebrated on May 7, 1945—the date on which the allies formally accepted the unconditional surrender of the armed forces of Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler.

Following VE celebrations, bottle-and-spoon bands developed throughout the country as the music of the poor and dispossessed.

At parties, the magical sounds of the bottle and spoon filled the air. Then steel bars and tubes came into use in the first attempt to make street music. And soon after prized pieces of steel were introduced into the steelbands.

This invention—the pan—which was later to become the national instrument of Trinidad and Tobago, created a keen spirit of competition that generated what was called steelband clashes.

Violence entered the arena, which led to a legal ban on the use of steelband music in public places.

"It was considered then as the music of the slums, and only vagabonds and the unemployed and idle people took part," stated one commentator.

With intervention from social workers, politicians and police, the rivalry among bands came to an end. Included in a list of people who supported the steelband movement were Albert Gomes and Anglican Minister Eric Max Farquhar.

Steelband music was then gaining ground among the elite.

It was reported that a former governor, Sir John Shaw, had danced to the strains of the steelband during an official function and had called for more. Yet some parents refused to permit their children to learn pan music, and the orchestras were not allowed to play in churches.

Formation of the Steel Band Association headed by George Goddard helped to unite the bands, and a new beginning was in sight.

From a modest start emerged steelband Panorama in 1963 as a national competition, with preliminaries held in different parts of Trinidad and Tobago, leading up to the finals in Port of Spain.

TAKING IT TO THE STREETS: Pan is played around the neck decades ago.

The first Panorama in Port of Spain in February 1963 took place amidst controversy between Invaders and the judges.

Invaders, a leading band from Port of Spain, played first at the competition with two out of three judges present.

When they were unplaced, they protested vigorously, claiming one of the judges was not present to hear their rendition. The organisers of the competition replied by stating that the band began to play before the scheduled time.

Winning the first prize on that occasion was North Stars, led by Anthony Williams. The band played "Dan is the Man in the Van"—a calypso composed by the Mighty Sparrow.

Placing second was Sundowners steelband, and in third place Desperadoes. That was the start that made steelband music an integral part of our Carnival celebrations.

As a cultural vehicle, steelband music had faced many challenges during the early years—some from the law and from certain sections of society.

But in the face of adversity from many quarters, what was banned in the past has become the music of the world eight decades later.

It is played in Britain, Switzerland, Germany, France, Holland, Canada, as well as islands of the Caribbean.

The music is taught at schools and universities as far away as Japan. It is also played in most churches and at official functions.

Pan music is truly a creation of the musical ability of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. From its small beginnings, it has spread throughout the world, integrating peoples far and wide while maintaining its basic character.