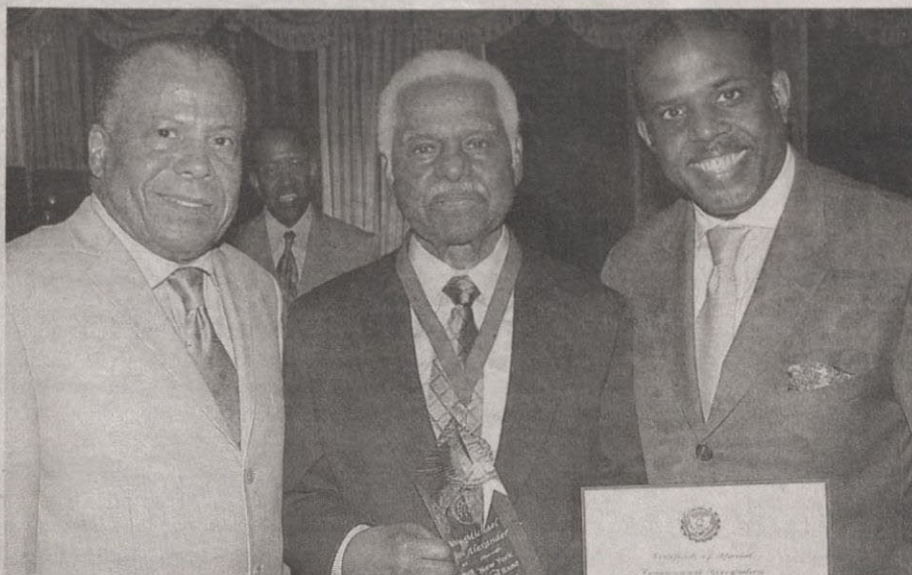




Austin Stoker, Michael Alexander and Rod Clavery. The historic appearance of a three-piece steelband in the 1954 Broadway production, *House of Flowers*, was one of the early highlights for steel band music in New York.



Michael Alexander is flanked by well wishers. PHOTOS: BROMLEY GITTENS

## T&T music pioneers honoured in New York

DR GLENVILLE ASHBY

It was an era when the impact of racism reverberated not only in the South, but everywhere in the United States. It was also a time when the inventiveness of the steelpan somehow made an indelible mark on the musical fabric of the Big Apple, courtesy of Austin Stoker (formerly Alfonso Marshall), Michael R Alexander, and the late Rod Clavery.

Stoker and Alexander were recently recognised and honoured at the Tropical Paradise Ballroom in Brooklyn for their sacrifice and contribution to the Caribbean art form. It took a long time coming, but after a forum by the Folks Arts Institute focusing on the origins and development of pan in New York, the worthy gesture surfaced.

"It was not expected in the least," said Alexander, referring to the honour.

"I was totally shocked and surprised," Stoker added.

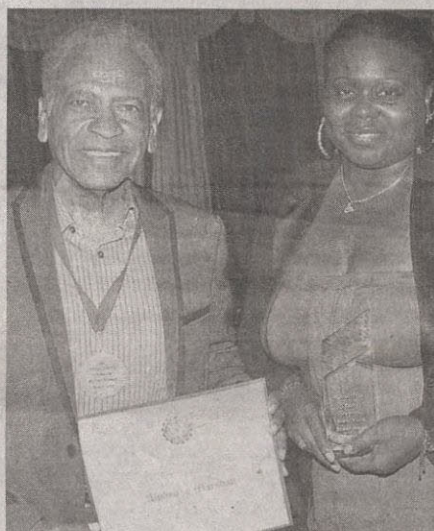
As members of the trio that appeared in the 1954 Broadway musical production, *House of Flowers*, Stoker and Alexander have lots to share.

They spoke of accompanying Geoffrey Holder Dance Company as pannists and drummers and "getting that big break."

Stoker mentioned becoming "the first non-citizens to join the American Federation of Musicians." He called it ground breaking. Yet, he admitted not understanding the magnitude of their work.

"I was having fun, plain and simple. Not by any stretch of my imagination did I think we were creating history."

Their work was historical, momentous. The trio was simply called, *The Trinidad Steelband*. The Broadway production featured Pearl Bailey and Dianne



Austin Stoker, left, and a friend.

Carroll and ran for over a year at the Alvin Theatre.

"After the show ended, I waited another six months for work," Alexander recalled. During that time Stoker was drafted into the US Army, spelling the end of their enviable run. Alexander thanked Jean Leon Destine Dance Company for sensing his talent and hiring him to tour Europe.

"It was stupendous. The crowds loved it and kept calling for more and more," he said, reminiscing of the time spent introducing the steelpan to audiences in Lisbon, Milan, Madrid, and other major cities.

Alexander returned to New York to play for Harry Belafonte and Miriam Makeba.

Upon his discharge Stoker tried in vain to locate his friends, eventually forming a duo with Enid Mosier who he eventually married.

"Music," he noted "has always been part of me." Like his friend, Stoker, continued playing to intrigued audiences.

"The pan just about mesmerised everyone," he said.

Alexander and Stoker who reside Texas and California respectively, reflected on the

racially charged climate that infected the US in the 1950s and 60s.

After a protracted pause, Alexander said: "We were well received except for one incident when we were asked to book separate hotels, but I cannot recall any major problems." However, he later added that "agents were careful to book places that were congenial."

Stoker was more pointed, recalling a 1956 incident at the Palmer House in Chicago.

"We were not allowed entry and had to spend the night at a private residence."

Thinking that they would be revered among the pioneers of culture was an unfathomable thought. But there were indicators. Alexander talked about his proclivity toward music at a young age.

"I did so much penance from drumming on the desk at St Mary's College."

And of his crowning achievement, he cited the presidential inauguration parade of Richard Nixon, followed by the presidential ball at the Smithsonian Institute.

Still proficient at stirring audiences, this virtuoso believes that more should be done to promote pan as an instrument that is integral to any musical group, "just like the guitar."

It is a point echoed by Stoker who cited the incredulous work undertaken by Ulf Kronman of Sweden.

"In his book, this gentleman has covered every aspect of the instrument. This is the kind of effort that is required by our nationals. It should be standardised...period. It's about time."

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