

US Navy pioneers of military steelpan

By KIM JOHNSON

HOW IRONIC, yet how typical, that it's taken independent Trinidad and Tobago 35 years for the army to openly support a steelband, while the Americans have been doing so since 1957.

It began with Admiral "Dan" Gallery, a World War II hero, amateur novelist, baseballer, a lover of classical music, friend of the great cellist Pablo Casals and generally a man of culture. He was on an inspection tour of Caribbean bases and happened to be in Trinidad at Carnival time. The governor asked him to review the mas from the Grand Stand and he heard for the first time what a steelband sounded like.

"The music just got inside me and shook me up," he recalled to US Navy chief musician Franz Grissom.

Gallery returned to home base and summoned his bandmaster. "Can we produce steelband music here in Puerto Rico?" he inquired.

Chief musician Charlie Roeper, a pianist by profession, didn't think his men could learn pan. But Gallery disagreed.

Not only could they learn pan, they would learn, he said. And by April the following year Roeper and his men were shipped off to learn pan in Trinidad, where they hung out in the panyard of the Woodbrook Invaders.

Ellie Mannette tuned pans for the band in exchange for oil drums from the US base. And they were taught how to play: the pianists learning ping pong; the trumpeters and saxophonists getting the seconds and cellos; the tuba player

going behind the bass; and the drummers taking the high hats and the iron.

Later that year the Tenth Naval District Steelband was joined by some gifted musicians who took to pan like sailors to the sea and after a year of gigs in Puerto Rico and refresher trips to Trinidad, the band hit the big time. Late in 1958 they played at the World's Fair in Brussels, were featured on the Ed Sullivan Show and played at the White House.

Roeper left the army to teach pan in schools and was replaced by percussionist Grissom who recalls their vast repertoire: "I set to work arranging suitable material and over a period of years had a book that contained 50 to 60 arrangements that were rehearsed and available to perform at any given time, and up to 100 more in reserve."

They came to Trinidad every year to record the top calypsoes and steelband arrangements, transcribing and performing them back in Puerto Rico and the US along with their classics, Latin American tunes, pop music, cocktail music and dance music.

"At a performance at the New York World's Fair in 1964, a gentleman approached the band after a performance and said that he had a youth steelband... and wanted to know if we were interested in hearing their band," recalls Grissom.

They agreed and the 20 of them, in three cars, went to Queens where they were "blown away" in the basement of Murray Narell by his boys Andy, Jeff and their friends.

And now, to bring the irony full circle, Andy Narell will unveil a new instrument designed by Ellie Mannette on July 27 at West Virginia University.

The band had been formed around 1965 with a push from George Goddard, leader of the National Association of Trinidad and Tobago Steelbandsmen (Natts). "Goddard was always nationalistic and with the national steelband being formed he was trying for it to be paid like the Police Band and the Regiment Band," recalls Natts treasurer Kenrick Thomas.

That was the band which James remembered in the 1966 Festival, but it didn't make it to the finals, even though it wasn't bad and it had one top-class tuner, James Andrews. It didn't last to enter another Festival, though.

"What happened is that for Expo 67 in Canada they sent a services band with men from the Coast Guard and the Police," recalls Edward Wade, a former Regiment bandmaster. "They had a vibrant thing going but most stayed in Canada after the Expo and the whole thing fell through."

But there were other reasons why that first steelband declined so rapidly. According to Wade, unlike the military band, the Regiment steelband was dismissed as a purely voluntary group of men from various rifle companies: "With the battalions moving around to the different camps it was difficult."

Gradually, Wade started back, bringing pannists into the military band in 1976. "We were short of musicians; it took six years to train a clarinet player while we had all these pannists," recalls Wade. "But I got into trouble for that. People didn't see it favourably at all, they didn't even consider the pan an instrument; when I put in the estimates to purchase pans, the ministry slashed it off."

Then tragedy struck.

"One of the first panmen I'd brought into the band, a fantastic pannist from Tokyo, was sent to train and got into an accident with two other soldiers—all died," says Wade. "It was years before I got the nerve to start again."

Now things have changed. Brig Carl Alfonso is supportive of the steelband. Of the 18 fielded in the Ramajay last Saturday, a core of seven are also in the military band. They're aiming for Pan is Beautiful VIII in October—if they can get enough instruments for 60 players—and then Panorama's next.