

Tripoli, the great St James steelband

By KIM JOHNSON

YOUNGER people mightn't be familiar with the band Tripoli, but older pan aficionados would all remember that great St James steelband. How many of them, however, know that the band, which was formed before the Second World War, was originally called by the unusual name of Grow More Food?

"I used to take a little jump with them, but it was the more senior fellas playing the pan," recalls Tripoli stalwart Lloyd Butcher. "Grow More Food wasn't an organised steelband, it was a community band without a definite leadership. When they start to beat and head for town, the whole of St James going with them."

And often he was there in the melee, for he lived around the corner. Born in 1930, Butcher had moved with his family to Ethel Street when he was about four years old, around which time his mother died and he came under the lenient jurisdiction of his father Joseph Butcher, a man who enjoyed his Carnival.

"Carnival time you eh seeing he at all!" says Butcher in explaining why his father never stopped him from playing pan, even in the days when it was considered a hooligan thing to do. "He coulda play stick too. He would hide it by the gate because he didn't want he mother to see it, he dress and when he going he reach under the house and get he bois. I eh following him but one year he had too much to drink and he pass out and somebody come and tell he mother to look for him. When we go we see him on the pavement sleeping with he stick under he arm."

The old lady, who lived in Woodford Street, was stricter and didn't want her grandson hanging around the "lawa boys" when the young Lloyd was left in her keeping. Granville Sealey, another Tripoli man, explains that "lawa boys" meant rough, plebeian types, and although he can't explain the origins of "lawa", perhaps it derives from the old batonnier's boast, even if the Big Yard didn't have stick-fighting: I, lawa (French, "le roi"—the king) "with stick, with fight, with woman, with dance, with song, with drum, with everything."

Despite his grandmother's prohibitions, Butcher sneaked out anyway to peep in at the Big Yard on the corner of Tragarete Road, where now stands a Republic Bank but where in the late thirties and early forties was an open yard in which limed men such as Carlton "Lord Humbigger" Forde, Victor "Totee"

Wilson, Carlton Blackhead, "Popoyak" Cummings and others. These were the men who formed Alexander's Ragtime Band.

"Even though these were wayward guys, they never encouraged little boys around their yard—you had to keep a distance," says Butcher. "It was something to see them and hear them, they used to sound great: they'd be just playing a rhythm, no tune. That was the first time I heard pan."

When a few years later the time came for Butcher to fall into the movement, the band he joined was called after a movie, *The Shores of Tripoli*, which Grow More Food had metamorphosed into, and which would shorten its name to simply Tripoli, even though where the fellas limed down by the water's edge where the fishermen moored their boats continued to be called long after the Shores of Tripoli.

"The pans used to stay under Joe Crick's mother's house but at first we had no yard," he recalls. "Then a kind lady, Miss Christina Goolcharan, she had a property at the corner of Ethel Street and Mucurapo Road she knew all the guys, so she loaned us there to be our first panyard."

If Butcher's father was indulgent, Tripoli's captain, Joe Crick—Joseph Christopher—wasn't. He was drastic," is how Butcher describes the authoritarian leadership style of the man who, for example, because of a minor argument with the band's main tuner and leading ping pong player, Granville Sealey, banned Sealey for 99 years. "The ban didn't really stay as such—but it make the relation kinda

sour."

Tripoli was one of those bands with a surfeit of talented youths many of whom, Butcher reckons, chafed under Joe Crick's abrasive leadership style and consequently broke away to form other bands such as Crossfire with Sterling Betancourt and Eamon Thorpe, and Wonder Harps with Othello Mollineux.

"Joe Crick wasn't a bad fella, he was a disciplinarian and when he coming out with something he want the best and to get that he used to get on," says Butcher, recalling the military mas when the band had a real sword and scabbard, real gun holsters and belts, as an example of Joe Crick's impulse for authenticity.

"If you come and hear him getting on you would wonder what kinda fella that is, but when you know him he different. The younger fellas didn't know this and they used to grumble and they leave the band."

Butcher's instrument was, first, the boom—the large drum which you held sideways and cuffed with your fist like a Hosay bass drum. Then he moved on to the baylay, a background pan with about three notes specially created to

get a particular Latin sound Tripoli strove after. The baylay pan didn't last, however, for it was quickly replaced by the tune boom which was made from a biscuit drum on which were tuned several notes.

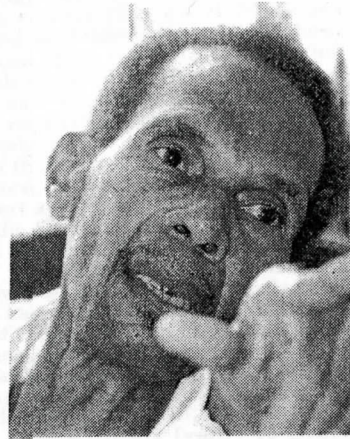
"That tune boom make me feel shame on the road once and strike a pain in my

heart," says Butcher with a laugh, recalling the time when Tripoli was jamming in St James, sweeping along two blocks of people, when the great tuner Sonny Roach's band, Sun Valley, passed by with the brothers Addawell and Nooksin Sampson playing the newly-invented tune booms.

"We jamming, things nice, you feeling to beat pan, when ups come Sun Valley," tells Butcher. "After they pass, when you look back you coulda take a glass of water and wet the whole band! Sun Valley with they tune booms take everybody."

And yet Tripoli made its fair share of innovations too, introducing as early as 1956 the first amplified pans on the road, the invention of one Herbert, a man who designed a walkie-talkie system so the movement of the front of the band could be controlled from wherever the captain happened to be. This same Herbert constructed it from two big speakers and a radio system. That year they won Best Beating Band on the road with Sparrow's "Jean and Dinah".

By then Butcher, however, was on the way out. After Taspo, steelbands had 3-basses on their stage side, and by the end of the fifties Tony Williams would put them on wheels. "This call for a lot of practice," reckoned Butcher, applying the philosophy he holds to this day. "I have to make a living and it's time to step aside and let the younger guys take over."



LLOYD BUTCHER

