

The Story of Pan, Part VIII

GREAT PLAYERS

THE first band was the Alexander Ragtime Band and Invaders was an offspring of that band. ELLIE MANNETTE, one of the original panmen continues his discussion with American pannist ANDY NARELL on the evolution of our unique art form — the steelpan. He also claims that ace pannists Robbie Greenidge and Len "Boogsie" Sharpe learnt their art partly through panman "Corbeau" Jack. This interview was conducted at Mannette's pan laboratory in New York where he now lives.

Q: Who would you say was the first of the great players?

A: The first great player way back then was Theodore Steven. T.S. was the first great player to the extent that he did something different to the other guys way back in the early 50s. He started having creative ad libs in melody lines when everybody would just get on a stage playing that kind of percussion together. Whatever cord pattern or whatever you decide to do, this boy Steven started what you call "revving". Theodore was the first person to

ever do this effectively. This was done in 1950 with a tune called "Anna" and he ad libbed considerably in the tune. Before that when the band went to London, Lt. Griffith had a way of arranging in which he would make the band play and then every once in a while, he would point to a person and you will have to get up and do some crazy things like run around the drum a little to try to create some attention and then you would have to sit down and he would point to the bass line and he would play some notes. The listener may not even know what he is playing but he is playing around the bass anyway. So he does things like that to create some attention as though, well the band is professional.

But it was nothing constructive and Theodore did something real well. After Theodore, also in the 50s, I think the greatest second pan player of all of them was a guy called Zephryne - David Zephryne. Yeh, I think that is the name. He played a double second. And then after him came this guy called "Corbeau" Jack who established a pattern of playing which most of the present day players have copied.

ROBBIE GREENIDGE (co-arranger with the WITCO Desperadoes Steel Orchestra) as great as he may be, has learned almost everything from "Corbeau" Jack whose real name is Emmanuel Riley. And also this fella — what's the boy's name? — BOOGSIE? (ace pannist and arranger) — they all have the pattern of "Corbeau" Jack. For that matter, I have a tape right now in the car which "Corbeau" Jack had revved way back in 1960 or whatever and it is still the best revs I have ever heard, the best ad libs. I still have it here with me and I don't think any of those other guys' ad libs ever matched his pattern. He is not fast; it is the notes that he used in between that is ad libbed. So he does it better than those other guys.

Q: It seems to be that in various areas, there is a long tradition of bands being known as bands with sweet sounds. You had the reputation of tuning pans for Invaders, the band which allegedly has the sweetest pans?

A: Yeah. We had... Well I had a name they used to call me at one time in the islands — sweet pan or some kind of thing or whatever slang they used to use. I can't remember exactly. But I always tuned the pans better than the other guys way back then because I started it. I built the first one so I had a jump ahead of them. Then I built the first second, single second and the single guitar so I had a jump on them. Everytime I did something, the guys came and caught up. But by the time they caught up, I had advanced on it, you know. So I had a better structure of my work than the other guys. I maintained a kind of lead and I have a different insight for what I want to hear as an orchestra and I tune my pans accordingly to what I want to hear. It sounds nice I think to the listener. A lot of guys might just want to hear a beautiful ring and put all the notes to a ring like crazy. It might be good but when you listen to it, the value of the sound and the ringing and you listen to the value of the band with the deep sound, and the echoes and the ring on top, I think I produce a better sounding band. I might be wrong but I think so.


Q: Who thought of the name Invaders for your band?

A: Well, it came from the war. There was the invasion of Normandy or one of those places at the time. No, it was before that. First we were called the Oval Boys because the band was opposite to the the big Oval where they have all the sports — the soccer and the cricket and whatever. And we lived right across the street and were playing there. So we were the boys from the Oval. And we called ourselves the Oval Boys from when we started in 1937 until 1941 or 1942, something like that. And then there was some raid in northern France I think where a British cavalry raided a German camp and they called them the "Invaders". So we called our band the "Invaders" because of what was taking place in the war. And most of the other bands named themselves after some war act like Casablanca or Tripoli. All these names are from the war days.

Theodore Steven
David Zephryne
Robbie Greenidge
Emmanuel Riley
"Corbeau" Jack
Boogsie

Alexander's Ragtime Band
Oval Boys 1937-1941-2
Invaders (Shell)
Invaders (Trimbac) →

Alexander's Ragtime Band
Oval Boys 1937-1941-2
Invaders (Shell)
Invaders (Trimb)



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Q: Tokyo?

A: Tokyo and all that, yeh.

Q: What about Desperadoes?

A: Desperadoes, yeh. All those names were from the war days.

Q: Desperadoes is from the war days?

A: Yeh. Yeh. Man there were a lot of crazy names and those bands were not really the original bands. There were bands that were offspring. The real beginner's band in the island...the first band ever was Alexander Ragtime Band. And Invaders was an offspring from Alexander Ragtime. I started as a little boy following the Alexander because it began in 1935 and I started in 1937. As a result, I am an offspring from the Alexander Ragtime. And then there are bands in Woodbrook right right now that are offspring from Invaders like STARLIFT and PHASE II.