

Invaders— the pied panmen of Woodbrook

By CARL JACOBS

IT WAS August 1962. The West Indian atmosphere was heady with the aroma of independence. A Jamaican disc jockey started a steelband record turning on the table in his studio.

A listener on the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies immediately turned the volume of his transistor set full blast, setting off a train reaction.

Other radios were switched on as the glorious sound of pan swept the campus.

As if by magic, undergraduates in nightclothes and various stages of undress poured onto the university grounds jumping up like mad.

The story goes that the radio station was contacted by phone and after urgent pleading played the record again and again. And the jump up continued.

The tune was Franz Listz's Liebestraume.

The orchestra: Shell Invaders, the pied panmen from Woodbrook who, ever since 1942, when they were formed in a backyard on Tragarete Road opposite the Queen's Park Oval, have been having that sort of effect on their delighted listeners.

This story is related, almost in the same words, in a recent issue of Shell Topics. And proudly so, for Shell Trinidad Limited has every reason to rejoice over its association with the Invaders, a legendary name in the colourful history of the steelband.

So much of the development and evolution of the steelband and the sweetening of pan is the product of Invaders that it is only fitting for them to be the first steelband to be sponsored.

When Shell Trinidad made the historic decision in 1960 to become the first company to be officially associated with the steelband, the Invaders were its first and natural choice.

Since then, dozens of steelbands all over the country have begun to enjoy the benefits of sponsorship by business and industrial enterprises operating in the country — a form of assistance which has ushered the steelband into a new era of refinement and sophistication.



ELLIE MANETTE . . . genius of the pan.

Now a kind of patriarchal institution in the world of pan, Shell Invaders have lived through every phase of steelband history making its own lusty contribution from the early war years to the present stage of international recognition.

Conscious of its history, Shell Invaders is not unduly anxious to prove itself in the arena of competition; the band is never "a hot contestant" for any prize or laurel. Still Shell Invaders have taken part regularly in steelband festivals and panoramas and their performances on these occasions have always demonstrated their classic feeling for the pan, endearing them more deeply to their audiences and devoted followers.

They have a style, a sound, a rollicking rhythm that establish their individuality.

To constantly enrich this is what makes Shell Invaders tick.

This is the heritage of Ellie Manette, a true genius of the pan who founded the Invaders and led them into the present golden era of the steelband.

"The man who brought the steelband from social ostracism to the threshold of respectability was Ellie Manette," wrote W. A. Simmonds in a booklet published to accompany an exhibition of cement sculpture by Raphael Samuel depicting the history of the steelband.

In their tribute to Manette, this is what Shell Topics had to say about him:

"In fact, one of the things which made Invaders famous in its early days and

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brought it the envy of other steelbands was the fact that the doors of socialite homes were open to Ellie who taught the sons and daughters of the elite what to do with a piang pong or other favourite instrument long before pan became as popular as it is today.

"It was Ellie who first wrapped his drumstick with strips of rubber and Ellie who first marked off the top of an oil drum in the now familiar pattern. As his technique developed he gathered a group around him, taught them and launched the Invaders Steelband.

"Under the quiet effective and inspired leadership of Ellie Manette, the father of the modern steelband, Invaders have experimented and innovated until their music has become an experience to hear and a magic potion which has lent feathers to the most leaden-footed of revellers.

"As a pan tuner, Ellie has been without par in Trinidad and Tobago. It was he who gave Invaders their golden sound.

"A facet of his remarkable gift was the manner in which he walked quietly amidst the music on Carnival days, and listened to the beat, and created new rhythms and new styles and combinations in his head while people jumped up around him."

In 1960, Ellie Manette migrated to the United States where he is engaged in teaching Americans to tune and beat pans. The tradition of Invaders, however, is safely stored in the competent hands of his brother, Vernon "Birdie" Manette and manager Terry Frederick.

But far from resting on their glorious past, the Shell Invaders, refuelled by fresh talents and a new generation of panmen, intends to keep their Tragarete Road headquarters as a fountain-head of all that is best in the world of pan.