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Steelbandsman of 40s a pariah, an outcast

Yet youths then, fearing the violence, began to admire his bravado, to identify with him

THE MIDDLE class was up in arms against this fad and the newspaper headlines of the 40s make interesting reading such as "Steelbandsman should be banished to the forest" and "No bail for any steelbandsman in my court, says magistrate."

The Steelbands all had their followers of Jamettes who can be best described as women of easy virtue and loose morals. These same women were the cause of the violent steelband clashes of the late 40s, 50s and the early 60s.

The early steelband men co-operated with each other during the formative years but the advent of the war and the presence of US service men stationed in the country brought a flourishing night club trade which saw the Jamettes being employed as prostitutes and the pan men as entertainers.

Disputes arose over control of prostitutes, and these spilled over to the steelbands which were defined by certain blocks or areas. Gang warfare erupted and very volatile situations occurred on the streets during the annual carnival parades where thousand strong steelbands led by flag waving, incident-prone Jamettes confronted each other on their various routes.

Pariah And Outcast

Young people are quick to adopt fads of other youth, whether it be hairstyles or life styles, especially if they defy tradition, convention or the authority of the day.

The steelbandsman of the 40s was a pariah and outcast, existing on the verge of civilisation. He was always on the run from the law, and discriminated against for his involvement in the then primitive art form. Even more despised than the Rasta of a few years ago by society.

Yet the youth of the nation while fearing the violent tendencies of the steelband man began to admire his bravado, and began to identify with him, drawn by exotic and primaevial sounds of his still crude instruments.

Among those youths were the sons of the French Creole ruling class, the same people who were most vocal in their condemnation of the steelband movement, and college students, the children of the bourgeois middle class. The French Creoles have a tradition in this country for carnival activity so it was no surprise when their children established two Steelbands Dixieland of Belmont led by Curtis Pierre, and Silver Stars of Newtown led by Junior Pouchet, both students of St Mary's College, that bastion of French Creole/Catholic learning.

The middle class was revolted, students were expelled for merely been seen in a pan yard; others were shipped abroad for schooling, but the tide could not be turned back. Young people were firmly in support of the steelband. Dixieland and Silver Stars hit the streets with thousands of revellers whose complexions ranged from dark brown to lily white, and most important girls outnumbered the boys.

Creeds And Classes

Woodbrook and Belmont played an important role in the desegregation of the steelband. Belmont, because of its proximity to the Queen's Park Savannah and its cosmopolitan population was a mixing and melting pot, as young people of all races, creeds and classes went to school together, played together and feted together.

The steelbands dem fortunates, dem boys and sun-land were well supported by youth from the lower middle class and working class families, while Dixieland had the support of the middle class youth on the East Side of the Savannah. There were no gang wars, Belmont was a united community.

Woodbrook had a greater diversity of races and classes. The barrack yards, although few and far between was home to a large number of families, so although Petra or Rosalino Streets might each have one of these yards, half the youth in the street would come from this yard; and they played and went to school with the French Creoles, Chinese, Mulattoes and the Syrians who had settled in increasing numbers.

Children in Woodbrook seemed to have a run of the streets and many privileges and freedoms. These were extended to the Steelbands. Starlift soon became a band dominated by College boys mainly from Queen's Royal College, while Invaders had youth of all backgrounds.

I distinctly remember the carnival of 1957 where two ten year olds had their tenor pans filled with dollar notes by admiring onlookers. The lucky boys were David Rampersad of Invaders and David Stoddart of Starlift; one of pure East Indian Stock the other of pure Caucasian stock.

Invaders also had two young Chinese pan players Dexter Akoo and Richard Allowings, popularly known as "Chinee" Dexter and Chinee Dickie.

The middle class youth many with some knowledge of formal music, flocked to the pan yards, and one could see young red skin players like Ray Holman, Monty Williams and Roy Rollock rubbing shoulders with "Cobo" Jack and Errol Zephyrine.

Ray Holman, now a lecturer at Fatima College was already arranging for the famous Invaders, while a 14 year old student of Queen's Royal College in the late 50s.

Young Anise Hadeed would follow suit in the 70s and walk the block from his Rosalino Street home to Invaders yard as a daily routine.

St James was quickly established as a working class residential area with a high concentration of East Indians. A cross fertilisation of cultures took place, and soon many young Panmen of African descent were beating the Hosay drums, while the young Indian Drummers were making their way to the pan yards.

The same situation occurred in San Juan, another urban district with a high proportion of Indians.

A Woman Player

Women have always been associated with the steelband movement, starting with the Jamette in the yard. Undoubtedly some of them must have taken a "chook" at playing the instrument. The earliest record of a woman player was that of one Norma who played in a Laventille band.

The Pan yard has always had a strong calling for men, whether they frequented the areas as a player, supporter or listener. Women, however have always been discouraged from this area as no man wanted his daughter, wife or sister in such a masculine and raw environment.

In the early 50s a group of young middle class girls from Newtown shocked society by starting an all girl steelband called "Girl Pat." They attended prestigious Secondary Schools such as Bishop Anstey High and were all proficient at the keyboards.

Following is the continuation of the contribution by Pan Trinbago's Education Officer, Selwyn Tarradath, speaking as a panelist on the topic "Race, Class and Politics in the Steelband Movement," at the seminar "Stratification Patterns in Carnival, Calypso and the Steelband."

The panel discussion was part of the symposium presented by the Institute of Social and Economic Research and the Faculty of Social Sciences, UWI, on Social Stratification in Contemporary Trinidad.

The discussion, held at the conference room of the Central Bank building in Port-of-Spain on December 6, also heard contributions from Professor Gordon Rohlehr, Dr David Trotman, Mrs Ann Lee, and Mrs Molly Ahye.

The first published part of Tarradath's discourse appeared in Friday's edition of the *Trinidad Guardian*.



VAT 19 Fonclair in action



TRINTOC Sun Valley performing earlier this year

Under the direction of Hazel Hendley they decided to extend their musical creativity to the instruments of the steelband.

Encouraged by Ellie Mannette, they formed a band, and were soon appearing at concerts and other public engagements. "Girl Pat" broke the ice as far as playing pan was concerned, but there was no flood of women into the pan yards.

The stigma remained, and up until the late 60 it was only the very adventurous, or very determined woman who could be found taking her place besides the men in the band.

Joycelyn Pierre, a graduate of "Girl Pat," became one of the first women to arrange for a steelband, taking Invaders to a very close second to Dixieland in the 1959-60 Music Festival. Her arrangement of "In a Monastery Garden" is regarded as a steelband classic.

Today there are many women Conductors and Arrangers of great repute such as Pat Bishop; Gillian Nathaniel-Balintalo; Dawn Batson and Alma Pierre who would not have ventured into a pan yard 25 years ago.

The next collective attempt by women in Pan was by an all woman Steelband, "Datsun Trendsetters", which was made up of employees of a business corporation. Today there are many such bands comprising women formed by personnel of Commercial banks; Insurance companies and other business firms.

Some of these use the instruments and facilities of established steelbands. The pan in schools movement started in the 70s together with a Schools Panorama Competition. The young liberated school girls grasped this opportunity to become involved in pan and many stayed with it after school.

Middle Class Families

Students at the University of the West Indies Campus at St Augustine opened a steelband, and for many young middle class academics it was a chance to realise their fantasies.

This was 1972, and many had been exposed to the radical ideology of the 1970 revolution. Some were able to associate and interact with the proletariat in a more positive manner than they could within the confines of St Mary's College or St. Joseph's Convent. Many had qualifications in Music which they attempted to transfer to the steelband.

Many of the women in the Steelband Movement today are from middle class families and are gainfully employed. They have come through the Pan In Schools programme initiated by Pan Trinbago.

St Francois Girls College has been a pioneer in this exercise.

Maureen Clement and Charlene Carnavon are two young ladies who have made it to the Finals of the Solo Competitions at the Music Festivals. Women have taken their rightful place in the steelband movement along side the men as in all other areas of Music. There is one field left to be conquered though, we await a female Pan Tuner.

The Politician has always realised the potential of the Steelband movement for its mass appeal. Albert Gomes was the first politician to relate to the movement. His influence and intervention went a long way towards easing the hostility of the authorities and public towards the steelbandsman. He was also instrumental in ending the steelband wars and getting the movement organised. Gomes was a white politician of Portuguese extract.

CONTINUED TOMORROW