

commentary

From ping pong starboys to tenor pan soloists

PING PONG soloists were the starboys of the early steelband movement; melody did not play an important role in steelband music until 1947. The early four-note ping pongs and the larger tenor "kittles" played percussive riffs over which the revellers chanted a song to accompany the band.

Ever so often the band would take a rest to allow a ping pong soloist to ramajay on the few notes at his disposal.

This is what happened in 1946 with the maestro, Winston "Spree" Simon, who put on an impromptu concert for the Governor, Sir John Shaw, during the J'Ouvert celebrations that year. This was the first official Carnival celebration since 1941 when Carnival was banned for the duration of World War II. Spree serenaded the Governor as his band, Destination Tokyo, was pass-



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ing the judging point where the officials' box was located.

He played snatches of tunes such as "Ave Maria", "I Am A Warrior" and "Lai Fung Lee", and ended with the National Anthem of the British Empire, "God Save The King". Spree

Simon can be regarded as the first recognised ping pong soloist, but there were many other virtuoso ping pong men around such as Zigilee, Ellie Mannette, Neville Jules, Fish Eye, Pops, Battersby and Andrew "Pan" De Labastide, who is rumoured to have sold Spree his first ping pong.

When the newly formed Steelband Association decided to send a steelband to the Festival of Britain in 1950, it selected the best individual player from each of the top steelbands in the land. These were the leading ping pong men of the time, but the ping pong had now given way to the tenor pan which was tuned from a larger more durable drum and contained many more

notes.

The band master of the Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra (TASPO), Lt Rupert Griffith, insisted that all the pans be tuned chromatically, and so the tenor pan was on its way to becoming a recognised musical instrument.

The TASPO members would lead the way in the art of solo playing for the next few years. Dudley Smith of Belmont Rising Sun would win the first ping pong soloist title at the Music Festivals of 1952 and 1954, but he would have strong competition from his TASPO colleagues.

Theo Stephens of Southern All Stars, Belgrave Bonaparte of Southern Symphony, Casablanca's Ormond

"Patsy" Haynes, City Syncopators' Kelvin Hart and Anthony Williams of North Stars were some of the TASPO men who challenged Dudley Smith for supremacy; along with Neville Jules, whose band did not belong to the association when the team for England was being picked.

Other crackshots of that era included Carl Greenidge, uncle of Robbie, Eamon Thorpe of Crossfire, Ethelbert Brown of Casablanca and Everest Bachquain of Katzenjammers.

Nerlin Taitt of Free French won the festival in 1956, preventing Dudley Smith from taking home the trophy for keeps. Taitt later settled in Jamaica where he played the electric guitar

and is credited by many as the man who started reggae music. The soloist was the supreme musician in the band, the man with a musical gift who was able to express it on the still primitive instruments.

Sheer and Skill

These players usually "carried" the band at the festivals with their sheer skill and artistry, executing the most difficult passages.

The great Pan Am North Stars had an embarrassment of riches in the persons of Herman "Rock" Johnson, Leslie Jordan and the Moore brothers. But it was Invaders of Woodbrook and Southern Symphony of La Brea that really

boasted the top guns in that era of the fifties and early sixties. Besides the Bonaparte Brothers, who formed their own music band with conventional instruments later on, the band had the young prodigy, Earl Rodney, and two men who were to become master pan tuners, Alan Gervais and Lincoln Noel, in their midsts.

It was Invaders that really set the tone for pan ramajay. Ellie Mannette was one of the best of the early lot but soon became all-consumed with tuning rather than playing.

David Edwards, a good player in those days, rates Kelvin Dove as the best panman he has ever heard and Invaders stalwarts still speak about Chic Mc Groo and

"Coye" with reverence. However, it was Emmanuel "Cobo Jack" Riley who set the pattern of jazz soloing that is being practised by most of our top pannists today.

His direct influence on two of his proteges, Robert Greenidge and Andy Narell, is very evident, while Len "Boogsie" Sharpe is almost a carbon copy of "Jack".

Then there were the young lions of Invaders who came under the wings of Cobo Jack and Errol Zephyrine. They were led by Ray Holman, who at 14 years was already the best of the lot - Roy Rollock, Winston "Mouther Bee" Phillips, Monty and "Happy" Williams, "Mano" Flores, and others like Earl La

Pierre and Jules Cazabon, who were not originally Invaders players but were attracted by the versatility of their peers.

Space is running out and I have not even touched on the many fine players of the sixties and seventies who honed their skills on the music festivals of that time, and those of the eighties and nineties who developed in the Schools Steelband Music Festivals and went on to cop the senior titles as well.

Mention must also be made of other crackshots of the fifties, Cecil "Catthr Nose" Augustine, Othello Mollineau, Kelvin "Zuzie" St Rose, Ralph Ryce and Boogsie's uncle, "Shadow". We will continue next week.