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ABOVE: The famous iron man "Korey" from San Fernando.

RIGHT: The Iron men of the TBC East Side Steel Orchestra.



Men of steel in the Engine Room

*The Engine Room.
It could go on forever,
Give them jump and prance,
Give yourself chance in de heat.
The Engine Room,
Could never die, never,
'Cause is nine months
meh mother make me check out she heart beat.*

AMONG the few calypsonians who have paid tribute to the steel men in the Engine Room are Ras Shorty I (Iron Man Korey), Scrunter (Liv-ee-Ting), Monarch (Iron Man), Squibby (Iron Man), and most recently, David Rudder (The Engine Room).

The "iron man" is the main percussion instrumental in a steelband, especially in the execution of calypso music. Located in the centre of the band (in the Engine Room), somewhere between the mid-range instruments and the basses, these skilled musicians provide the rhythm which keeps the music synchronised.

The art of beating iron has become a highly skilled and respected one among steelband opponents. It is no easy task beating that piece of steel nightly at practice sessions, for approximately three months prior to Carnival, and almost non-stop on both days of Carnival. However, this insignificant looking bit of percussion has come to be probably the most important instrument in any steelband.

Basically, the steelband iron can be categorised into two types—the "cutter" and the "rattler." To become a master, one requires great dexterity, a keen ear, and wrist manipulations which would make a contortionist do a double take.

In the good "old time days," it was easy to discern whether a band was from the West, or from the city, simply by listening to the sound emanating out of the Engine Room. It is argued by pan aficionados that West bands possessed the best cutter-men in the iron business.

Any veteran pannist from down the Western Main Road will testify that men like Francis "Pezcock" Wickham, "Mailan" Ellie Mannette, Albert "Hilo" James, Michael Phillip, former Invaders/Starlift member and Cassanova percussionist, "Dicks" (Dicks) Ellis, and "Knicker Best" were the best in the land. Equally knowledgeable pannists from the city's east side would contend that Neville "Niles", "Big Jeff", "Becket", "Granville" and "Willie" were the greatest. Of course, graduates of the young school

will harp that "Korey," from the southland, and Bradshaw of Desperadoes are better.

There is even a steelband tale about Francis Wickham who, armed with his iron alone, could entice a crowd of people to follow him, like the fabled Pied Piper of Hamelin, as he executed a variety of mindboggling rhythms on the "instrument." Another well-loved Woodbrook story is that of Ellie Mannette and his faithful "bell." The story goes that Ellie would leave invaders panyard with that iron in the morning and, throughout the day, until the band returned home at night, nobody but nobody could get that piece of iron away from him.

Yet another tale is that of calypsonian Popo, being given a choice by a limb of the law; that he would be given a chance if he gave up his iron, and Popo replying: "Officer, wherever my iron going, I going, so yuh might as well arrest me."

Popo's brother, the late "Paulie"—some old pannists swear there has never been a better Engine Room practitioner than he—was known to have played with almost every steelband which passed through the city including bands from the east. Coming from Edward Street, he originally played for Commandos, in the '60s.

During the late '50s, into the early '60s, Crossroads and Crossfire were widely regarded as the west bands with the "sweetest iron sections." This reputation was later passed down to Invaders. When the legendary Emmanuel "Cobo Jack" Riley of Invaders, now based in the United States, decided to moonlight with Desperadoes, though not an iron-man, he took with him the westernised style of iron-beating.

This change in Despers' rhythm was made evident when, in 1964, playing Beverly Griffith's arrangement of *Mama Dis is Mas*, they placed second to North Stars which played the same Kitchener calypso. Third place went to another west band, Starlift, playing *Bull Pistle Gang*.

The now defunct Guinness Cavaliers took storm in 1965 with a scintillating version of *Mas*. Arranged by Bobby Mohammed, this piece was to become the turning point in steelband iron, as it was known then.

What arranger Bobby Mohammed did then was subsequently defined as "bram" and "boom bam," as documented in calypso by the late Maestro.

In 1966, the title came back to the north with Desperadoes winning with Sparrow's *Obeah Wedding*, also familiarly known as *Melda*. But, Cavaliers would return the next year with its unique brand of compelling music to snatch back the title, with Kitchener's '67.

At this point in time, pannists began scratching their heads, trying to decide whether the key to winning the Panorama title lay with rhythm, percussion and smashing crescendos, or with well-balanced, synchronised musical arrangements.

Harmonites provided the answer, and proved the latter to be true the following year. To highlight the point, Harmonites went on to win the national title on four occasions in seven years, playing some stimulating music arranged by Earl Rodney. This was further strengthened by the successes of Ray Holman with Starlift, and Clive Bradley with Desperadoes.

Instead of the iron and percussion playing a dominating role in the music, arrangers began making the Engine Room an integral part of the selection, in synoposition with the other instruments.

The selection of the iron requires an expert Engine Room technician. While the hub caps from some vehicles are made of steel, others are now made from a synthetic alloy. The expert would tell you that the latter is a definite no, no in the selection process.

Once the hub cap is chosen, varying sizes and mass, along with tempering in heat, and tuning, decide into which category it falls in the Engine Room range of instruments. There's the type which emits a bell tone, which causes some iron men to refer to their instrument as "the bell."

At one time, the iron was played held either aloft or, cradled between forearm and upper arm. With the introduction of the "double iron" it became necessary to introduce the "iron rack." With the growing sophistication of the steel orchestra, Engine Room personnel have had to move with the times. They now use sponges as dampers for sound, controlling the ringing pitch. Special travelling cases for this precious piece of percussion have now become standard equipment for the professional men of steel.

From crude hub caps, cradled between forearm and upper arm, to selected steel placed on specially designed and custom built stands, the Engine Room has certainly come a long way.