

A HISTORY OF THE TRINIDAD ALL STARS STEEL ORCHESTRA

The steelband that grew from 'Hell Yard'

By PRINCE BATSON

ATTEMPTING a history of Trinidad All Stars is a monumental task, not only because of the vastness of the band's exploits, but also because these exploits go back to the beginnings of the steelband movement in this country and, in fact, the world.

The band really began in 1946, that is to say that the orderly, organised aspects were about the time enunciated. But in reality the whole thing started nine or ten years before, around 1937, in a place known as "Hell Yard." A lot of historic things happened there, some not so good.

"Hell Yard" in effect was a large, barrack yard in an area of land lodged at about the centre of the block in Charlotte Street, between Park and Duke Streets.

It was a hellish place, come to think of it. But it was a place where a lot of creative things took place as well. The frustration was about, "How can we gain an outlet for our creative instincts?" And this led to some aggressive approaches to life in general.

The main, and conventional, entrance to Hell Yard was on Charlotte Street. But there were other unconventional entrances, two on Duke Street and one via the Dry River, which runs along Piccadilly Street. Somewhere midway between the two bridges on Park and Duke Streets were steps leading down to the river bed.

HELL YARD

One wondered the reason why these steps should have been there in the first place, but there they were, nonetheless. And apart from being used as a quick receptacle for the real ease of bladder content it was a short cut to Hell Yard across the way. One only had to skip down the steps, jog across the 40 feet or so of river bed and reach up on the other side, which was six or so feet high.

No one ventured into Hell Yard that way if he was not a known visitor. In Hell Yard, like I said, a lot took place. Gambling for one, apart from sport, liming and pan beating. Famous characters were: Sarge (captain), Tecky, Ashoo, Tackray, Eric Stowe, Desmond, Mackoff, Demsie, Mud-dock, Bassie, Orderly, Jitterbug, Brown Boy and a host of others. Hell Yard was made up of members from John John, Prince Street, Gonzales, Belmont.

The elderly fellows called themselves First Eleven and the younger set Second Eleven, which later changed to Second Fiddle.

In 1941, carnival on the road was stopped, but this did not stop the pan beating. It was customary to see everyday the fellows in the river beating pan.

Famous players from Second Eleven were Fish Eye, Sonny Jones, Big Head (Hamil), Jules, Spree, Andrew Penn, Granville, Calypsonian Dougla, Shur-land.

Classical Jewels at the Hall Nov. 7

ON Thursday, November 7 at 8.30 p.m. at Queen's Hall, Catelli Trinidad All Stars will begin a series of four concerts of the Classical Jewels series. This year's Classical Jewels V coincides with the band's 50th anniversary as an organisation, which started even before the accepted birth of the steelband, whose beginnings historians place approximately at the turn of the 40s.

In the article on this page, former captain of Trinidad All Stars, Prince Batson, writes on the history of this particular band describing what input All Stars made in the evolution of pan, and showing that no one individual can claim to have invented pan. Clearly this new musical form was being

worked on by more than one individual at that time, all of whom appeared to be located somewhere in the East Dry River (Laventille) area.

Classical Jewels was first performed in 1974, then in 1979, 1981, 1983 and now in 1985. The idea was not to prove that steelband could perform the classics, for this was clear long before that. The plan here was to push the steelbandman to learn and cope with more difficult music on a regular basis so that he develops as a musician. The results of virtually every Music Festival, Panorama and other steelband contests since seem to have justified this policy.

Nor is this country's other indigenous art form — calypso — left out

of this formula. In each of the Classical Jewels concerts the band selects one "classical" calypso to be included on the programme. Among those the band has performed in the past are "Progress", "Pan Talent," and what many refer to as the country's alternate national anthem, "Portrait of Trinidad."

On each occasion also, the band tackles one major piece of music. In 1981 it did "Carnival Romain" by Berlioz, in 1983 it performed the "Piano Concerto No. 1 in B Minor Op 23" by Tchaikovsky, accompanied by Lindy-Ann Bodden-Rich, and this year it is back with Tchaikovsky and his "Symphony No. 4 in F Minor Op. 36 — Last Movement."

These members were from the Jackson Place, Jackson Hill area. They were called Jacksonville and among them were members who had experience in club life and parliamentary procedure. In these men Jules placed his confidence and the future of the band.

Nineteen sixty-eight came and the band was successful on the road, contrary to what some people thought would have been the case.

On Panorama Friday night, we heard that Catelli-Primo Ltd, wanted to sponsor the band. Jules accepted sponsorship, so it is that the name Catelli All Stars came in to being. After Carnival that same year, we were able to acquire the services of a genius in music in Fitzgerald Jemmott.

STEELBAND

The members called him "Uncle Jem." He is more like a father to them than an uncle for he is able to maintain the discipline that is synonymous with All Stars. He has shown his musical talent to the public by taking a bunch of inexperienced pan men and winning the 1968 Music Festival.

The discipline and togetherness is seen whenever the band is on stage. All Stars continued going places with the advent of "Uncle Jem." In 1969 the band placed second in the "Bomb" competition. Then in November we played to a standing ovation at the J.C.I. World Congress Awards Ceremony.

Come 1970 the band won the "Bomb" competition and made a tour to New York, performing at the Madison Square Garden to a

crowd of over 40,000 people. The band returned minus many of its members who either remained in the U.S. and lost more soon after

when they returned to America and left us with a handful of men.

New men were soon recruited and in 1971, the band was out in full

force again, winning once more the "Bomb" Competition. Later that year, Jules handed over the captaincy to Hamilton (Webb) Alexander and left to reside in the U.S.

Hamilton Alexander is an intelligent and vibrant young man and a good leader. Part of his success is due to the fact that he always listens to anyone who has a point of view, before coming to a decision. He takes advice and as a youth, is able to move with the times. Although he is of the same age group as the other members, he demands respect as a captain.

With him is a vibrant, young committee working for the betterment of the band.

In 1972 the band was fortunate to have the services of one of its old members, Rudolph Wells, who resides in

the Virgin Islands. He arranged the Panorama tune with a certain measure of success with the band winning "Peoples Choice." The band also won "Pan on the Move," which replaced the "Bomb."

That same year, we entered the 10th anniversary of Independence Steelband Music Festival, and won. We were also selected to represent Trinidad at the Carifta Festival in Guyana.

PANORAMA

On Independence Day, the Prime Minister announced that Trinidad All Stars will be representing this country at the "Black Arts" Festival in Lagos, Nigeria, in November, 1975.

The following year things began happening to All Stars. Wells, using his experience from

the previous year, again arranged the panorama tune and for the first time in the history of the band we managed to win the Panorama competition.

Wells, had been under Jules for a number of years. He got most of his knowledge in arranging from Jules and has helped in arranging tunes for the band for a number of years.

In November, the band again entered the Steelband Music Festival, this time placing third.

The band made tours with Aubrey Adams' "Ambakaila" in July, 1973, January, 1974 and June, 1974 to Paris, U.S.A., Canada, Mexico and Barbados. In December 1973, the band went on a prize tour to Sarasota and Orlando,

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VICTORY

Neville Jules by this time had started introducing notes on the pans which were mere bumps.

By 1945 when we heard of Victory in Europe and Japan (V.E. and V.J. DAYS) a lot of members left and opened bands in their own areas. Some went to Belmont, others on the Hill (upper Bath Street Way), John John, etc.

When the band hit the road in 1945 it was strange, because a lot of people had never heard the new sounds which came from the pans.

For Carnival of 1946, the band's name was "Cross of Lorraine" but later that same year it changed again. There was a similarity in the emblem used (a cross) by Casablanca and so we had to change the colour of our pans.

A man from Casablanca called Rudder marvelled at the ability of the players we had and called us Stars. It is from this time that we got the name, Trinidad All Stars.

From then on Trinidad All Stars has been the "weight of town." As early as 1947 we started playing non-calypso tunes on the road. We had our own tune called "East Dry River Drive."

All Stars introduced a new dimension in the Steel band world with the transposing of the classics to calypso tempo. This was

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