

How the early steelband grew

THE STEELBAND Movement originated as a medium for the dispossessed descendants of African slaves to express themselves. This movement started in urban Port-of-Spain and its immediate environs, the suburbs of Laventille, Gonzalves, Belmont, Woodbrook, and St James.

The steelband quickly spread to San Fernando and its environs and within five years it was not uncommon to hear the crude but quaint sounds of the ping pong in most rural areas.

The immediate predecessor of the steelband was the Tamboo Bamboo band. The Tamboo Bamboo bands in and around Port-of-Spain were mainly preoccupied with Carnival and street parades during the early part of this century, while the rural Tamboo Bamboo ensembles were more concerned with traditional ceremonies such as Dame Lorriane, Bele, Wakes, Shango, and so on.

Barrack Houses

Port-of-Spain at that time was a very divided residential city with areas being set aside for residents according to their status in society. There was a distinct class system which was influenced greatly by racial considerations.

The Woodbrook Estate was converted to a housing settlement specifically geared for the needs of the bourgeois middle class.

The streets were well laid out and named after prominent members of the Siegert family. The parks, squares and playgrounds were included in the layout, but there was one snag, the barrack houses which were shelter for the many families who were employed on the estates remained in most of the streets.

This was to be a temporary arrangement until alternate accommodation could be found for the peasants to get them out of the way of their middle class neighbours. Even today remnants of these barrack yards could be found in the Woodbrook-Newtown area.

Woodbrook was bordered by two ghetto areas to the East called Corbeaux Town and Donkey City. There were also large barrack yards around Edward Street, St Vincent Street and Sackville Street.

Smaller Islands

St James was also converted from estate lands to a working class residential area populated mainly by East Indians, formerly indentured labourers who worked on the estates. The foothills of the Northern Range in areas such as Ross Lands, Fort George, Belle Vue, Dundonald Hill, Upper Bournes Road and Kandahar Street were occupied by squatters and settlers of mainly African descent, much like the Laventille area and like Laventille, were flooded by waves of settlers from the smaller islands during the early and middle part of

Following is 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.



Casablanca in action in September this year.

the century.

Belmont, situated on the Eastern edge of the Queens Park Savannah was mainly a working class residential area populated by the Petit Bourgeois mulattoes and other mixed races dominated by descendants of Africans.

The hills were occupied by squatters and settlers, mainly African in origin, in such areas as Gonzalves, St Barbs and Upper Belle Eau Road.

The Southern border of Belmont, Hermitage Road and running along Observatory Street and Charlotte Street through Piccadilly Street to the La Basse marked an area that contained the greatest concentration of people in the country.

Collectively called the East Dry River area, it was populated by people of African descent from the foothills of South East Port-of-Spain, sprawling all over the hills of Laventille and John John and continuing on the other side to Morvant.

Foreboding Terrain

Originally settled by descendants of our own African slaves, it became a haven for immigrants from Grenada, Barbados, St Vincent, and other Caribbean colonies, most of whom were Africans.

This was the cradle of the steelband movement, where it was nurtured and defended by the proletariat against the

forces of the bourgeois ruling class who wished to be rid of this intolerable nuisance once and for all.

Its narrow winding streets and mass of houses with open yards to be used as short cuts, not only allowed the early steelbands to parade at will whenever they chose to but also to openly defy the police in this foreboding terrain.

Scholarship Winner

St Clair was established as the residence of the very upper echelons of society. St Anns and Cascade were reserved for the upper classes, mainly for people of European descent. This was the scenario in and around Port-of-Spain around the time of the birth and early development of the steelband in the era 1935-1946.

The steelband, as I have stated in my opening paragraph, was started by Africans from the lowest strata of our society. People who were mainly unskilled labourers, unemployed and in many cases unemployable. This situation persisted until 1950.

Today, less than 40 years later, the steelband movement has permeated every strata of our society, and truly represents a homogeneous blend of our cosmopolitan country, more so that any other national institution.

It has become a symbol of our success

as a rainbow country and truly exemplifies the words of our National Motto "Here every creed and race find and equal place."

The President, Prime Minister, Chief Justice and Archbishop are among the self-professed patrons of the art.

The steelband movement has become both a power base and a power broker. The same people who complained to the police about the loss of their garbage bins which later became instruments, now have finely tuned chrome plated tenor pans on collapsible stands in their living rooms alongside the piano for the use of their grandchildren.

Prominent steelband personalities include East Indians, Syrians, Chinese, French-Creoles and women. Top scholars are now faced with the decision to pursue a career in music which would keep them close to the steelband or to pursue other endeavours.

One recent island wide scholarship winner, Satnarine Sharma, made the decision to pursue music instead of the academics because of his love for the dedication to the steelband.

Metal Receptacles

Such decisions would have been unthought of 25 years ago, especially for someone from an East Indian family.

The early steelbands comprised of restless youths. There was a short transition period between 1930 and 1935 when the instruments of the Tamboo Bamboo Orchestra were discarded for metal containers.

I would like to dispel the myth that the steelband was born "behind the bridge." It was a spontaneous phenomenon whose scenario was spread throughout the ghettos of urban Port-of-Spain.

Alexander's Ragtime band of Newtown is given credit for the change from Tamboo Bamboo to metal band, but who is to discredit the claim of Mussel Rat at the Gonzalves Tamboo Bamboo band.

East Dry River because of its density of population had by far the largest concentration of steelband activity, but while "Spree" Simon, "Fish Eye" Olivierie and Neville Jules were daily making new discoveries to the advancement of the instrument, so was Ellie Mannette of Oval Boys and while Hell Yard, Hill 60 and Bar 20 are established pioneer bands, so was Red Army of West Port-of-Spain.

East Dry River sustained the steelband movement during its infancy, but development and discovery were happening throughout the ghettos of Port-of-Spain and environs.

The early steelbands carried a strong macho image which only intensified their daily confrontations with the police, who persecuted them for stealing metal receptacles, such as garbage bins and drums for storing water; also and for their illegal street parades which took place at the whim and fancy of the panmen, anytime they felt like taking a jump up. **CONTINUED ON MONDAY**