



Illustration by Keithos showing Red Army and Invaders steel orchestras.

A chip down memory lane

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The Alexander Ragtime Band took its name from an American movie of the same name. Around November 1938, the movie Alexander Ragtime Band was shown at the De Luxe and Empire cinemas in

The Alexander Ragtime Band: the pioneer steelband from Newtown

Port-of-Spain.

Prior to this re-christening, the name of the band was the Navy Tamboo Bamboo Band. In the mid to the late 1930s, when the Waterfront in Port-of-

Spain was being developed, the area where the fire station now stands on Wrightson Road was a huge dumping ground, and many empty steel drums of all sizes were discarded and dumped there.

There was also a dump in the Mucurapo area (southwestern Woodbrook). The youths from Newtown and Corbeau Town (the area where Crown Plaza now stands) used to go there, and to the Harbour Scheme area, took the pans and carried them up to the Big Yard, also called the Dame Lorraine Yard, at the corner of Woodford Street and Tragarete Road. The Big Yard was also well known for its stick fights and other cultural and artistic activities during the Carnival season.

For the 1939 Carnival celebrations, there was the transition from tamboo bamboo to metal, as paint cans, biscuit drums, brake drums, and cement drums took over from the tamboo bamboo.

With the metal pans taken from the port area, the youths would gather in the Big Yard and practise to get a perfect rhythm in time for Carnival 1939.

For Carnival 1939, the Alexander Ragtime Band hit the streets for the first time with a new styling of music, led by Carlton Forde, also known as Lord Humbugger, parading in full regalia with baton, top hat, gloves and coattails.

The charismatic Leo Warner, one of the most artistic pioneers, was very good on the large biscuit drum, which gave the band its bass sound. Other good biscuit drum men were "Peche" and "Police."

Other main men in the ARB were Victor "Totee" Wilson and Frederick "Mando" Wilson, who it is said mastered the two-note paint pans and started introducing the melody, which motivated the chantuelle singers of

the band to sing with more gusto and enthusiasm.

From the Calvary Tamboo Bamboo Band of the previous years, the transition was in full effect to the metal/steel and iron band.

As the legend goes, the ARB was coming up Park Street with the people dancing and having a good time, and as they turned down into Charlotte Street, the people from Hell Yard were amazed and in awe of what they saw.

Some members of the pioneer ARB included Carlton "Humbugger" Forde, Victor "Totee" Wilson, Victor "Mando" Wilson, "Buddy" Colston, "Popoyack," Leo Warner, "Peche," "Police," and the Alphonso Brothers.

Reginald "Popo" Alphonso was also one of the ARB famous iron men. Other legendary names and characters of this era, all contributing to the preservation and progress of the steelband (both the instrument and movement) were George Goddard, Freddy Maroon, Maifan Drayton, Clari, Johnny Rab, Ronnie St Hill, Lio Terrible, the Corbeau Town Section, the Mayers Brothers, Candi Boucan Steel Man, Gumbo Lie Lie, and Gumbo Glesen.

Years later, in the period after World War II, Alexander Ragtime Band spawned the Red Army Band, located on Green Corner, and Commandoes on Edward Street.

Today, the memory of the legendary Alexander Ragtime Band continues to live in the pages of steelpan history in T&T, across the globe, and in the hearts and minds of those surviving pioneers and pan lovers of that glorious era.

Some residents of the Big Yard community were the Bishop Family, the Coombs, Miss Nora, Beryl Hughes, Hasting Huggins, Adams, Desmond Huggins and Claire.

VACANCY

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