

# When Tokyo ruled the hill

By KIM JOHNSON

ML1040

**THEY GAVE a great performance, and their elimination from the Panorama semi-finals must have deeply hurt Tokyo Steel Orchestra and indeed all the people of John John.**

Actually, neither of the two great community bands,

Desperadoes and Tokyo, was very good in the music department in the earlies. The hill boys climbed out of that by the sixties, but Tokyo is still rooting around for a Panorama or a festival first prize.

It wasn't always so. When, during the wartime Carnival prohibition, the John John band would take a chance and parade up the hill, joining up with a smaller section from St Paul's Street, keeping an eye out for the police, the Despers boys — they called themselves "Dead End Kids" in those days — looked on enviously.

Even as late as 1951, when the Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra (Taspo) was formed to play at the Festival of Britain, John John's Winston "Spree" Simon was part of that team to which no Desperado was invited.

They were better than the hill boys and they had more tradition, for the John John band reached all the way back into the bamboo days when people played Jouvert in old clothes, chanting and waving bits of bush in the air, and a few youths had introduced dustbin covers, old pans, anything they could put their hands on.

"At that time it didn't have no rubber on stick," recalls Ralph Clarke. "We used to go up in the mang and cut them little guava stick to beat with."

Those were the days when Spree Simon would be under a mango tree experimenting — like Ellie Mannette in Woodbrook and Neville Jules in Hell Yard — with the notes which could be put on a pan.

Then the war ended, first in Europe.

"They give us VE day, they say band on the road," says Clarke, recalling the ideas being tossed around for the band's new name. He suggested the film name Destination Tokyo, for that was the next target for a holiday when the band could hit the streets, and thus the John John band acquired the name it still has today.

The John John band wasn't the only John John band, though. There were other bands, small offshoots, which happily coexisted with their mother band. Down by the river behind the Besson Street police station some Tokyo youths formed River Lady, although come Carnival you'd find them beating in Tokyo. Down there a Tokyo stage side used to practise too — Tropical Harmony.

River Lady left the aquatic environment

# All one John John, all one band

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and around 1950 moved to the yard of Alan Mottley where they acquired the name Johannesburg Fascinators. They sounded all right and had at least one member, Cecil "Jinx" Gordon,

who played piano and was musically literate. And then Spree, who had moved in with a girlfriend nearby, joined them.

Spree Simon was really in Fascinators when he went to England, but most people thought it was Tokyo he represented. "We didn't mind," recalls Mottley.

"And he come up a Christmas time and make style on we," says Tokyo veteran Aldwyn

George. "Around a Carnival time we ignore him, we pass him straight. He jump in the band and start to cry and hug up people."

And Tokyo and Fascinators remained close for as long as the latter existed, the smaller band following the bigger around town every Carnival.

George also tells of yet another breakaway from Tokyo, which was prompted when the older Tokyo men were unwilling to share with the youths the money they'd received for playing at Carnival. "They say, 'Let we give them some pan and throw them out and let them make their own money,'" recalls George. "We say, 'Yes — give us the pans.' We went up Picton Hill and opened a band named Casanova. Carlton Questel was the captain."

The following Discovery holiday, however, Tokyo was refused a police permit to play on the streets because of the band's penchant for rioting. So when the young Casanovas came down the road with their permit, "The older fellas just take the pans from we and gone — we have the permit but them beating the pan," says George. "Casanovas didn't last a year. It was the first little outing we had and they take we pans, so we join back up with them."

