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Point pan not great by mistake

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IT MIGHT seem strange that our main pan-on-the-road festival should take place at Point Fortin's Borough Day celebrations, quite down in that distant outpost.

But it isn't really, not if you know the long history of pan in deep south and the seminal contribution it made to the steelband movement. This started even further south than Point during the early years of the war, around 1942, after schoolboy Franklyn Roberts visited his older brother who was apprenticed to a tailor on Charlotte Street, Port of Spain.

Lining around the town with a friend, Roberts somehow got his hands on the small one-hand ping pong from a band on Nelson Street which he eventually took home proudly to Buenos Aires, where other young boys would gather round for a knock whenever he played it.

So they formed the small Starlight steelband, and when Carnival was resumed in 1946 after the war, the band developed a reputation for Ju Ju mas.

"We had a little band in Erin with Peter Vin Courtney, but they never had mas in Erin, so we joined Starlight," recalls their lead tenor player, George St Louis. "But the major centre was Point Fortin."

In Point proper, around the end of the war, steelband started on Adventure Road a bit later than in Buenos Aires. This was partly due to the influence of Casablanca's

mailmore "Boots" Davidson, whose mother had a house in Canaan Road which led the Point youths to call their band Casablanca too—but under James "Bumpy" Neverson's captaincy the name was changed to Morning Stars.

There wasn't as much violence and antisocial stigma about steelband down south as in Port of Spain, but there was a touch of it. "And in 46 we retaliate when we give two police a good licking and then disperse," recalls Carl "Assing" Mollineaux from Morning Stars. "That happen Carnival Tuesday night and they never hold nobody, but after that they decide who they ketch well ketch."

These two bands mightn't ring any bells in the ears of northerners, but Starlight produced Leo Coker, one of today's top tuners. And as for Morning Stars, that band was responsible for Alan Gervais and Earl Rodney.

"I MET Alan in Morning Stars. We had an informal band on Guava Road, Point—just little boys mimicking the elders with milk cup," recalls Rodney. "I went to thief a pan from Morning Star and James (Neverson) catch me. He run me down and tell my mother but she tell him I was a real pan jumbie, so he invite me to join the band."

Gervais and Rodney, the two talented youths in the band, were already beginning to shine, but they needed Neverson's polishing.

"We was going to play in a competition and we wanted to practise—Alan and Earl was small and they just stand up by the dam," recalls Morning Stars' member Stephen Hagley.



SOUTHERN SYMPHONY in Italy 1960. (front row left to right): Oliver Nelson, Belgrave Bonaparte, Clifton Bonaparte, Cyril Roberts; (Back row): Lincoln Noel, Ashton John, Robln Belgrave, Phil Trim

"Bumpy, Rupert Gomes and I went there and Bumpys say, 'Boy, we have to play and all-you sitting down by the dam?', and Rupert hit two of them a lash and they came back so we could practise."

They lost the competition to the band from Buenos Aires, but Gervais and Rodney formed Tropical Harmony in 1951 and immediately their talents began to mature.

"Allie Gervais, Alan's brother, played guitar and when we were practising at their home in Egypt Village he told us we weren't forming complete chords, which should be at least three notes," recalls former government minister Vincent Lasse, who was a young member of Tropical Harmony.

"We used to attempt tunes like 'Stardust', which required serious chords, so Allie made a device to join two sticks together."

Unlike, say, Siparia, where a more Hispanic culture with less Carnival atmosphere inhibited the spread of pan, Point has always been African. Thus, in addition to Morning Stars, there were several other early steelbands in the area, most notably an unnamed band in Cassava Alley, La Brea led by "Ginger" King, another one down by Sobo Beach led by one "Marcus", and the Cocoa Boys from



Earl Rodney can also play tenor pan and bass guitar but he knows when your iron good you is king

Parilon. It was the latter whose visits to La Brea inspired a group of youngsters to start beating milk tins and anything else metal.

"Block and Belgrave Bonaparte and their cousin Avilla and I used to beat milk cup. I was about 13 and I used to have a car fender what I pound out notes on with a hammer," recalls Ashton John. Despite that humble beginning, however, the Bonaparte brothers came from a musical family: their father had a band, and the youngsters eventually formed the steelband that would change pan music, led by Belgrave Bonaparte, and

Belgrave poached the best from other bands in the area. "We was scared George (St Louis) would leave us to join them," recalls Franklyn Roberts of Starlight's leading tenor player.

St Louis didn't join Southern Symphony but Belgrave inveigled Rodney and Gervais to join them for festival competitions. Belgrave got Casablanca's virtuoso Kenny Hart to play with them while he visited Point. He got Ivan "Skull" Henry—who subsequently formed Arima Melodians—to join them while hiding in La Brea from the police. And, more permanently, he recruited a 13-year-old Lincoln Noel from Sobo Village whose precocious talent was well-known.

"I used to hear them practising and one day I get a pan from Block Bonaparte in exchange for a bird cage and going back home through the bush I start to play," recalls Noel. "I used to play by myself at the back of the house and one day they send and call me because they were hearing about me."

NOEL joined Southern Symphony, toured the world with them and eventually became one of the great tuners. It was he who modified Tony Williams' "Fourth and Fifths" design to complete what is now the standard tenor pan.

Primarily a stage side, Southern Symphony was sponsored by Esso from the early '50s, and later in the decade they migrated to Port of Spain to become the house band for the Hotel Normandie. Their circuit of oil company staff clubs was taken over by Gervais and Rodney's Tropical Harmony. And when in 1959 Southern Symphony left Trinidad, Tropical Harmony left behind the schoolboy players in Rhapsody and moved up north to shake up the steelband world.

For just as it was Belgrave Bonaparte who introduced panmen to more interesting chord changes in the '50s, so too it was Alan Gervais who showed tuners how to make a living from their craft as he moved from Casablanca to Cavaliers to Harmonites, tuning long-lasting pans with the speed of a conveyor belt, while the arrangements of his friend Earl Rodney won Harmonites three Panorama trophies.

with pans tuned by his brother Carlton "Block" Bonaparte.

"It was Belgrave who gave us the name," says John of the great band's martinet leader, arranger and tuner—a man who ranks alongside Neville Jules, Ellie Mannette and Tony Williams. "He wanted to play all them hard tune, 'Vienna Waltz' and 'Blue Danube', so he call the band the Southern Symphony."

Hard tunes required hard work, and Belgrave, who now lives in the Bahamas, was a harsh taskmaster not above giving a few cuffs to sloppy players. "You could fight me, you could jook me," John recalls him saying, "but don't f... up my music."

It also required good players, and



LEO COKER still lives in Buenos Aires, coming up north to tune for almost every major steelband in the country