

By KIM JOHNSON

TONIGHT at the Steelband Festival preliminaries, a fixed pattern will be followed. Every band's tune of choice will most likely be a faithfully rendered classic, with what Pat Bishop referred to as "a flowing melody"—that is, she explained in the last Festival brochure, "the listener had to be able to whistle a part of it easily." The piece will also be "technically challenging" or, "Sticks must be flying." And, finally, it will conclude with a "long and charismatic coda"—end with a crash and a bang.

But it wasn't always so. Not in the decade beginning in 1952 when steelbands were simply part of the Music Festival, which was adjudicated by foreign musicians. The first Music Festival was organised by the Trinidad Music Association in 1948 and although several vocal and instrumental categories were adjudicated by a Barbadian musical expert, Gerald Hudson, there was no steelband. One had been sent to him at the Queen's Park Hotel, but he hadn't been impressed.

By 1952, however, things were different. By then the watershed Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra (Taspo) had made steelbands fully chromatic, capable of playing every note from tenor to bass—alto pans and tenor booms had been invented to fill the gaps. So the next step was unavoidable—participation in the Music Festival.

A few TMA middle-class members were wary of the panmen. According to George Goddard's *Forty Years in the Steelbands*, some objected that the panmen were professionals because Red Army and Invaders had visited Guyana and Aruba respectively, and besides many bands played at functions for fees. But English-born Helen May Johnstone, the founder and main inspiration of the Music Association, appreciated grassroots culture and she overruled their objections. She even suggested a piano accompany the ping-pong soloists, but pans weren't yet tuned to concert pitch and couldn't blend properly with other instruments.

A compromise was made: the preliminaries to be handled by the Steelbands Association, which knew how to deal with the masses. Eleven ping-pong soloists played one selection of any type of music. Twenty bands played two of either a calypso, a mambo, a rumba or a classic, plus the test piece, at the Cocorite Youth Centre. Most chose a mambo and a classic.

Both solo and ensemble finalists included

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Triumph of 'The Fish Band'

dark horses. Solo finalists included three Taspo members—Dudley Smith from Rising Sun, Belgrave Bonaparte from Southern Symphony and Patsy Haynes from Casablanca. There were also Carl Greenidge from Kentuckians and the unknown Hilton Jarvis of Central Casanovas in Santa Cruz.



BELLERAND...now

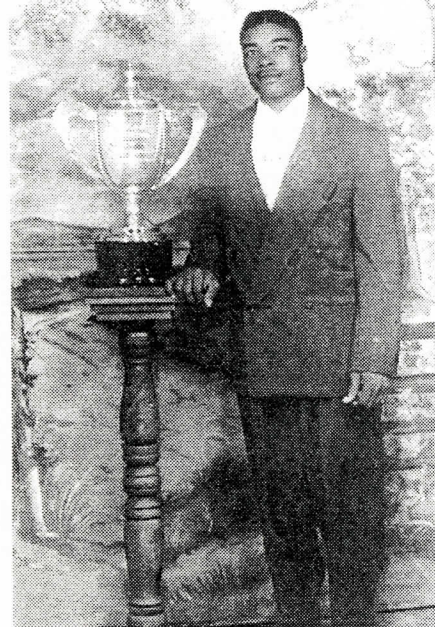
The ensemble finalists to move into the TMA leg of the competition were North Stars, Southern Symphony, Chicago, Trinidad All Stars, Free French and the surprise selection—Boys Town.

The finals were held on March 10 at the Globe Cinema, which was packed with "Stiff highbrows and noisy 'pan' enthusiasts," according to the *Trinidad Guardian*. The adjudicator was a Welshman, Dr Sydney Northcote, the professor of singing, harmony, counterpoint and competition at the Guildhall School of Music.

"Red Army was outside looking for some band," recalls Monica Johnstone, May's daughter-in-law. "There were some scary moments." But the show went ahead, each band playing a folk song test piece and a tune of choice.

The big guns blazed away with their heavy classics: Free French chose Handel's "Largo", Southern Symphony chose Strauss's "The Blue Danube" and Trinidad All Stars chose "The Dream of Olwin".

"The pans were sweet; the beaters capable; the music rich and varied; and the audience appreciative (too audibly so)," reported the *Guardian*. And when the Globe stopped ringing and the applause died down, Northcote announced the winners: ping-pong soloist Dudley Smith from Rising



BELLERAND...then

Sun—no surprise there.

The Welshman had been pleasantly surprised by the sound of pans. "When I first saw steel instruments, I wondered what kind of music they would make," he said after the competition. "I was astonished that they could make such mellow sounds." But the adjudicator was less than satisfied with the top bands.

He buffed Free French, for instance, for their variations of "Largo". "Why change the music?" he asked. And he criticised others for playing too fast. Anthony Williams, whose North Stars placed last with "Come Back To Sorento", explains that, "In those days we used to learn the melody by ear, mainly from the radio or a record, and then we would put

anything we wanted in the harmony."

The band Northcote gave the first place to was Boys Town, the "fish band" from Point Cumana.

Today, the memory still brings a tear to 67-year-old Clem Bellerand who founded the band, tuned their pans, arranged their music and led the unknown Boys Town to victory against the Goliaths of that first steelband festival, 16 days after his first son was born, a victory which precipitated a week's festivities in the tiny fishing village of Point Cumana.

Steelband had begun in Point Cumana early—since Alexander's Ragtime Band came to St Peter's Day in Carenage in 1939. But Boys Town was only launched in 1951 after Bellerand led the youngest players out of the village band, Stardust, because the older members were exploiting them. It was a year before the festival when he named the new band after the Mickey Rooney film, *The Men from Boys Town*.

As the festival drew nearer, the test piece was played regularly on the radio for contestants. But Bellerand hadn't a radio—he had to rush across with the band to his wife's cousin's house where there was a Rediffusion so they could hear the test piece. As for their tune of choice, Bellerand decided on a ballad sung in operatic style, "You are my Heart's Delight", which he liked but knew only vaguely. He sought out a villager who knew music, an old drunkard named Narsus Henry, and brought him from the rumshop to the panyard to sing it for the band.

Long after his victory, Bellerand discovered that Henry hadn't remembered the entire tune and what Boys Town had played left out part of the chorus. But perhaps Northcote didn't know the whole thing either. "And the point is what we played was well-played and it pleased Dr Northcote," Bellerand recalls proudly.

Ballantyne will be back tomorrow

IN ORDER to accommodate the two articles on this page, both of which relate to Pan is Beautiful VIII, the World Steelband Festival which begins this evening at the Jean Pierre Complex, Port of Spain, we have had to hold over the Jillian Ballantyne Column which usually appears here every Friday. Dr Ballantyne's column will appear on the Today Page tomorrow.