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Today reviews&interview



Steelband memories on May Day

TO DAY, May Day—the celebration day of the working class of the world—it's interesting to speculate that Karl Marx might have raised an eyebrow to discover that the vanguard of the steelband movement in the Forties was a band called Red Army.

Even the solicitor Lennox Pierre didn't notice, despite being the guiding force behind the 1950 steelbands association and having been a socialist since he formed the Workers' Freedom Movement in the 1940s.

Perhaps it was with Pierre's blessing many years later when the OWTU sponsored the San Fernando steelband Free French in 1971, for he was by then advisor to the union. But in 1945 when the bunch of well-dressed young men who limed around Green Corner and controlled the whores, decided to form a steelband, who was to guess what the role that would be thrust upon them?

"They was selling all kinda flags and bunting, so we say let we go in town and see what happening," recalls Mack Kinsale, one of the band's stalwarts of that day the boys went down Frederick Street to lime. "And we come across this Russian flag—we say this is a good looking flag because of the hammer and the sickle, so we say we will give the name Red Army."

That was just before VE Day in 1945 when everyone was expecting the war to end and celebrations to begin, so Kinsale and his partners went back to their yard on Woodford Street and started to paint their pans red and yellow. They stencilled the hammer and sickle on their T-shirts and that's how they hit the streets on VE Day, May 8 and on VJ Day, August 15, 1945.

Communism was just a word to them, one whose meaning they never considered, far less adhered to. "Tomahawk and grass cutter," is how Wellington "Blues" Bostock referred to the hammer and sickle when interviewed by anthropologist Steve Stempfle. They weren't even the average unemployed scrunters who formed steelbands in those days. Rather, Kinsale, his brother Teddy and their friends Wellington "Blues" Bostock, Lenny "Bad Good" Russell, captain Kenneth "Diego" Allen, second captain Leonard Morris and others, were Port of Spain's saga boys—snappy dressers living well off the women who serviced the American soldiers.

So if St James' Sun Valley won the first island wide steelband competition in 1947, elbowing Red Army into second place, the saga boys of Green Corner won the best dressed competition.

The band they could not ban

And yet despite their dandyism, when they came out in 1946 on that first Carnival after the four-year wartime ban, passing along Queen Street, the ageing Alfred Richards, grandfather of trade unionism in Trinidad took them for the real McCoy.

The ancient proletarian strugger, founder of the Trinidad Workingmen's Association in the previous century, Port of Spain mayor before the Second World War, was living out his last days quietly as a druggist on the corner of Nelson and Queen Streets, when he saw the band coming down the road in front of his establishment, Red Army emblazoned on their T-shirts, bearing a huge picture of Stalin. He ran out in front of them and told them to stop and lower the banner. And he pinned paper money—twenty dollar notes, ten dollar notes, five dollar notes—all around the portrait of the Soviet leader.

Every Carnival aliyuh must pass here," demanded Richards.

Even the younger socialist John Poon, whose father sold cigarettes on Prince Street, used to visit the boys in their panyard at Blues' barracks on the same street. But Poon hadn't a chance to introduce them to his ideology, however, before the band left those cramped quarters to settle by Kinsale on St Paul Street.

If they were innocent of ideology, they had one thing in common with their namesake: for all their sharp looks, these saga boys were fighters—they had to be to control and defend their many women—and their band became embroiled in riots with almost every other fighting band except Invaders. Kinsale blames it on other bands' enviousness, but whatever the reason Red Army couldn't go on the road without a fight breaking out.

Why, they even got into a fight when they went on tour in British Guyana in December 1946 as the first steelband ever to leave Trinidad, and ended up spending Old Year's Night in the Georgetown's Brickdam Jail.

Soon, their notoriety became itself criminal: a bottle could hardly fall in Port of Spain, far less bus a head but Red Army was blamed for it. Kinsale bitterly remembers, for instance, being arrested and taken to court for fights when he was nowhere around: "You know how much time I get lock up and eh know what going on?"

Lord Melody sang: "Who dead? Canaan, Who Canaan? Canaan Barrow/Canaan Barrow went to town and a Red Army badjohn lick him down." The band was even once prohibited from going on the road for Discovery Day and they were obliged to change their name to Lucky Jordan and reapply for police permission.

And yet Kinsale was never convicted of all the charges laid against him, for again unlike other scrunters

ing panmen and badjohns, those Red Army boys were able to retain lawyer Edgar Gaston Johnson, considered to be the best.

But mere combativeness does not a communist make, and the Red Army earned its name before they went to Guyana, towards the close of 1946 when Butler was agitating down south and dockworkers were on strike up north. The workers were threatening licks for anyone who attempted to break the strike, so the police had Black Marias moving around to collect strike breakers and ferry them to the docks. And where better to find strong out-of-work men than in the panyards? "But I had my bigger brothers working stevedore," says Kinsale. "So I tell the fellas, 'That is unjust, I have my brothers working on the wharf and to go and break strike—we eh so suffering, we could hold out on that.' So when the police come by us we tell them we eh going."

From then on at least some police began thinking that perhaps the band really was "communist", and perhaps it was this what made the white man from C. Lloyd Trestrail approach them in 1948 at the Grand Stand in the Savannah with ideas of sedition. It was perhaps their moment of apotheosis, for the band faded away in a year or two's time, having nurtured virtuoso players such as Alfred "Sack" Mayers and Rudy "Two Left" Smith and having given birth to the Merrymakers.

"This band is a nice band, I like it," the white man from Trestrail came up and said to the boys. "Don't say I farse and I don't want my name to go back, but what it is aliyuh playing for?"

It was the Sunday night before Carnival and Red Army was waiting with 11 other top steelbands to compete at the Jaycees Carnival show. They answered the man they were competing for a trophy, a challenge cup.

"A cup? And no money?" exclaimed the instigator. "Look, watch that crowd there in the Grand Stand—them people making tons of money. Get on to the same man who organises this thing and tell him aliyuh would like to get some cash."

So the leading Red Army boys called the other captains around—Ellis Manette from Invaders, Sonny Roach from Sun Valley, Neville Jules from All Stars, the big boys of the steelband world—and argued they should call for prize money and appearance fees or boycott.

They didn't pull it off, though. For many panmen of those days the pleasure of playing was its own reward, and besides, the youths were probably flattered by the enthusiasm of the upper class audience. Some just turned away from the Red Army boys, others accused them of running from competition. So they took up their pans and walked away, never gaining from the prize money which was eventually given that night.

It was the first attempt to organise panmen to fight for their collective interests and yes, Marx might have raised an eyebrow but perhaps Lenin would have smiled.

