

ALL STARS TURNS 61

Hell Yard boys look back at the Bad old days

Stories By LARA PICKFORD-GORDON

THE BAND from Hell Yard is 61 years old, entering that dignified stage associated with restraint and wisdom; a long way from the impetuosity of youth. (Perhaps that accounts for the tameness of the recent incident when bottles were thrown at the band.)

Whatever, the Neal & Massy Trinidad All Stars steel orchestra has several laurels upon which to rest its basses. Its record alone says it: winners of the Music Festival competitions in 1968, 1972, 1980, 1994; Panorama titles in 1973, 1980, 1981 and 1986.

The band's story begins long before Music Festivals and Panorama, long before corporate sponsorship and music scores.

In the beginning, there was Walter Drayton "Sagiator." Sagiator was

the leader of a J'Ouvert morning sailor band coming out of Charlotte Street called "Hell Yard" (1935). Then came Big Head Hamel, Bully, Big Jeff, Prince Batson, Big Brassy, Sarge, Fisheye and Neville Jules.

The All Stars story is closely related to the development of the steel pan in colonial times when the music produced by locals was regarded with suspicion. Official churches restricted the use of Congas to get rid of the small unofficial religious groups which used drums in their rituals. Drums were taboo since slavery, when they were used by slaves to transmit messages right under the noses of the planters. In this repressive climate, innovations flourished.

A new instrument was created to replace the drum - the Tamboo Bamboo from "tambour," French for drum. Bands were acclaimed according to their bois skills, her-

alded by the chantwells. The "big pappies" battled for mastery and broken noses, buss heads and fractured ribs were common.

The Tamboo Bamboo players accompanied the stick men and would provide support when necessary. It wasn't long before a ban was also placed on the Tamboo Bamboo band on Carnival days and the stick fighters had to confine their activities to the yards.

The Irving Berlin movie, Alexander's Rag Time Band (1937), starring Tyrone Power, Don Ameche and Ethel Mer- man, provided the name for an iron band from Woodbrook.

Mc Donald Serrant, Education and Research officer with Neal and Massy All Stars said that the contribution of Alexander's Rag Time Band was that "they would discard the bamboo and make a syncopation on the biscuit tin, dust

pan, hub cap."

The band was not a steel band as we know today, because the bands were called iron bands. The Hell Yard Second Fiddle was the second band formed.

Elmo 'Bully' Alleyne, one of its survivors, said that it was while "liming" in front of Hell Yard on Charlotte Street with Big Head Hamel, that they first became aware of "pan."

Alleyne said, "we stand up with the bamboo and a

fella come and tell us "look a band coming up Park Street with pan" - we didn't pay him no mind because in those days it was only bamboo. We didn't move, but he come back and made an alarm about the band, so we walk up to the corner of Park and Charlotte Streets, the band was just breaking the corner." What Alleyne and Hamel saw was a band of about 16 men led by Carlton Forbes - Lord Humbugger. "Humbugger was

wearing a broad hat and a long coat, in his hand a band master's stick. Mock music sheets were attached to the front of the pans. The name of the band was Alexander's Rag Time Band. Alleyne and Hamel followed the band as Alleyne said, "we were amazed listening to the pan."

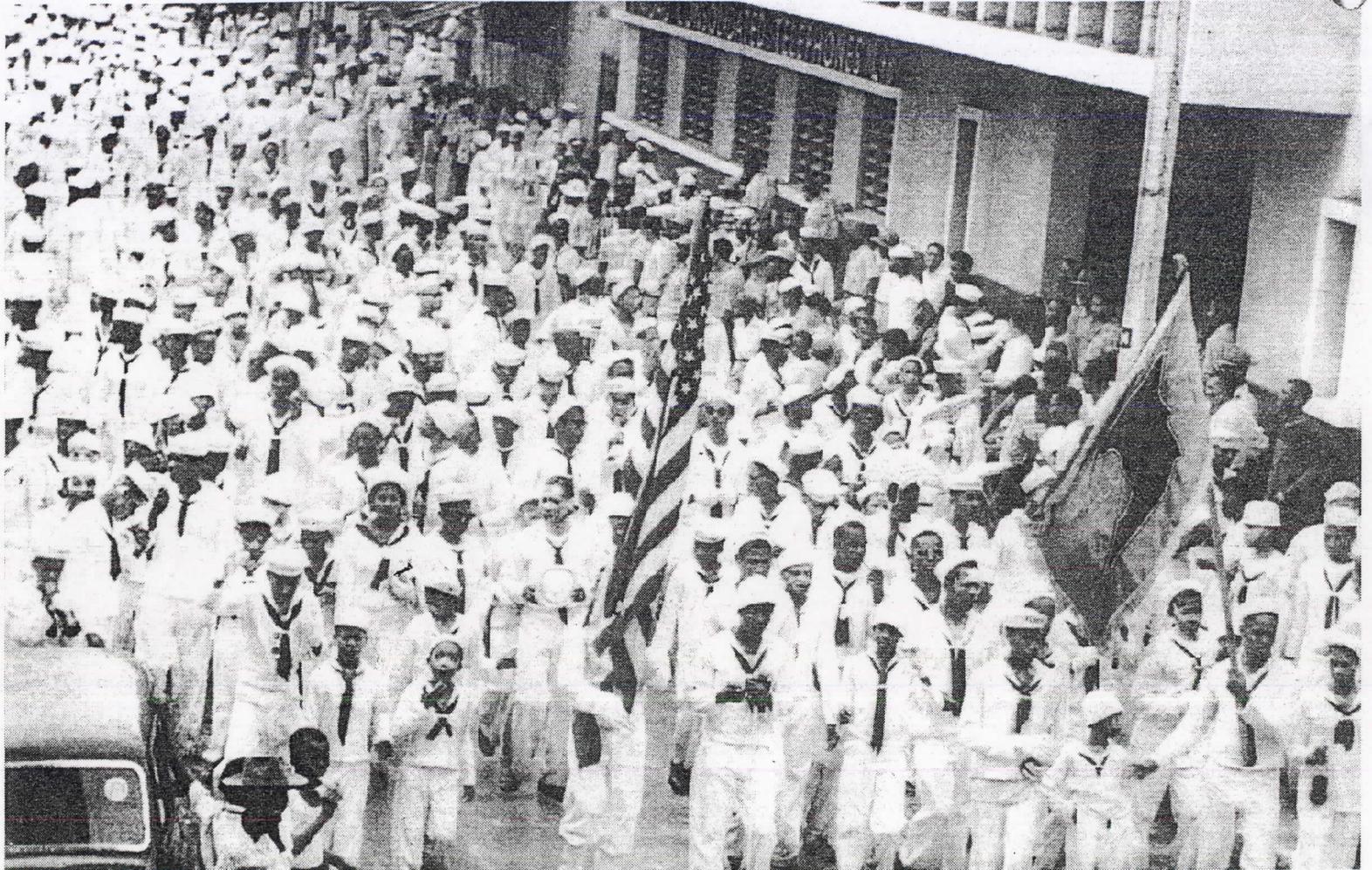
Hamel was curious to learn how pans were tuned and went to "Police," a Rag Time man who showed him how. Hamel began experi-

menting and not long after, Second Fiddle (1939) was formed by Eric Stowe who also was the band master.

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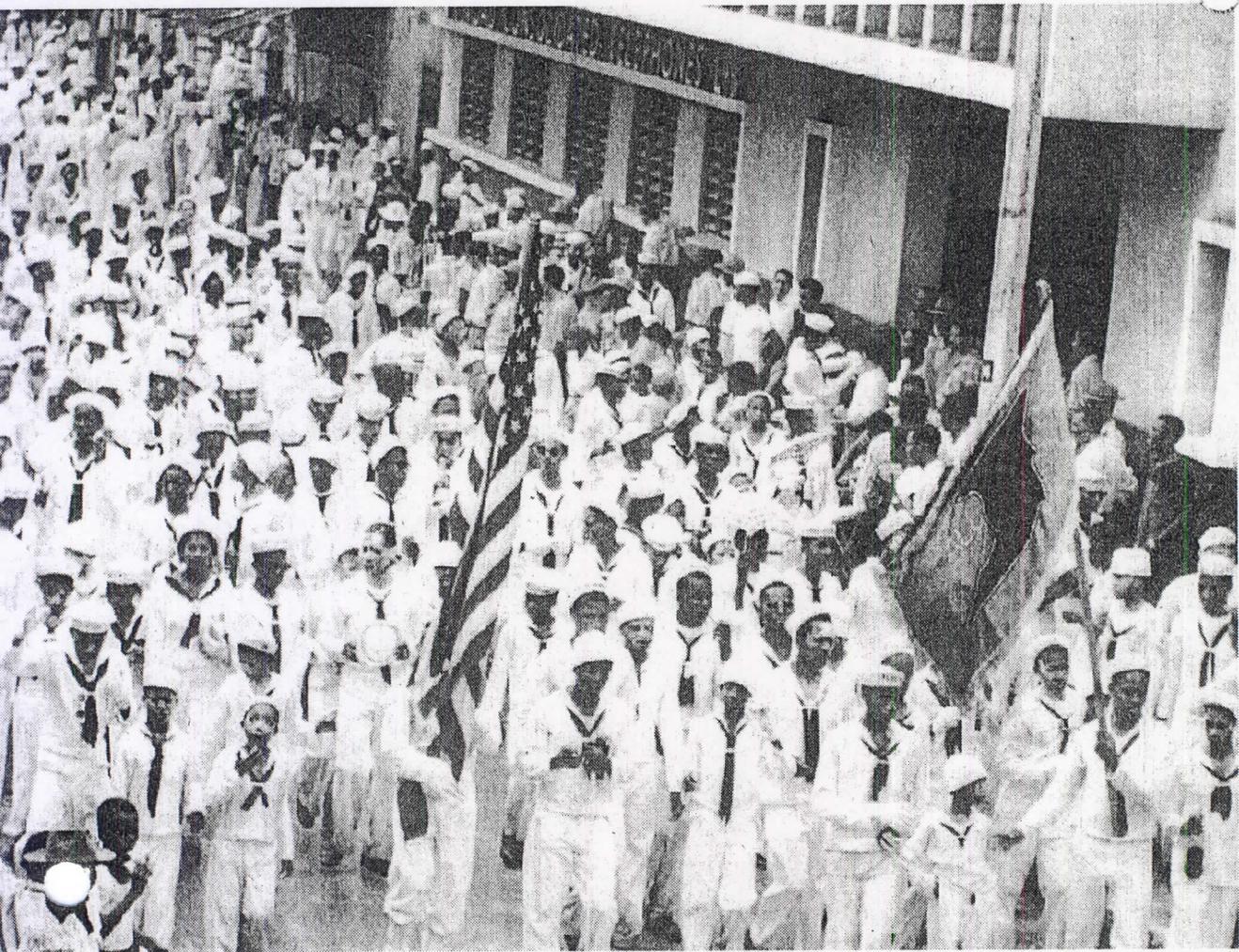
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"Fleet's In" (1958)



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TRINIDAD CARNIVAL 1962...Elmo Alleyne with baton front row.

the old stalwarts from Hell Yard" for the introduction of iron into the Tamboo Bamboo band.

"When they used to beat the bamboo, Lulie, a member of the bottle and spoon section would beat the gin bottle, but it used to be breaking, there was an Olympic taxi garage on Henry Street and we went in the back on Christmas Day to look for a square piece of iron and a long piece and we started beating iron from then," says Alleyne.

Although World War Two stopped Carnival celebrations, there was no halt in steel pan development. The Hell Yard Sec-

Playing on the streets of the city was prohibited and Alleyne said people would complain about the noise the pan players made. Big Head Hamel "Bully" Alleyne and others were taking a risk venturing out at night during the curfew. Raids by the black marias from Besson Street or headquarters were frequent. Those who were caught had to watch as the police "mash up" the pan or "beat it out of sound."

The penalty for being caught on the street was \$100 or six months in the Roya Gaol. This did not deter the panmen who would go out and "make a

There was a rumour that bands could play on the hills. On that morning the players left their base on Charlotte Street and headed up Jackson Hill. While walking up the hill the ping pong players started playing. There were other bands on the hills, but Second Fiddle's number called. The players ran down the hill clutching their pans with the police on their heels, batons in hand. No man wanted to risk throwing off his pan because if he wasn't lucky to be beaten by the police he would surely get a beating from Hamel. Hamel was strict

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Jules, the jewel

Neville Jules: innovator, bandleader, pan man

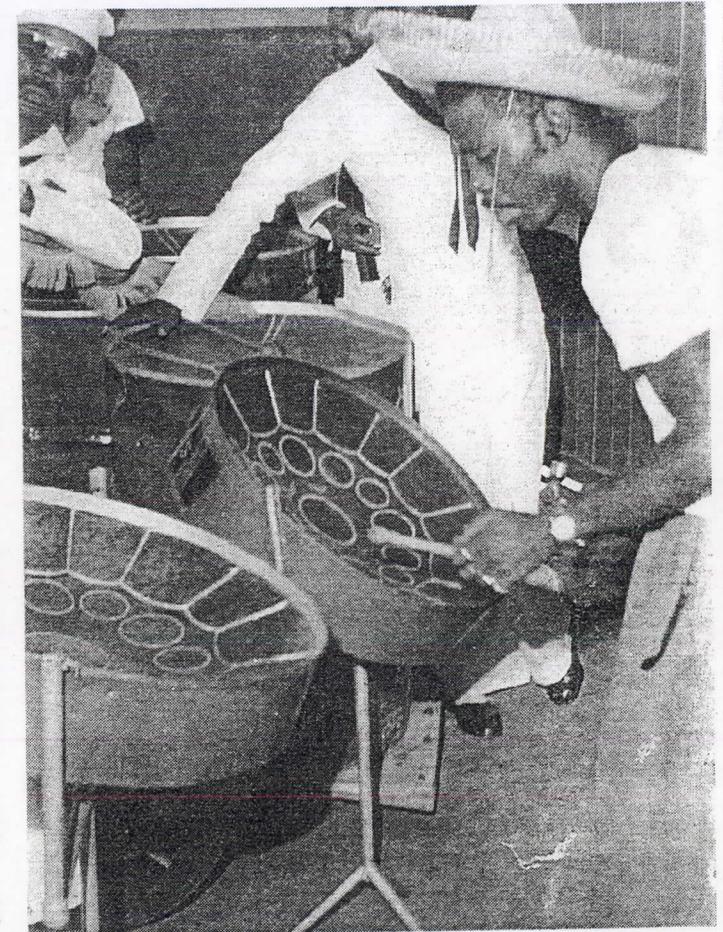
ONE man says that from early on Neville Jules "had an ear for music that was fantastic." Another says people think Butler was a leader, but "Jules was a leader."

Neville Jules earned the respect of all who came under his command. He did not invent the pan nor is he first among pan players but his contribution to steel pan ranks him with Elle Manette and Winston "Spree" Simon.

Jules had only a primary school education. Born on May 21, 1927, he attended Gloster Lodge Moravian school and Rosary Boys' school. He began going down to Hell Yard possibly at age 14. When Big Head Hamel and Fisheye were making their mark, Jules was interested in tuning and experimenting.

By April 1946, the student had surpassed the teachers, and Jules took over All Stars from Fisheye. He was 18. This was the first of his commands and he would return to this position again and again to steer the band successfully through competitions. Jules, like many other pan men of the time had no formal training in music yet he is responsible for introducing new kinds of pans thus expanding the range of sounds. All Stars achieved many firsts during Neville Jules' involvement with the band.

All Stars was the first band to introduce



JULES on ping pong.

the bass pan. They were responsible for using the present type of bass made from oil drums.

Caustic soda pans had been used to replace the biscuit drum bass but the biscuit drums were not discarded. Jules found a use for them - they were given five notes and became known as the tune Bumm.

They were the first band to use the guitar

pans which were developed from the cuatro pans. Guitar pans are known today as the quadrasonic pans.

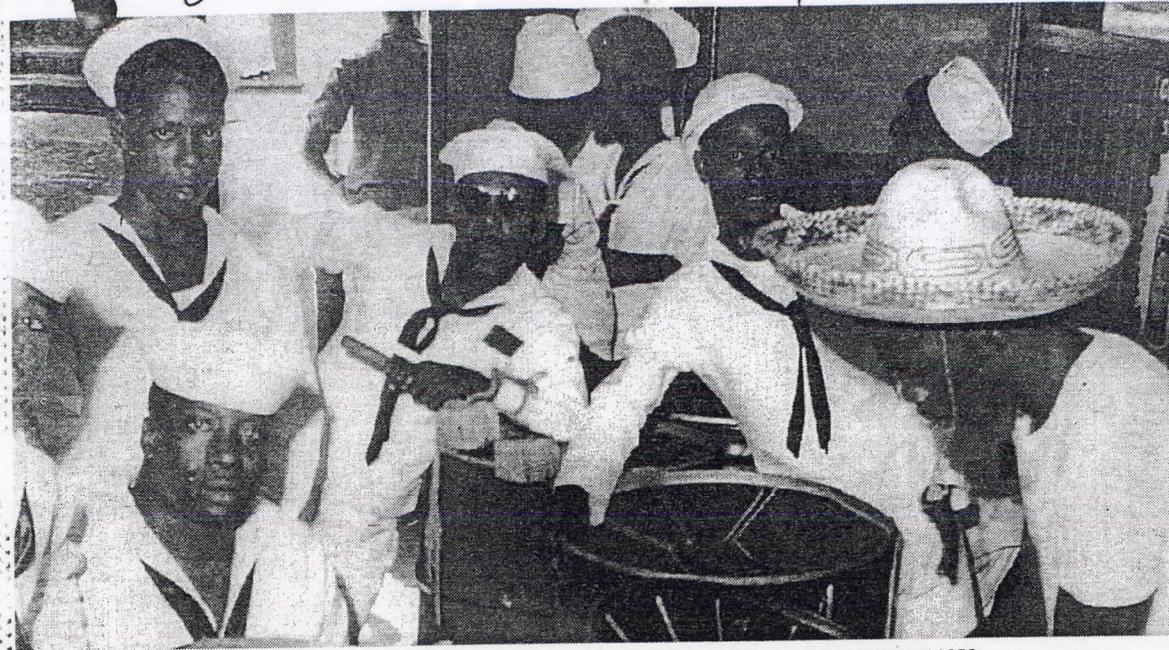
The band introduced the grundig which has since become the cello pan.

All Stars was the first band to use alto pans in the Music Festival of 1952. There were pans that never got popular like the trombone pan because Jules couldn't get play-

ers for them.

And there was the Bomb, a product of the time spent in the Garret.

One of Jules' contemporaries said he was not the kind of man to seek acclaim. He enjoyed arranging the music for the band and was always soliciting new tunes whether classical or calypsos of the time. His business wasn't boasting, but music.



NEVILLE JULES...touching up a pan for Fleets before the band goes back on the streets Carnival 1958.

The Bomb in the Garret

LOOKING back at the early days of All Stars, one cannot miss the period, 1953-1968, and the room above the Maple Leaf Club, called The Garret.

In the Garret the band practised under the strict instructions of Neville Jules. The Garret has also been referred to as the place Neville Jules did most of his improvements on the pan. The band used to practise at the Royal Club on Charlotte Street but outgrew it and Sylvester Taylor rented the Maple Leaf Club.

Players came from a variety of jobs such as customs officers, teachers, wharf workers even the unemployed, the bad johns and saga boys. Roy Gibbs, who joined when he was 18, said, "Everybody would lime together, everybody had

respect for the elders... it was quite a lot of discipline. When it was practice time and they rap on the pan, no coasting, everybody had to stop."

Rehearsals in the Garret sometimes were marathon sessions especially at competition time. Elmo "Bully" Alleyne said, "you had to carry your sandwich and your Solo in the evening, one time, because you can't go home. When you in that Garret you not leaving."

The devotion to getting a tune right was illustrated by the wharf men who would not take overtime because they had to learn the Bomb tunes. They put in their overtime in the Garret. Those who knew they would be late would have their names taken because a man couldn't sneak into rehearsal eas-

'You had to carry your sandwich and your Solo in the evening, one time, because you can't go home. When you in that Garret you not leaving'

ily because Plowden would be sitting at the bottom of the stairs with his book waiting to fine you 50 cents.

"The closer the time get (to competitions) when Jules figure fellas don't know the tune correctly with all the arrangement; you can't go home because he don't want no blundering on the road, no mistakes, the music must not spoil at all."

Practice was only interrupted by a break, says Roy Gibbs. "Sometimes we burning pan and roasting breadfruit, that was lunch, then you go back in the Garret and practise."

Mc Donald Serrant said the Bomb tune came out of the Garret. What is a Bomb? "A classical piece played in kaiso tempo." Jules, he said, would take music

by Bach and Beethoven and play them in a kaiso vein. Secrecy surrounded the Bomb. Men would be playing the pans with their fingers (anyone who played with a stick could be fined). Each section of players knew his own part but not even the entire band knew the Bomb. The Bomb was a sweet surprise to be dropped on the competition and audience to blow them away. The secrecy of the All Stars Bomb tune was preserved by scouts down in the club who would shout "too loud!" if the sounds upstairs got a little too loud.

On J'ouvert morning Jules would take his position at the front of the band and call "number one" and the fragments would come together in melodious music.