

The Journey of Pan

FROM FOLKLORE
TO PHILOSOPHY

By LAURIE ANDALL

IN THE beginning before the Great War the Tamboo Bamboo carried the tempo of the people's street carnival but its staccato rhythms anchored the arms and limited the feet to a festival march and revelers, wanting to free the arms from the rigid vertical motion and to make the feet dance and swagger, began to experiment with the ringing resonance of steel. And so bands like Oval Boys replaced bands like Alexander Rag Time and if your iron was good then you became King of the Road.

From the calypsonians, the griots and Kim Johnson's seminal publication, *The Illustrated Story of Pan*, we learn that Pan was an integrated invention as the sound of the iron triggered two decades of creativity with our pan pioneers pounding day and night, looking for lyric and the nascent keys of a familiar melody. Most of these early stories have crossed into the realm of legend and folklore as memories fade and the bravado of the old badjohn often colour fact with fiction.

When Spree Simon ventured on the road on VE Day and claimed fame as the first pannist to play a recognizable melody on the streets of Port of Spain, some old-timers say his pan had just four notes and he was still playing with one hand. Ellie Mannette, the man credited with reshaping the pan from convex to concave and tying the sticks with rubber - a story challenged by others - nevertheless made a sterling contribution to the pan's evolution. In the film 'Pan Pioneers' by Yao Ramesar we hear Neville Jules laying claim to the modern bass and graciously sharing the guitar and cuadro with Boots Davidson. The most important invention, without the controversy of contradiction, was Anthony Williams' spider web pan. This invention became the brand of the modern tenor as we know it today. Bertie Marshall gave us the double seconds and Rudolph Charles introduced the twelve bass to the family of the modern steel orchestra.

The story of the orphan with the tuned paint pan who came across to practise with the boys in Tantie Willie's yard in Gonzales, as told by the Orisha priest, adds mystery to the story, more so since no one knew the boy's name and his magic drum became a trophy of conflict on the hill after the boy disappeared into folklore.

The catalyst of the early movement towards our national instrument, however, arrived when a team of our foremost pannists was chosen to visit England to showcase the steelband. T.A.S.P.O heralded the pan as a social movement since the idea of the tour awoke a crescendo of pride in Port of Spain with bespoken tailor Fitz Blackman outfitting the celebrants with suits, Bermudez Biscuits donating drums and citizens like Doreen Hamilton and Beryl McBurnie making their contributions to the efforts to finance the first national ambassadors of Pan.

Red Army had already visited Guyana in 1946 and Belmont's Rising Sun was the second band to go abroad but T.A.S.P.O under the leadership of the Bajan Captain Griffith, a policeman, who demanded strict standards both in music and conduct, was blessed by the colonial state and accepted by its citizens as their official representatives.

The members of that historical tour included Spree Simon, Boots Davidson, Ellie Mannette, Orman Haynes, Sonny Roach, Sterling Betancourt,



Anthony Williams, Theo Stephens, Andrew De La Bastide, Belgrave Bonaparte, Dudley Smith and Granville Sealy who refused to travel because as a family man he requested money to maintain his home while he was away and was refused.

From Nestor Sullivan's presentation at Scherzando's public forum on Monday November 28th 2011, celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of these pioneers of pan, we learnt that they travelled on the M. S Mateo and that Sonny Roach fell ill in Martinique before the Atlantic crossing and returned home. Nestor, who travelled to the U.K in July, along with Pan Trinidad's President Keith Diaz, to celebrate the T&T High Commission's commemoration of that occasion, informed the gathering which included panelist Clary Benn, Gregory McGuire and moderator, Rawle Gibbons, that T.A.S.P.O kept every musical appointment, did a few performances in France and did our country proud.

Among that first group of pioneers, everyone returned home to further the development of the instrument and their bands, all except the youngest Sterling Betancourt who was advised by his brother Hadyen to make himself a man in England. Boots Davidson returned to Britain a few years later and Zigilee followed him to spread the gospel of Pan.

Today only Sterling, Ellie Mannette and Anthony Williams are still alive and as a nation we would be amiss, as was unanimously agreed at Scherzando's Forum, if we fail to honour our patriots with The Order of Trinidad and Tobago at our fiftieth anniversary celebrations of nationhood in 2012. If the truth be told, these men began an odyssey sixty years ago across the frontiers of the world that is still in progress to this day. Captain Griffith's musical brigade symbolized not just Caribbean unity but an era that gave this twin-island state a sense of purpose and identity just when a famous native scribe, Trinity Cross if you please, was telling a British audience that we had created nothing in these West Indies. As a panman in Rawle Gibbon's Ogun'Iyan says

"While they were building bombs in Europe we were creating the Pan."

After the silence of the Great War when the men of rhythm were under serious curfew, many bands came out on VE Day in a spontaneous release of suppressed emotions. Assuming the names of their movie heroes, they gave their bands names like Red Army, Five Graves to Cairo, Casablanca, Invaders, Rising Sun and Destination Tokyo. Few of these bands stood the test of time with many morphing into others as Red Army begat Sun Valley which begat North Stars and Merry Makers begat Dixieland. Oval Boys begat Invaders which begat Starlift which begat Phase 2 and Modernaires which begat Play Boys.

In the East where pannists had borne a grudge since T.A.S.P.O days because Tacarigua's Boom Town was never really given credit as the first band to introduce the fifty-five gallon oil drum and where not one of Barataria Corriegedores members had been selected on that inaugural tour, Corriegedors begat Ebonites which begat Harmonites while San Juan All Stars begat East Side Symphony and Finland, which begat Pamberi.

In Curepe Rochdale begat Rebels which begat Golden Dukes which begat Merry Boys which begat Scherzando which begat Sforzata which begat Polyphonics.

Really it was our own biblical symphony playing out before those with eyes to see and ears to hear. The drum, travelling in the hearts and minds of our ancestors from the shores of no return on Africa's west coast across the Middle Passage to these strange lands, had come full circle, finding incarnation in the steelpan. It was an epic journey for both man and drum/pan, our own Miracle, the rejected receptacles of the black gold which flowed from the earth being transformed, over the course of two decades, into the chromed harps which flowed from the spirits of a lost people seeking identity. Certainly when the new peoples of our New World decide to forgive History for imposing upon us the yoke of slavery, indentureship, famine and poverty which

drove its development, and compile a Holy Book of our own myriad tales of modern miracles, The Book Pan, chapter and verse should find a place of pride.

Indeed Pan became a religion for some while others continued to hear and see just the noise and the riots of that era between Invaders and Casablanca, Desperadoes and Marabuntas, San Juan All Stars and Renegades and the trail of jail, hospital and mortuary that time left in its wake.

Then the genius of Anthony Williams shone through and Pan Am North Stars won the first Panorama and the music was so sweet that die-hard Panaderos swore on their mothers' graves that pan was truly from heaven. Pan Am North Stars went on to woo international audiences on the Ed Sullivan Show and Pan was making its own way as even the hallowed portals of the church welcomed the new instrument.

But old prejudices die hard and when Sparrow sang 'If yuh sister talk to a steelband man de family want to break she hand', the calypsonian indeed knew the society about which he sang. Up to this day in the very land of its birth Pan continue to be a Carnival trophy.

Dr. Eric Williams, the historian and philosopher, quickly embraced it, although for his own listening pleasure he preferred Beethoven and Bach. Yet to this day he remains the only Prime Minister to embark on a 'Meet the Steelbands' tour. Desperadoes was his band and Rudolph Charles was his main man but he had the wisdom to come down to earth and walk with panmen. In recent times prime ministers have visited elite bands and policies have reflected this penchant to use steelband for public relations gimmickry.

Patrick Manning's G-Pan initiative, while commendable, made a hero out of one man in an industry that begs for a more comprehensive perspective such as Lloyd Best's 'Schools in Pan'. It was too late in the final days before his Waterloo that he invited leaders of the Pan community to dinner at the Palace and requested an invoice for panyard development.

His successors, the Peoples Partnership, speaks of a panyard initiative which remains almost inaudible, needing a clear voice, a prominent steelband face and maybe even a Ministry for Pan. After all calypsonians now effectively have their own ministry.

The truth is that in a world where European economies are heading in perilous waters and the U.S economy needs trillions to launch out of debt and recession, capitalism looks like a beaten fighter on the ropes. In T&T, the tragedies of Clico and the Hindu Credit Union combined with the finite nature of our non-renewable energy resources, are creating a space for Pan to move centre stage, and Pan, out of this odyssey, is emerging with a philosophy of its own, ready to speak to Power on its own terms.

Laurie Andall is the President of Scherzando's Steelband Co-operative

(See Nestor Sullivan's Review of The Illustrated Story of Pan, Page 14)