



A BOOK TO LOVE UP

NESTOR SULLIVAN Reviews
The Illustrated Story Of Pan

I THANK and congratulate Dr Kim Johnson. In the treasury of books on the steelband, *The Illustrated Story of Pan* is among the most valuable of gems.

It cuts a new path by telling the story of Steelband in photos and taking the reader along on a visual journey into the development of the movement from the birth of the modern steelband in the late 1930's/early 1940's, up to the present time. In this book Johnson captures the images of the period in an explicit manner: the instruments, the players and supporters of the early steelband are all well represented.

This was the period that immediately followed the transition from Tamboo Bamboo to dustbins and metal containers. This development which had all been as triggered by the banning of the African drum back in 1884 which led to its replacement by the Tamboo Bamboo as the lead instrument in the Carnival Parade of the masses.

Then there is the journey of the steelpan itself as recorded through the photos in *The Illustrated Story of Pan*. In the late 30's/early 40's there were few notes on the lead instrument, then known as ping-pong. The period between 1945 and 1960 was one of rapid expansion of the ranges in the treble, middle and bass ranges of the steel orchestras. These developments are depicted in the book with a vividness that no verbal description could match.

Equally compelling is the photo story of the movement of the steelband from Pan-Around-

Neck to the full steelband orchestra on wheels. In an earlier period the players held their instruments on their laps and played with one hand. Around the neck allowed the use of both hands in the performance of the music, which in turn created scope for greater complexity in the steelband repertoire.

The next stage when the complete orchestra was put on wheels is a critical part of pan history. The bands were now able to improve the "Road" repertoire that included European classical pieces in the Jouvert Bomb Competition and Calypso renditions for the masquerade. These stages of development are captured in Johnson's epic work.

Another feature of *The Illustrated Story of Pan* is the role of the youth in the development of the steelband. Iconic figures in the movement such as Ellie Mannette, Anthony Williams, Ray Holman, Rudolph Charles and others are presented in photos as teenagers, young people passionate and committed to an act of beautiful creation. It's worth recalling that these were the same youths who were condemned by the validating elite of the time and those in authority, as 'vagabonds', 'cut-throats' and 'criminals'. These brilliant, pioneering youngsters were socially stigmatized as they took a different road to lay the foundations for what we all claim today as "We Culture".

This book shows the wide participation of people involved in the development of the Steelband movement. The photos show early bands from Port of Spain, San Fernando, Tobago, Fyzabad, Tunapuna, San Juan, Point Cumana, Arima and

other places and confirms the national nature of the developmental process that included people from all races in Trinidad.

An important feature of Johnson's book are the interviews with key persons involved in the various bands shown in the book. These provide insight and context into the details of the moment that was captured for posterity by the camera. These interviews make life a lot easier for both reader and researcher.

Most of the participants in this book came from communities and homes in the lower-income bracket of Trinidad society. Most had limited opportunity for further education; unemployment was high and, for them, upward social mobility was almost impossible. In that environment, the steelband emerged as an expression of self-assertion, self-pride and creativity. They guarded and defended the source of this selfhood fiercely; some gave their lives, others their limbs, and in so doing, created the space for the development of what is today the national instrument of Trinidad and Tobago.

For me, this book presents the visual evidence that the people of Trinidad and Tobago have, on their own, created a family of instruments against a backdrop of poverty, unemployment, hard times, disinterest by authorities and ostracism from mainstream society. In spite of these apparent deficits, these young men and their communities have created institutions that still exist after five, six and seven decades. This is a story of "creativity, daring, adventure and plenty love" as stated by Dr Johnson himself.

What it also makes very clear is the role of the communities from which the bands emerged. In their thousands, they rallied behind 'their band' on the road at Carnival and at other events and were a big part of the ring of protection around the Pan.

Within *The Illustrated Story of Pan* runs an undercurrent of politics of a people stirring to life, and the global influences that shaped their responses. One example is the 1949 photo of "Stardust" from Point Cumana being led by a flag from the German Nationalist Party (Nazi). For a community that resented the Americans' presence in Chaguaramas, flying Hitler's flag was an act of defiance. Then there is the photo of the "Red Army Steelband" carrying a large picture of the leader of the then Soviet Union, Josef Stalin. Red, indeed.

This book is about the people who were involved with the development of the steelband in Trinidad and Tobago. I recommend it without reservation to everyone with a deep and abiding interest in the steelband movement. Among its pages are many of our heroes who created and played and gifted us with this instrument of wonder. It is also about the people who defended it physically and in song, like the late calypsonian, the Lord Kitchener (Aldwyn Roberts).

I have shown this book to several of my colleagues in the steelband movement and they join me in complimenting Dr Kim Johnson for a work very well done!! Stay up Bro.

Nestor Sullivan is the manager of Pamberi Steel Orchestra