

PEOPLE OF THE CENTURY

Birth of two pan pioneers

By **MICHAEL ANTHONY**

Ellie Mannette and Winston Simon
Part I

As the 1930s came to a close, two youngsters were in the forefront of an activity that was of great interest to the police. In fact, the police would have loved to know these persons, though not to keep them for any length of time, for they were too young to be guests of the police. Their names were Winston Simon, and Ellie Mannette and they were skilled in

what the police would have called "making noise," and of course few people would have disagreed with them. (Although the number of people disagreeing with them would have been considerably lessened at Carnival time).

These two boys emerged during the period when the rhythmic instruments which bore Carnival crowds along were lengths of bamboo, knocked together and called tamboo bamboo. ("tambour" pronounced "tamboo," being the Patois and French word for drum).

Apparently, by the mid-1930s

young Carnival revellers were finding that tamboo bamboo did not make enough noise for them. They took to beating old iron, or anything like old iron which they could put their hands on. Dustbins were particularly sought. It was not safe for the householder to leave a dustbin outside the gate. Paint cans and brake-drums came high on the list.

The first time we hear of these steel-beating boys was at Carnival 1935. On that Carnival Tuesday (5th March) the *Trinidad Guardian* spoke of an early-morning band "surging like



WINSTON "SPREE" SIMON



ELLIE MANNETTE

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a river" into downtown Port-of-Spain, with members beating out pulsating rhythms on old cans and drums.

The bamboo bamboo bands first adopting steel were Alexander's Ragtime Band (named after a United States orchestra of the same era), and Hellyard, which later became "All Stars" steelband. Alexander's Ragtime band belonged to New Town, while Hellyard was on Duke Street. These are the bands believed to have been referred to by the newspaper).

The year 1935 was a little too early for Winston Simon to come out at Carnival, for he was only five then. He lived in the south-east Port-of-Spain district of John John, and a "steel-beating" group of the area, calling itself John John, appears to have come together around 1937. By then dozens of such groups calling themselves steelbands had sprung up. They came out, not only at Carnival time, but on Discovery Day, which was the first Monday in August, as well as at any other time when there were celebrations in the street.

It was in 1939 that the nine-year-old Winston seems to have come into his own. In an interview given several years later he gave an insight into those early days and shed light on what he is best known for — certainly not making noise. He said: "I was the little drummer boy for John John band. Once when the band was on the street I lend me pan to somebody, and went and had me jump-up, and when I come back for the pan I saw the face was dent in, and I was so vex. I went and was trying to beat out the face of the pan with a stone, and then...and

then I find when I hit the parts with the dent I was getting like notes, like different kinda tones. And then I knock and knock and it had four separate tones, like music, and in the end I used the same stone and play a tune. Four notes. A tune that they call: "River vine, vine cavalli."

This, in fact, was the birth of the steelband as we know it today. Although the steelband seems to have started in 1935, with certain bamboo-bamboo groups banging on steel for the first time, it was really after little Winston discovered notes on the pan in 1939, that the steelband took wings, as it were, and soared.

For although the rhythm was good, especially to Jouvert revellers, it was only when the melody came that the "magic" came to the steelband.

The 1939 incident with nine-year-old Winston Simon completely shattered normal community events so far as steel-beating bands were concerned. And maybe "boys" is the right word here, for the majority of the players were teenagers.

After hearing of the John John kid who was playing music on the steel pan, they all wanted to know how it was done. Spies were on the move, for the rivalry was so sharp that no group was allowed to gain any advantage for long.

And despite the extreme inter-steelband hostility of those early days, with groups having to keep within their own territory, it was soon discovered how it was done and almost every one of the steel-beating groups had an instrument like Winston's, only that the dents in the pans were not accidental but deliber-