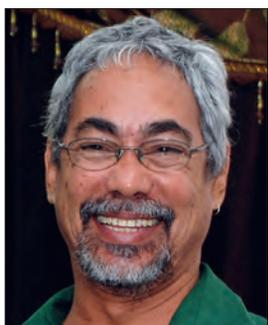


# PAN: THE INSTRUMENT THAT BUILT A NATION

## A SOCIOLOGICAL JOURNEY THROUGH SOUND



**DR KIM JOHNSON**  
 Writer, Journalist and  
 Steelband Scholar

Nothing unites people, from a couple on a dance floor to an entire generation of youth, like music. The counter-culture 60s generation gelled around Bob Dylan and The Beatles, while a decade later the conscience of the world was shaped by reggae. And in the case of Trinidad and Tobago (T&T), it was pan, the music, the instrument and the movement, that took a colony divided into splinters and brought it together around a single purpose.

That was a startling about-face. In 1945 the Legislative Council prohibited the public playing of “noisy instruments”, for example steelpans. “Fancy you having a musical evening and inviting these gentlemen of the steel band to provide the music for you!” Sir Courtney Hannays, KC, postulated at the Council. “Fancy at any exhibition of the fine arts Trinidad represented by people who beat the steel drums!”

Yet, within a few years Sir Courtney’s idea moved from being preposterous to a historical necessity, even as the steelband warfare

precipitated widespread social panic. So, by 1949 the pan movement was drawing a broader and broader cross-section of the community into its fold, and a group of Portuguese and Chinese CIC students, led by Ernest Ferreira, formed a steelband in Sackville Street.

In 1950 this middle-class band of white, brown and Chinese teenagers hit the road as Dixieland Steel Orchestra. One member from Sackville Street, Rolf Moyou, whose sister Suilan worked at the Caribbean Commission, where she became romantically involved with the researcher, Dr Eric Williams, was fascinated by the mixed racial composition of the band. “When he looked at the band he was more interested in who he was seeing,” says Moyou.

At the time middle class masqueraders cavorted on the back of trucks, segregated from the hoi polloi of Carnival. With the arrival of Dixieland, however, they came off their high trucks and joined mas on the road.

Dixieland, now followed by hundreds of middle-class teenagers, was in front the Red House when up comes Casablanca, the most feared steelband in the country. According to one story Curtis Pierre carried in front of the Gonzales band and declared, “Nobody cyar pass!”

Such was their shock that the Casablanca “badjohns” put down their pans and hugged this white boy who was obviously drunk on music. The breakthrough unity was made by a different band, however, in 1951, when the Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra was formed to represent the colony at the Festival of Britain.

Yet the inspiration for TASPO probably came from



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Antigua. On 21st January 1951, before the thought struck anyone here, the Trinidad Guardian reported that: “Hell’s Gate Steel Band of Antigua is likely to represent the West Indian steel bands at the Festival of Britain which will be opened in London on 3rd May.”

A month later, president of the T&T Steel Bands Association Sydney Gollop was heading for solicitor Lennox Pierre’s office, where the Association met, when he was hailed by politician and cultural activist Albert Gomes.

“I want you to act now!” Gomes urged. “Go and set up a committee or something to get Operation Britain.” And so by March the Association had decided to send a representative steelband to the Festival and a team of the most gifted panmen was chosen:

Theo “Black James” Stephens, 17, from Free French; Orman “Patsy” Haynes, 21, from Casablanca; Winston “Spree” Simon, 24, from Fascinators; Ellie Mannette, 22, from Invaders; Belgrave Bonaparte, 19, from Southern

Symphony; Philmore “Boots” Davidson, 22, from City Syncopaters; Sterling Betancourt, 21, from Crossfire; Andrew “Pan” de la Bastide, 23, from Hill 60; Dudley Smith, 24, from Rising Sun; Anthony “Muffman” Williams, 20, from North Stars; and Granville Sealey, 24, from Tripoli.

Sealey dropped out. He claims that he was snubbed by the other players, but popular belief has it that he was recently married and had asked for and was refused wages to support his wife. Either way he was replaced by Carlton “Sonny” Roach from Sun Valley. Government refused their request for \$6,000, however, so the Association decided to raise the money,

This was at the height of the riot years, when respectable society recoiled from the steelband movement in fear and loathing. “You think they would ever send a steelband to England with them set of hooligans in it?” sceptics told Tony Williams. “Boy, you’re only wasting your time.”

But committees were established. Fundraising began. And the steelband movement, riven by

**Lt Nathaniel Joseph Griffith, the steelband movement’s greatest unsung hero, left Barbados in 1932 to play with an American jazz band, but was soon in Martinique arranging for the Municipal Orchestra. In 1935 he founded the St Vincent Philharmonic Orchestra**



Far left: A post card from the mid 1940s showing a very early steel band using paint pans and biscuit drums as musical instruments. Left: The Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra performing at the 1951 Festival of Britain

The steelband movement forged an alliance of people from different social classes and races which seeded the nationalist movement that 11 years later won independence for Trinidad and Tobago

warfare between bands, closed ranks. Bands held benefit performances all over the island: Fantasia and Mutineers in Princes Town, La Lune in Moruga, for instance.

The musical director of the band was Lt Nathaniel Joseph Griffith, the steelband movement's greatest unsung hero. Born 1906 in Barbados, he joined the police band at 14. He left Barbados in 1932 to play clarinet and sax with an American jazz band, but was soon in Martinique arranging for the Municipal Orchestra. In 1935 he took over the St Vincent Government Band and founded the St Vincent Philharmonic Orchestra.

Then he led the Grenada Harmony Kings, before joining the Trinidad Police Band in 1938. He taught at the Tacarigua Orphanage and led its band, and conducted the Royal Victoria Institute's orchestra. In 1947 he was appointed bandmaster of the St Lucia Police Band, and there he was when he was asked to lead TASPO. "If I going to England with you, you can't play any sort of wrong thing," he warned the panmen. "You have to play real music."

And he set about teaching them. He put numbers on the notes and wrote scores. Spree queried one note on a Negro spiritual. "I said to roll that note! You want me to roll your balls?" snapped Griffith.

Thus he taught them a repertoire that included a waltz, a rumba, a samba, light classics, a foxtrot, a bolero, calypsos, mambos. He made them tune (invent) an alto (second) pan with 14 notes. He also insisted the bass have at least 14 notes. When the tuners protested that so many notes couldn't fit on one drum, he replied to everyone's surprise, then use more than one.

Griffith's knowledge leavened the genius of men like Williams and Mannette, and they produced better pans than they ever did before. Williams replaced the biscuit drum "tune boom" with an oil drum 2-cello, and discovered the technique of tuning two tones in one note.

"Come down an afternoon when we practising," Mannette told Maifan Drayton, then in Invaders, who recalled: "When we went we were shocked to see one man playing two pans. Boots was on bass, Sterling Betancourt was on guitar and Tony Williams on cello. We were mystified."

The public was even more dazzled. After a concert at Globe the audience emptied its pockets into the pans.

Now that Trinidad realised what a steelband could accomplish, even the elite supported them. Bermudez donated drums, Fitz Blackman offered uniforms, the Himalaya Club, the Little Carib, and the Jaycees held fundraising dances.

The Tourist Board and Sir Gerald Wight each offered \$500. Governor Sir Hubert Rance's aide de camp organised an auction: Winfield Scott bought a case of whiskey and returned it to the auctioneer, who promptly sold it again. Edwin Lee Lum, a non-smoker, bought 2,000 cigarettes.

The band left on 5th July and spent a week in Martinique, where almost all the players picked up new girls and old diseases. Sonny Roach got a sore throat and returned home, but the rest went on to Bordeaux, Paris and then London.

TASPO's first engagement was at the BBC, after which they performed at the Colonial office, and at the Festival. "A revolution in music reached London today, and experts predict it will sweep the country in a new craze," reported an English paper: "Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra sat outside the Festival Concert Hall and tapped sweet, swingy music out of rusty pans still with steamer labels stuck to them after their trans-Atlantic voyage."

The real revolution, however, had already taken place months before, when TASPO, and by extension the steelband movement, forged the alliance of people from different social classes and races, which seeded the nationalist movement that 11 years later won independence for Trinidad and Tobago. ■