Steelband Music in Trinidad and Tobago:
Class and Color Issues in Creating a People's Music

Script for32 minute educational dvd

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The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, a two-island Caribbean nation of a little over one million people, is about the size of the smallest U. S. state—Rhode Island.

It's the southernmost of the Caribbean islands, just seven miles off the coast of Venezuela, which is in northern South America.

Trinidad was first a colony of Spain and then of England, gaining its independence in 1962. Over the years there has also been some social and cultural influence from French planters and settlers, from Arawak Indians, people of African heritage, and those from India, China, the Middle East, Portugal and North America. The religion of most of the people is Catholic and Anglican but there is a large percentage of Hindus and some Moslems.

Officially between forty and forty-five percent of Trinidad and Tobago's citizens are of African heritage, about the same reflect the heritage of India, fourteen percent are of mixed racial and ethnic background, and one percent is white. But these official figures seem to underestimate the blendings in the backgrounds of Trinidadians.

Out of this diversity of backgrounds Trinidad and Tobago's people have developed a unique culture, a sense of being Trinidadian—a complex mix of ways of seeing the world, of thinking, feeling, speaking and in general living, that they have developed from living together on the small islands for generations.

Steelband drums and music were developed in the poorer sections of Trinidad's capital city, Port of Spain, by young men of African heritage, with little formal education. Very often people in these cir-

cumstances are quite creative in their use of whatever is affordable and at hand to express and develop their musical interests and talents, and that is just what happened in Trinidad.

Steelband's invention and development was a reaction to the suppression of African and Indian drumming by the dominant economic, government and social leaders of the colonial society. Pan music, as it's known in Trinidad, has been called the heartbeat of the nation. It is indeed part of the lifeblood of this small nation, which has been blessed with talented people far out of proportion to its size. Pan music today is a source of pride to Trinidadians and other West Indians of all races and classes. Few Trinidadians, or many others for that matter, can remain standing still when they hear the captivating, pulsating rhythms of a steelband beating out a Calypso song.

This unique and fascinating form of musical expression is painstakingly and lovingly created by beating with sticks on drums skillfully crafted from 55-gallon oil or chemical containers made of metal. And the music is usually played by ear. Panmaker and tuner Tony Slater tells us how a steeldrum is made:

"First you have to be sure that you have a proper face, the piece of steel that you using to sink, you have to make sure then that you have a good piece of steel then, according to the instrument you makin'." He stresses the importance of carefully choosing a good piece of steel, the quality determined by the type of drum you're making. For the small, narrow tenor pan the steel has to be strong or it will crack after you sink it to a certain depth. You start sinking, hammering down the top, bit by bit, about two inches from the rim, seeking the shape of a cone, with three stages or depths to accommodate the different notes—up to 32 on a tenor pan. You stretch the metal and listen for the different sounds, because if you're an experienced tuner it will start to sing to you, and you'll know when it's tight enough to start marking in your notes.

You hammer-groove the notes in, then take out the slack with more beating and cut the pan down to its proper size, depending on the pitch of the drum you're making. You put it into a fire and may also

seize the metal, to give it more tension, by throwing water on it while it's in the fire. Then you pre-tune it and send it to be chromed, after which it gets the final tuning.

The arrival on the scene of the steeldrum, a definite first for Trinidad and Tobago and the world, was the culmination of years of accidental discovery and careful experimentation. The drumming tradition among both Afro-and Indo-Trinidadians has a long history and has played a vital role in both religious and social observances.

When drumming is so basic a part of one's religion and social life, then people have a need for the drums and drumming for their very existence, to properly locate, observe and celebrate their place in the world and their relationship to their gods, ancestors and fellow human beings.

But East Indian and African Trinidadians did not have any power or control over this important aspect of their lives in colonial Trinidad. The police and government did their best to suppress drumming. They feared and disliked it, believed it to be un-Christian and that the dancing which sometimes accompanied it was sinful. They also feared its use as a means of communication and potential unity among both Black and Indian people.

To maintain their positions of superior power the White and often also the Brown-skinned people constantly devalued, denounced and suppressed anything that was African or Indian. A law of 1883 tried to eliminate dancing, drumming and other music-making by the masses by punishing the owners of dwellings which allowed such activity. Between 1881 and 1891 there were several violent clashes between the police and the people over the use of drums. In one of these, involving Moslem Indians using drums in their Hosein religious observance, over one hundred people were injured and thirteen were killed.

Because drumming was so vital to most of Trinidad's citizens it continued underground, but it didn't flourish and people had to find alternative ways to express themselves musically, particularly at the annual Carnival celebrations held just before Ash Wednesday. What eventually developed and was used from the early 1900s was the Tamboo-Bamboo Band. The instruments were made from bamboo

sticks of different lengths, partially or completely hollowed out, which were struck against each other, with sticks, or against the ground, to produce sounds of varying pitch. Players beat bottles with spoons to get the higher-pitched sounds.

Artist Patrick Chu-Foon recalls this early music…

"… Long before even steelband came out, I remember seeing the bandsmen thumping bamboos on the raw pitch, the asphalt on the street. I can see it because I used to stand from the top of my father's shop front and look down into the street and see all the goings on of early Carnival. But I remember the sounds, it's, maybe this is where the African influence comes in. Because it was a thumping, a thumping of the drums–tum, tum, tum, tum, tim, tum, tim tum, you know? And the fellas had a twitch like, and they keep twitching and rattling between two sticks and all the fanciful beating. And I remember that well, but, um, they also had drums, some skin drums, but also booms like. Like this was also the early beginnings of steelbands."

According to old-time Calypsonian Roaring Lion, who is a historian of Trinidad's music and Carnival, people in Trinidad had been beating on metal and tin for some year. "Long ago, and to some extent up to now, the children of this land used to get together on Good Friday and make what was known to everyone, young and old, as the effigy of Judas. Sometime between one and two P.M. on that day the children in the neighborhood would collect all the old cooking utensils–empty milk tins, pieces of iron, pitch-oil tins, and of course the garbage pans or dust bins in the district would naturally be borrowed for the occasion. With the necessary musical instruments in their possession they would march back and forth through the district beating their pans while they sang, 'Bobolee, Bobolee, Beat the Bobolee, Bobolee, Bobolee, Beat the Bobolee.' And the rhythm of that pan was identical with what is now known as the steelband, even up to the middle forties, that is, before they started to discover notes and the production of bits and pieces of melody. With the passage of time, about 1919, the music of the Bobolee Band caught on with the adults and the result was that it found its way into the carnival band at the time . . . the beating of the Bad Behavior Band was identical with that of the Bobolee Band.

But about 1930 a fair number of masqueraders from East Dry River areas, such as Behind the Bridge, St. Joseph Road, Laventille, Rose Hill and George Street, Port of Spain, all slum areas, also became interested in the noisy beating of these crude discarded utensils. About ninety percent of these newly-made members were not members of any sailor bands, but they were disciples and active members of the then famous Tamboo Bamboo Band, the music of the Kalinda, and a few of them were members of a carnival band called Red Dragon, from George Street, Port of Spain. On Carnival morning they used to come out with one of the largest Tamboo-Bamboo bands from George Street, David Leach yard. David Leach, a stick player, was the leader of the band and whilst parading on the streets those who had no tamboo-bamboo instruments would pick up garbage pan covers, pieces of steel from the Smith Shop in George Street and any cooking utensil they could find and proceed to beat it in time with the rhythm of the Tamboo-Bamboo.

Thus the Tamboo-Bamboo and the Bobolee or Bad Behavior Pan Band had joined forces, and was in unison, at least on Carnival Monday mornings."

The exact date of the creation of the first steeldrum is uncertain. There are several different versions about when, who or even what event or refinement constitutes the invention of the steeldrum. Oscar Pile, pioneer steelbandsman and the organizer and leader for many years of the Casablanca steelband gives us one version:

"…Way back in 1935 they had the Tamboo-Bamboo and playing on the road, by an accident, one of the leading men, which was Forde, was playing one of the bamboos. That bamboo happened to beak, and in the excitement and the heat of it wanted something to beat. He then run across the road and take up a dustbin cover, and by beating the dustbin cover they found out really the dustbin cover had a more stinging and more rhythm sound than the bamboo just knocking on the ground, and from then on that particular band, which band he was playing, from Newtown, Alexander Ragtime Band, they then went back a couple weeks or months after and they start looking for pans, you know, old paint pans and so on and getting a more genuine sound that the bamboo. Whilst they was at that, Gonzalez, which was

way up in the East, East Dry River, went and start making pans and getting pans, old disregarded bins, biscuit drums, gasoline tanks and so on, and this was the birth of the steelbands."

The crucial point in the transition from bamboo to steel is probably when different notes were added to the metal drums and melodies could be played on them. Emerging from the several different versions of the creation of the steeldrum there is consensus that the first pan with notes was created in the mid-1930s, evidently by accident, and that one of the first, if not the first, person to add notes and play recognizable songs was the late Winston "Spree" Simon. Here is his version of how notes were added to the crude pans… "…and I had lent this drum, or loaned this drum and on coming back to retrieve my drum, the face of the drum was beaten in so badly that it had taken on a concave appearance. Now I just took the drum from him and went to the side of the road and tried to get back the face of the drum to its normal surface. By pounding on the inside with a stone and a stick, in and out, in and out, I discovered that I was able to get four distinct notes, which enabled me to play something of a bugle call, ta ta ta tum ta ti tum and therefore I played at that moment, ta ta ta tum ti ti tum…"

Spree Simon is hailed by many as the father of steelband music. Whatever the case, he was a very talented pioneer in the development of steelband music, who in 1946 presented the first solo pan concert, playing selections ranging from calypsoes to the classics. It was a landmark in the progress and acceptance of steelband music as it was a Carnival Sunday concert, well-attended and well-received by an audience which included Trinidad's governor.

Young people who believe they have little opportunity for recognition, success and self-fulfillment in the customary areas of achievement in society—a good education, a good job or career, often channel their energies and talents into other areas, those which are available to them. They choose other, and sometimes marginal or deviant role models and self-images. Some of the steelbandsmen and women and their followers saw themselves and were seen by others as hooligans, "badjohns" in Trinidad talk, and they took many of their cues from American war, gangster and Western movies.

Anthony Prospect, musical director of the ISCOTT Casablanca steelband, sums it up:

"You see what was responsible for the violence and so on was a lack, it was frustration the thing that cause the whole thihng. People—no education, poor housing, lack of recreational facilities and all those things, so all these young lads had to do was to gather around corners and at night beat pans and so on. And they had to release all this energy somewhere or other."

Oscar Pile tells us how he chose the name Casablanca for his band: "The name Casablanca really came from a motion picture which was starred with Humphrey Bogart as you know within that time, that was pre-war. So we choose to call the band Casablanca, because within that time, well, they used to call me Humphrey Bogart…."

Pat Chu-Foon recalls the violence in the early steelband era: "… those were the days when we used to see a lot of those films with…*Back to Bataan* with Robert Taylor, and all the…Audie Murphy and all this sort of damn stupidness. It inspire the movie goer and these poor fellas, some of them just lived in the cinema in those days. After seeing a good war picture they want to do the same thing and this is what caused a lot of things with the steelband clashing in those periods. It was like a game. You would see fellas go up and say, 'Look, we going up to beat Casablanca tonight. Invaders, we going and beat the Invaders.' If you hear how the names are. All war names. Invaders from Woodbrook coming up to clash with so and so and they meet in this corner. Men used to walk with razors in their waist."

Here is Trinidadian Errol Hill, playwright, actor, author and Dartmouth College professor: "…The gangs of the boys were of course related to different districts and were in fierce competition with rival bands. They would steal their pans, they would fight them for their girlfriends, they would clash with them on the street during Carnival time. The element of competition, contest, rivalry, which band is better than which, who plays best, who is the leading ping-pong player, etc. (the ping-pong being the leading pan), um, this generated a considerable amount of fierce rivalry, leading to fighting, knifing, and I regret to say, killing, between the members of various bands."

Carleton Constantine, nicknamed *Zigili,* one of the pioneers of steelband, and the founder of the Bar 20 Band, explains how trouble with the police often developed: "Well, the clashes on the road, so

much different things used to, could have caused the noise. A woman from one band, she have a man from one band and probably she see a next guy from the next band. Well, that is one of the factors. Then again bands playing, this band playing this tune, say the next one take their tune. In a dance where drinks is concerned, anything, anything. Because that was a era that violence was very high. So anything could start a fight, anything at all."

Curtis Pierre, founder and leader of the Dixieland Steelband in the 1950s, recalls his personal experience in a steelband clash: "…There was a certain amount of turf rivalry, which there is in any type of group activity. For no other reason than, you know, you just want to be King of the Rock, said, 'You're from Belmont and you should not be walking in Woodbrook.' It had nothing to do with the quality of your music or with whether you had their girl. We had a clash with a band called Ebonites. It was not anything that they knew who we were or we knew who they were, some little incident sparked it off and it got real messy. You know, guys were swinging baseball bats. I got hit with a baseball bat. Lucky nobody was holding it at the time, somebody just flung it across. One guy next to me got his cheek cut open with a razor. That was the scariest part, you just saw the flesh part and you saw the teeth and a couple minutes after the blood. One guy came charging at me with what looked like a piece of a kitchen fork, a large kitchen fork, and all I could do was raise the tenor pan I had and hit him across the bridge of his nose and that I remember also, seeing the bone just go white and the guy's eyes closed and he flaked out and I disappeared."

The result of all this was great hostility and severe repression between the police and panmen and women: "So, the police hounded these bands, literally. They would have raids on the bands headquarters and pick up the men and it seemed for aperiod of years that there was no end to this. The hostility between the police, the forces of law and order on the one hand, the middle classen the other, and opposed to these two were the panmen as they got to be called."

Steelband music then, its players and followers were not very well received by the more influential and powerful members of their society. Gradually, in the 1950s and 60s this changed, as did the behav-

ior of the steelbandsmen, due to several factors: First, financial sponsorship by businesses and the moral support, status, and guidance that accompanied sponsorship. Casablanca, for example, is now sponsored by the Iron and Steel Company of Trinidad and Tobago, Renegades by the AMOCO Trinidad Oil Company. George Yeates, leader for many years of Desperadoes, explains: “Well, West Indian Tobacco came along and they didn’t have a steelband and they wanted Desperadoes at all costs and they would have paid anything to get Desperadoes. Well, I got a nice little budget of eleven thousand for them at that time. From then onwards this is where I can say that Despers has been the trendsetters in the steelband, setting the pace for good behavior in the steelband movement because they no longer had cause to fight, they were more interested—if anytime the idea or the concern they thinking in terms that they would lose their sponsorship, so that sort of held them. Then I wasn’t the violent type.”

A second factor was the gradual involvement of more educated, lighter-skinned and white people in the bands, often against the wishes of their parents, relatives and friends. Curtis Pierre tells us what he thinks brought about greater acceptance of steelbands: “I really don’t know what we did, but up to recently a guy said, ‘You guys don’t realize what you did. You fought society and you said, We ‘re going to make this thing great.’”

Pan player, composer and arranger Ray Holman, a school teacher, seems to support this view: “The change came about when people, well, say like myself, who might have the benefit of a secondary school education, began to come into the band. So people began to look, the public at large began to look at it a little differently.”

A third factor is the support of several key, respected, influential members of the society who took the unpopular stand in favor of steelband music and bands: politician, writer and patron of the arts Albert Gomes; religious leader Canon Farquhar, shown here at the head of the table; lawyer, musician and Secretary of the Youth Council Mr. Lennox Pierre, left center, and Beryl McBurnie, dancer, choreographer and founder of the Little Carib Theatre, who brought the Invaders steelband into her theatre for a performance in 1948. She also got Ray Holman involved in steelband music:

"In my mind, she played an important part too in making the steelband, in getting the steelband more socially acceptable, because, for example, it was through her that I really started to play pan."

A 1949 Commission of Inquiry Into the Steelband Movement recommended that a Steelband Association be formed, and this was done, another important factor in the greater acceptance of the music and the players.

Steelband music and musicians were more well received when they demonstrated that they could play the challenging and complex classical, or what they called "European" music. It is not unique to Trinidad and Tobago, but a general phenomenon, that many colonized people develop negative attitudes towards their own cultural heritage and give more respect to that of their colonial rulers.

When the People's National Movement Party, headed by the late Dr. Eric Williams, came to power in 1956, supported largely by Afro-Trinidadians, there was active and open support of local culture, much of which had been either legally banned, ignored, or socially snubbed in the past.

The 1970 Black Power Movement in Trinidad created more Black pride and consciousness and acceptance of the African heritage. This seems to have generated more interest in and acceptance of drumming in general, and to have brought about greater acceptance of steeldrums in a variety of settings—social, educational and religious.

Another factor in the gradual acceptance of steelband music is the involvement of bands in organized music competitions, but again special weight was given to those with foreign judges. Their opinions were more highly regarded that those of local people.

Women have been actively involved with steelbands, and in 1951 Hazel Henley started the *Girl Pat Steel Orchestra.*

Steelband music has influenced the other arts: literature, as represented by Earl Lovelace's novel, *The Dragon Can't Dance;* paintings by Trinidad and Tobago 's artists; sculpture, as in this steelband memorial in Port of Spain by Pat Chu-Foon; drama, as in *The Ping-Pong* by Errol Hill, and dramatic readings and poetry.

Steelband music has spread far and wide and been very well received. In 1951 the Trinidad All-Steel Percussion Orchestra, led by musical director Lt. Joseph Griffith, played in London at the Festival of Britain, and in Paris. Now there are steelbands in Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., Montreal, Toronto and many other cities. The United States Navy has a steelband, which was organized with the help of Trinidadian Ellie Mannette.

Today in Trinidad and Tobago steelbands even play in schools, churches and at funerals. The steelband movement continues in its long and difficult struggle and many people have made important contributions. Deserving of special mention are Spree Simon, Ellie Mannette for innovations in the bass pan and Anthony Williams for developments in tuning.

Let’s listen now to a portion of the *1812 Overture* played by the award-winning ISCOTT Casablanca Orchestra, and a calypso entitled *Rebecca* by the Catelli Trinidad All Stars. ♦