
The popular music of Trinidad and Tobago, known for its creativity and its multicultural origins, is constantly changing, and numerous scholarly studies have tracked every musical nuance. Less well researched is the origin of the steelband (pan). The culture of Trinidad and Tobago, where pan emerged from inchoate biscuit tin bands, continues to be a laboratory for cultural studies, as Melville Herskovits might have put it. The steelband is one of the most significant great acoustic instruments (and perhaps the last) to be created anywhere in the world. At every turn pan is an intersection for ethnic and class relations and musical synthesis, stretching out over seventy years. Kim Johnson richly describes pan from the time of its creation in Trinidad to its spread around the globe at the close of World War II.

Johnson is perfectly placed to make this old testament of pan studies. The only others to have studied or touched on the period in any depth are Stephen Stuempfle and Ann Lee. Two of six chapters in Stuempfle’s groundbreaking study are devoted to the early era and Ann Lee focused on post-War pan. So for all the focus on Trinidadian and Tobagonian music, the roots of steelband have remained legendary and mysterious.

After a long career as a newspaper reporter in his natal Trinidad and Tobago, Johnson switched careers and became a historian; this book is a tightened presentation of his innovative Ph.D. dissertation. With a historian’s quest for accuracy and a reporter’s skill at interviewing, he made a thorough documentation from newspapers and drew on other contemporary sources to provide a chronology for oral accounts. His was the last study of its type possible, since enough pan creators were still living and their differing memories were still relatively fresh. Research for this work, with his heavy reliance on oral sources, could not be done today.

Johnson’s interviews include casual meetings. For example, he asked the calypsonian Lord Kitchener, in a chance encounter in a supermarket, “Do you remember ‘Bubulups’?” to which Kitch replied by singing the chorus. (“Bubulups, why you beat the officer? /Bubulups—three months hard labour!” [p. 20]). More significant are Johnson’s lengthy in-depth probes that separate truth from fiction in hundreds of steelbandsmen’s descriptions of decades-old important events.
The book follows the development of pan in its early, creative, and vexing years. Chapter 1 concerns pan roots in the tamboo bamboo (bamboo stamping tubes) and biscuit tin bands (cookie tins, dust bins, metal rod on brake drum, and other makeshift instruments). Chapter 2 covers the years 1939 to 1942, just as outdoor performance was outlawed by the British when World War II heated up and pan was partly confined to pan yards and calypso tents. Chapter 3 deals with the experimentation of the War years. Creative Trinis experimented by adding notes to the biscuit tins so that simple melodies could be played. This moved pan from a mostly rhythmic configuration to an emerging melodic and rhythmic set of instruments. At the close of the European war pan moved back onto the streets just as the new melodic pan emerged.

Chapter 4 takes the story from 1945 to 1949 as pan underwent a formalization process, from a strictly vernacular ensemble to an incipient tuned orchestra with an increasing number of notes per tenor pan. The voice of grassroots young men who championed pan began to push against the middle class and elite masquerade bands for dominance of street carnival. Street clashes between bands became more numerous. Chapter 5 details the development of TASPO, the Trinidad All-Steel Percussion Orchestra (1949-51). Just as steelband clashes became frequent, some middle-class and intellectual Trinidadians thought a national pan band, drawn from members of contentious steelbands and ethnic groups, could help legitimate pan. Children’s pan, like TASPO, emerged as a government-backed steelband that represented the colony internationally. The subtitle to Chapter 6 says it all: “Rhythm of Africa, Melody of Europe,” as European scales were applied to Afro-Creole metal instruments.

Franz Boas (who was Melville Herskovits’s professor) thought that his generation, working from the 1880s through the 1940s, was the last to be able to document cultures that were disappearing in the flash of imperialism and industrialization. He argued for more ethnography and less theory. Maybe he was right. Maybe in this day of IT there is still time to nail down what we can of recent historical developments. For now, data trump theory; document first and understand later. By setting down this history of the origin of pan, Kim Johnson was in the right place at the right time. He was the right person to render the best guess possible of what “really” happened during the creative development of the steelband.