

The steel pan was created in Trinidad and Tobago in the 1930s and has seen many innovations and advancements ever since. Today's steel orchestra is a far cry from what a steelband was 75 years ago. Recently I was part of what was interestingly entitled 'a social studies pan crawl' that visited four pan yards in the Port of Spain area and while there apart from hearing 'some good pan' we learnt a bit about the history of these three well known orchestras. The steel pan is undoubtedly part of our heritage so I would like to share a bit of the history of these bands with you.

The first pan yard we visited was that of Silver Stars Steel Orchestra which we were told has been around for over 70 years. According to his sister, as told to journalist David Cuffy, Silver Stars began in 1950 when the teenaged Junior, received a tenor pan from his parents as a birthday gift. She related that Junior talked his brother Edwin and some of his friends from St. Mary's college into starting a band called Gold Coast. In those days, however, playing in a steel band was not something that decent Catholic school boys did, and they had to hide to play. When they were found out, the boys were threatened with expulsion and had to leave the band. The Pouchet brothers joined another band called Valentinis and in 1952 the name was changed to Silver Stars. Junior was elected bandleader two years later and held that position for 20 years before migrating. He was also the band's arranger for many years. Their first Panorama win was in 1970. The band also won the National panorama in 2009 as a large band with a rendition of an Edwin Pouchet composition entitled 'First in d line' and followed it up the next year with another first place placing and again in 2011.

As a testament to the changing times the band is currently made up of many young, educated men and women, boys and girls including university students and students at so-called prestige schools. They boast of being a very disciplined band and according to drill master Marcus Ash, if you want to be chosen to play you have to keep your grades up along with being able to play well.

Our next visit was to Starlift steel orchestra, a band with a rich and long history. Currently led by Eugene Peters, Starlift was formed in 1956 in Woodbrook, Port-of-Spain, by a group of panmen from three defunct steelbands from the Woodbrook area. Starlift stalwart Mr Clarke told us that the bands were called the Nightingale, Saigon, and Hot Paraders. In those days bands were usually named after popular movies. The name Starlift came from a musical that was playing in cinemas at the time starring American actress Doris Day. The band was later joined by some players who had left Invaders steelband including famed arranger Ray Holman. According to Mr Clarke, players were paid \$15 for playing both Carnival days. Starlift also brought out Carnival Bands in the 60s and 70s and won band of the year. They were Panorama champions in 1969, 1971 and 1978. They were also the first band to play an original composition, a song entitled Pan on the Move, penned by Ray Holman, at Panorama rather than one of the popular calypsos.

The next stop was to Hadco Phase Two Pan Groove. Phase two was formed in 1972 with by a group of players from the Starlift steel orchestra that included the then band leader Michael Phillips and Len 'Boogsie' Sharpe. That explains the Phase two portion of the band's name and The original intent was to concentrate on dance (groovy) music and "groove" was incorporated into the band's name. With Sharpe's musical arrangements, the band won seven Panorama titles in 1987, 1988, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2013, and 2014. The band gained the sponsorship of Petrotrin in the late-1990s, and later Digicel in 2006. Phase II finished among the top three steelbands in the following significant competition:

We also made a stop at the Renegades pan theatre. The Renegades Steel Orchestra was founded somewhere around 1945, at the end of the Second World War. This makes them one of the oldest surviving steelbands. The name of the band also has a film history along with bands such as Casablanca, Tokyo, Desperadoes and Invaders.

Renegades had its first competition win in 1969 and Jit Samaroo began to arrange for them 1972. They made it to the Panorama finals that year and have done so many times since, winning 13 times, the most recent being a tie for first place this year along with Massy All Stars.

Renegades is also one of the most travelled steelbands having toured extensively since the 1960s. The band was even the opening act at the Nelson Mandela Welcome Rally held at Yankee Stadium, New York, in 1990 and has been the recipient of the National Chaconia Gold Medal (1992).

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