

PIONEERS OF PAN

The History and Legacy of the Trinidad
All-Steel Percussion Orchestra

Janaya Pickett

A Research Commission by Culture& and Southbank Centre

September 2025

Image Caption: Bajan Lieutenant Joseph Nathaniel Griffith conducts the Trinidad All-Steel Percussion Orchestra during their first public performance at the Festival of Britain, Southbank Centre, London, UK, 26th July 1951; Credit, photo by Raymond Kleboe, courtesy of Getty Images Black History and Culture Collection.

CONTENTS

<i>The Steelpan's Journey to the World Stage</i>	3
<i>A NEW SOUND FOR A NEW WORLD</i>	3
<i>From Port of Spain to London: "Operation Britain"</i>	5
<i>Taking the Stage, Changing Minds</i>	7
<i>Members of TASPO:</i>	10
<i>Bibliography</i>	11

THE STEELPAN'S JOURNEY TO THE WORLD STAGE

In 1951, a hand-picked ensemble of gifted musicians from Trinidad, the Trinidad All-Steel Percussion Orchestra (TASPO), was selected to perform at the Festival of Britain. This grand event was designed to boost national morale and project an image of a modern, progressive nation recovering from war. It was in this setting that TASPO were poised to make history. They were ready to introduce the world to the innovative sound of the steelpan, marking the pivotal moment a vibrant art form, forged on the streets of Port of Spain, was to claim its place on the international stage.

A NEW SOUND FOR A NEW WORLD

The steelpan emerged from the creative energy of Trinidad during World War II, a time of profound social change. Its roots trace back to the Tamboo Bamboo bands of the 1930s, lively percussion groups that used sticks of varying lengths to produce different tones. The Tamboo Bamboo was outlawed, pushing musicians to find a new medium. They turned to discarded biscuit and paint tins, dustbins and other scrap metal.¹ Pioneers discovered that by hammering the surface of these tins, they could produce distinct notes. The process of creating a simple, one-note pan eventually evolved into the multi-note "ping pong" drum, the direct predecessor of the modern tenor pan, born from discarded oil drums.

¹ Johnson, 160–177.



TASPO member Philmore “Boots” Davidson tuning ‘pan’ in preparation for their South Bank performance; Credit: photo by Raymond Kleboe, courtesy of Getty Images Black History and Culture Collection.

However, many in Trinidad's upper and middle classes viewed the steelpan with suspicion. The "panmen" who played them were often looked down on, associated with street violence, and faced constant police scrutiny. “Pan” was seen as a symbol of lawlessness, social unrest and the country's lower-class urban Black communities. Yet, a dedicated group of artists and community leaders believed in the steelpan's musical potential. They formed an official Association of Steelbands in 1949,² with the aims of quelling violent rivalries, legitimising their music and earning it the respect it deserved. One of their first major projects? Sending a representative group to one of the most prestigious cultural events in the world: the Festival of Britain.

² Johnson, 176–177.

FROM PORT OF SPAIN TO LONDON: "OPERATION BRITAIN"

The journey to the Festival was a true community effort, reflecting the unity and pride of a people ready to present their unique culture to the world. The Festival of Britain was an ambitious event, designed to project an image of a modern and progressive nation recovering from war. It also served a subtle diplomatic purpose: to frame Britain's declining empire as a new, benevolent partnership with its colonies.³ By sending a steelband, Trinidad was asserting its own cultural identity and participating in this new narrative on their own terms. The idea for the tour was the brainchild of politician Albert Gomes, who envisioned the steelpan as a vehicle for national identity.⁴



*Will Operation Britain Succeed? Trinidad Guardian Evening News, 27th June, 1951;
Credit: courtesy of Kim Johnson.*

To raise the necessary funds for the voyage, the committee launched the "Operation Britain" campaign. A promotional brochure was published with a message from Governor Sir Hubert Rance, urging all citizens to support the worthy venture.

³ Jo Littler, 'Festering Britain': the 1951 Festival of Britain, decolonisation and the representation of the Commonwealth, p.2.

⁴ Johnson, p.247.

Contributions poured in from every corner of society. Local politicians like Roy Joseph and Albert Gomes offered their backing, and journalist Canon Farquhar of the Anglican Church also lent his support, signifying a new level of respectability for the art form.⁵

Furthermore, Roy Joseph, Minister of Education and Social Service, also served as official Trinidadian delegate to the Festival, actively seeking to leverage the trip for more than just music. Colonial Office records reveal that he tried to arrange a meeting with the King and had an ambitious list of other requests, including securing a telephone line and visiting prisons, schools, and borstals. These requests, which contemporary Colonial Office correspondents found quite annoying, highlight the broader, unofficial diplomatic mission of the tour—the push for the development of Trinidad, as well as greater recognition and respect for its culture and society on the world stage.⁶

“Operation Britain” fundraisers, from recitals at Princes Town to small “shilling jars” placed in drugstores, sprang up across the island. Despite initial challenges, such as a poorly attended dance, the community's support was unwavering. After a last-minute auction at Government House pushed them over the top, the young musicians—each with a unique story and personal sacrifice—were ready to set sail on the SS San Mateo.⁷



Bajan Lieutenant Joseph Nathaniel Griffith conducts the Trinidad All-Steel Percussion Orchestra during their first public performance at the Festival of Britain, Southbank Centre, London, UK, 26th July 1951; Credit, photo by Raymond Kleboe, courtesy of Getty Images Black History and Culture Collection.

⁵ Johnson, p.251; George Goddard, *Forty Years in the Steelbands: 1939-1979*, chap. 3.

⁶ The National Archives, Colonial Office Records, CO 295/654/10: Visit by minister of education to Britain for Festival of Britain celebrations: representatives from Trinidad.

⁷ Johnson, 247-257; Goddard, chap.3.

TAKING THE STAGE, CHANGING MINDS

The success of TASPO's tour was not just about their musical talent; it was also thanks to the crucial support they received in the UK. Trinidadian actors and activists Edric and Pearl Connor, along with the West Indies Student Union, helped organise and promote the tour, ensuring the band's performances would reach appreciative audiences.⁸

The Festival of Britain performance on 27th July at the Seaside Exhibition outside the Royal Festival Hall, was a pivotal moment, filmed by Pathé News, photographed by journalists, and broadcast around the world.⁹ TASPO stunned audiences with their polished sound, playing everything from local calypsos to classical pieces and subverting expectations. The orchestra continued with a busy UK tour, including a performance at St Pancras Town Hall on 9th August, a television appearance on 24th August, return shows at the South Bank with Calypsonian "Roaring Lion" on 3rd and 5th September, and performances in Edinburgh and Manchester throughout September. Following their triumphant time in Britain, they travelled to Paris to perform at the legendary Cirque Medrano, earning immediate and profound international recognition.¹⁰

⁸ John Cowley, 'London is the Place: Caribbean Music in the Context of Empire 1900-60', in Paul Oliver, ed., *Black Music In Britain: Essays on the Afro Asian Contribution to Popular Music*, pp. 57-76.

⁹ Some sources cite the performance as taking place on 26th July 1951, e.g., *Remembering Taspo* 62 years later - Trinidad Guardian <https://share.google/xYojwcPqZUVWCOORs>. However newspaper reports confirm a performance on 27th July. E.g., *Daily Express*, 28 July, 1951, p.3.

¹⁰ For UK performances see, *London Evening News*, 24 August 1951, p. 3; *London Evening News*, 3 September 1951, p. 4; *Edinburgh Evening News*, 10 September 1951, p. 1; *Manchester Evening News*, 21 September 1951, p. 9; *Evening Dispatch*, 26 September 1951, p. 2.



Trinidadian singer and actor Edric Connor, promoting a TASPO concert at St Pancras Town Hall to be held on 9th August, 1951; Credit: photo by Edward Miller, courtesy of Getty Images Black History and Culture Collection.

TASPO's triumphant return to Trinidad fundamentally altered the steelpan's public perception at home. It grew in popularity across class lines, ultimately becoming a cherished national instrument. Their success also inspired a new generation of musicians, and many of the original members would go on to build the global steelpan movement. Sterling Batencourt, the only member to remain in the UK, embedding himself in London's growing carnival movement, receiving many accolades over the years for his contribution to the pan movement, including an MBE for his services to the steel band movement.¹¹ Another member, Belgrave Bonaparte and his Southern Symphony band became the first to secure corporate sponsorship with the ESSO oil company in the mid-1950s.¹² Ellie Mannette settled in the United States, developing a successful pan-making business and teaching steelpan at West Virginia University, widely regarded as the "father of steel pan" in America.¹³ These few examples demonstrate the lasting transnational impact of TASPO throughout decades.

¹¹ <https://www.panpodium.com/sterling-betancourt-mbe-speaks>

¹² <http://www.trinbagopan.com/steelpan/Bonaparte.htm>

¹³ <http://www.mannetteinstruments.com/dr.-ellie-mannette.html>



TASPO members performing at the Festival of Britain, 27th July 1951; Credit: photo by Raymond Kleboe, courtesy of Getty Images Black History and Culture Collection.

MEMBERS OF TASPO:

Joseph Nathaniel Griffith (Bandleader)

Sterling Betancourt

Philmore “Boots” Davidson

Winston “Spree” Simon

Elliot “Ellie” Mannette

Anthony “Tony” Williams

Dudley Smith

Orman “Patsy” Haynes

Belgrave Bonaparte

Theo “Black James” Stephen

Andrew "Pan" DeLaBastide

Carlton “Sonny” Roach¹⁴

¹⁴ Unfortunately Roach did not complete the journey to Britain, having developed tonsillitis on the SS Mateo, he had to disembark at Martinique to seek medical attention.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books and Book Chapters

Cowley, J. (1990). *London is the Place: Caribbean Music in the Context of Empire 1900-60*. In P. Oliver (Ed.), *Black Music In Britain: Essays on the Afro Asian* Cowley, J. (1990). *London is the Place: Caribbean Music in the Context of Empire 1900-60*. In P. Oliver (Ed.), *Black Music In Britain: Essays on the Afro Asian Contribution to Popular Music* (pp. 57-76). Open University Press.

Goddard, G. (1991). *Forty Years in the Steelbands: 1939 - 1979*. Karia Press. Accessed via <http://www.seetobago.org/trinidad/pan/goddard/ggbkfram.htm>

Johnson, K. (2011). *From Tin Pan to TASPO: Steelband in Trinidad, 1939-1951*. The University of the West Indies Press.

Johnson, K. (2011). *The Illustrated Story of Pan*. The University of the West Indies Press.

Littler, J. (2019). 'Festering Britain': the 1951 Festival of Britain, decolonisation and the representation of the Commonwealth. In *Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures*. Routledge.

Journal Articles

Heinonen, A. (2015). *A Tonic to the Empire?: The 1951 Festival of Britain and the Empire-Commonwealth*. *Britain and the World*, 8(1), 76-99. <https://doi.org/10.3366/brw.2015.0168>

Shah, L. M. N., & Shah, H. N. (2020, May). *The Memory of TASPO Lives On; Lineages of this Legendary Steelband Team up to Play on the Streets of Trinidad for Carnival 2018. Where are the Steelbands? What is their Future in Carnival?* *International Journal of Carnival Arts*, 1.

Websites and Web Pages

<https://www.google.com/search?q=https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/philm-ore-boots-davidson-allan-capitan-thornhill>

www.bestoftrinidad.com

www.mypanyard.co.uk

panmedia.com

www.panonthenet.com

www.panpodium.com

www.seetobago.org

whensteeltalks.ning.com

Archival Records

The National Archives: Colonial Office records, London.

CO 876/155: West Indian Students Union, London.

CO 876/156: West Indian Students Union, London.

CO 295/654/10: Visit by minister of education to Britain for Festival of Britain celebrations: representatives from Trinidad.