



Beating Iron

The Development of Steelpan and its Intersection with
History, Science & Technology

By Gabriel J. Christian Esquire ©

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BP Renegades
2023 Trinidad & Tobago
National Panorama Champions
75th Anniversary



The Steeldrum or Steelpan

Only musical instrument created in the 20th Century

In the waning days of summer 2023, when the aroma of backyard barbeques can take on the spice of the Caribbean's culinary contributions to the Washington, D.C metropolitan area, I heard from my friends Luis and Monique McSween. The McSweens are the founders of the CariBeat company- a unique Caribbean enterprise focused on promoting the best in Caribbean arts, culture, education, and cuisine. They are an effervescent couple always on the boil in way of enthusiasm for community, inclusivity, and nation building, they were calling to say that they had organized something grand. They had arranged with the Ministry of Tourism of Trinidad & Tobago for the legendary BP Renegades Steel Orchestra from their island-home of Trinidad & Tobago to visit the United States in the fall of 2023.

BP Renegades is a steel orchestra based in Trinidad and Tobago. The band was founded in 1948 and was initially named "Bad Men of Missouri" and "Dodge City" before adopting the name "Renegades." The legendary BP Renegades Steel Orchestra are the reigning 2023 Trinidad & Tobago National Panorama Champions. The orchestra is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year and plays all kinds of music on what is called steelpan or steel drums. They promised to bring to the D.C area and New York City, their dynamic musical renditions flowing from an instrument indigenous to Trinidad & Tobago. That beating of iron to produce a sweet melody has deep historical roots, and I thought it fitting and proper to make this a teachable moment that allows for all humanity to appreciate the genesis of the art form and its intersection with history, science, and technology.



Black Panther Movie

Black Panther is a 2018 American superhero film based on the Marvel Comics character of the same name.

The Beating of Iron – Our Vibranium

In the movie Black Panther, we are introduced to the magical African kingdom of Wakanda which draws its strength from a metal with mystical superpowers called vibranium. Mastery over the possession and use of vibranium makes Wakanda a powerful nation. While Wakanda is the stuff of movie fiction, it offers insight into the very real history of African ingenuity in ironmaking that historic prejudices covered-up for generations. Such insight into the history of ironworking allows us to better understand the genesis of beating iron on Trinidad and its African roots.

It is the reasoned judgment of most, if not all, historians that the steelpan evolved on the Caribbean island of Trinidad in the Lesser is Antilles; what is now known as the Republic of Trinidad & Tobago. The steelpan, also known as steel drum, is a musical instrument that was developed in the early to mid-1900s in Trinidad. Its roots can be traced back to the drumming tradition of the African descended population on Trinidad who had been brought to the Americas during the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The steel drum is considered the only musical instrument developed in the 20th Century.

The steelpan is believed to have originated from dustbins used as rhythm instruments by the traditional Carnival bands of Trinidad & Tobago in the 1930s. It must be noted that the oil industry in Trinidad started in 1908 with productions facilities around Pointe Fortin and La Brea. That industry evolved into a culture of skilled machinists on the island familiar with

working iron - a skill that had some roots in the management of the ironworks of the sugar mills which dotted the land in the heyday of that industry. An additional factor in the development of steelpan was the need for the 55-gallon oil drum to transport petroleum products during World War II when the island hosted US military bases at the Chaguaramas US Naval Station and Waller Airfield of the US Army Air Force. The modern steel drum evolved from 55-gallon oil drums.

The two pioneers commonly associated with the development of the musical instrument we know as the steel drum today are Winston "Spree" Simon and Ellie Manette. Both Simon and Manette beat the tops of the 55-gallon oil drums into concave shapes with sections made to sound out different musical notes when struck with rubber tipped drumsticks.

This ingenious intersection between science and technology that led to the creation of the steelpan on Trinidad did not occur in a vacuum. To understand the familiarity of Simon and Manette with ironworking, one must first grasp that Trinidad was part of the agro-industrial combine that produced the world's first modern sugar industry in the West Indies. In his 1944 thesis "Capitalism & Slavery," Dr. Eric Williams - the future Prime Minister and independence hero of Trinidad & Tobago - argued that capital accrued from the unpaid labor of Africans impressed into slavery played the key role in developing the British economy. That unprecedented capital formation triggered the Industrial Revolution. However, what is missed in most analyses of the growth of the steelpan is the historical prowess of African descended people in ironworking that goes back to pre-colonial times - as early as 2,000 years BCE.

There is evidence of early iron metallurgy in parts of Nigeria, Cameroon, and Central Africa, from as early as around 2,000 BCE. Iron metallurgy may have been independently developed in the Nok culture between the 9th century BCE and 550 BCE. Indeed, evidence exists that areas of west Asia and Europe developed ironmaking around that same period.

However, in what is a dramatic new piece of scholarship the British **Guardian** newspaper reported that the Industrial Revolution in Britain was enhanced by the use of the Cort process in steel making. In a July 5, 2023 issue of **The Guardian** newspaper, it was explained that the Cort process allowed wrought iron to be mass-produced from scrap iron for the first time. That process was first developed by seventy-six Black Jamaican metallurgists at an ironworks near Morant Bay, Jamaica. Many of these metalworkers were enslaved people, trafficked from west and central Africa, which had thriving iron-working industries at the time. The innovation was later appropriated by the British financier turned ironmaster Henry Cort, who shipped the machinery and the fully fledged innovation to Portsmouth from the Jamaican foundry that was forcibly shut down. The Cort process transformed Britain with structures such as Temperate House at Kew Gardens in London. The transmission of ideas, processes, and skills across the British West Indies, of which Jamaica and Trinidad were once part, flowed from there.

However, prior to colonialism, African civilizations were on the rise and producing advanced innovation in ironmaking. So ubiquitous was iron to early African civilization that there is a God of iron known as Ogun in West African culture. Ogun, also known as the god of war and iron, is a tremendously revered and feared deity in the Yoruba pantheon of deities. According to Yoruba lore, Ogun and the other gods climbed down to earth on a spiderweb. When creation was completed, the gods realized that people needed to clear more land in the forest where they lived. Ogun, being the god of iron, was called upon to help. He used his iron machete to clear the land, and thus became known as the god of clearing paths.

Today, in Africa, the Caribbean, and other parts of the developing world iron must not only allow us to enjoy sweet harmonies; it must also inspire industry. Indeed, it must inspire creative endeavor in agriculture and manufacturing. As of this writing, an Alabama born former marine and IBM executive, Horace Clemmons is on that trajectory. Horace grew up in humble circumstances in Alabama - a state with an outstanding legacy of African American excellence in science and technology rooted in the famous Tuskegee University birthed by educator Booker T. Washington and agriculture scientist Dr. George Washington Carver. Deeply committed to social justice and sustainable development, Horace and his Cuban-born friend Saul Berenthal created the Ogun tractor. The Ogun would serve as an affordable tool for mechanized agriculture in the developing world. In December 2023 Clemmons embarked on an Africa manufacturing project to develop small indigenous tractor factories on the continent and desires to do the same in the Caribbean. Indeed, iron - via the Ogun - is coming full circle to advance food security.



Kleber Tractor Company

Horace Clemmons displays the Ogun (Yoruba for God of Iron)

Let us Continue to Create a Sweet Melody

Science and technology are two distinct concepts that are often used interchangeably. Science is the systematic study of the natural world through observation and experimentation, while technology is the practical application of scientific knowledge to create products that solve problems and improve human life. In other words, science is concerned with understanding the natural world, while technology is concerned with using that understanding to create useful products and services.

STEELPAN AMBASSADORS

The US Navy Steel Band, 1957–1999

Andrew R. Martin



The inventive Trinidadian duo of Simon and Manette were inventors who applied their knowledge of science in creating an innovative technology to produce music – the steelpan. Such a prowess in beating iron represents a harmonious marriage between science and technology that produces the sweet melodies of BP Renegades Steel Orchestra. Others around the world have taken up steelpan and even the US Navy had its own steelpan orchestra between 1957-1999.

See ***“Steelpan Ambassadors – The US Navy Steel Band 1957-1999” by Andrew R. Martin.***

Maybe you won't like steelband. It's possible. But it's been said that the Pied Piper had a steelband helping him on his famous visit to Hamelin. In fact, the story goes, the Piper was only there as a colorful figurehead; something an obscure reporter dreamed up in order to play down the fact that the steelbands wouldn't be invented for another few hundred years. The steelband really could have done it all by itself. Steelbands prove the tale each year at Carnival, in Trinidad, by drawing thousands of people through the streets in a rhythmic shuffle known as the “tramp.” Compared to this, what was the Pied Piper's one night stand?

—US Navy Press Release (1957)¹

One People - One Love of Music

Trinidad & Tobago is a nation peopled primarily by those of African and East Indian descent. There also exist on that blessed island significant European, Chinese, and Middle Eastern indigenous cultural underpinnings that afford that nation a cosmopolitan framework. Out of those disparate strands of humanity situated in one republic have evolved a people with one shared love of music. Such a framework thrives and is attractive where we value the benefits of social harmony born of inclusivity that favors successful nation-building. Such inclusivity cannot thrive where ignorance of our common humanity obscures or denies the positive contributions of any strand that makes up the colorful national fabric.

It is by expanding upon the value of such inclusivity via music and the shared knowledge of our past, that we can continue to create and innovate in the mold of Winston "Spree" Simon and Ellie Manette. They both worked assiduously at beating iron and fashioned sweet melodies that enhanced the lives of all who basked in the glow of their majestic effort.

We salute CariBeat, the Government and people of Trinidad & Tobago, and other community partners for brightening our lives with the BP Renegades Orchestra 75th anniversary tour. May we all enjoy, evermore, the sweet songs that flow from beating the iron of the steelpan.

CariBeat



CariBeat is a Caribbean lifestyle company headquartered in the Washington, D.C Metro area with a mission to bring Caribbean decor, culture, cuisine and apparel to every corner of the world. It is a proudly Caribbean-American, family-owned and an inclusive community-based entity that welcomes the world to be part of a happy Caribbean family.

Happy Vibes forever!

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BP Renegades at the Maryland General Assembly where they were celebrated on December 7, 2023. They were given Maryland Governor Wes Moore's citation by Maryland Governor's Chief of Staff for Community Outreach Gregory.

We thank DC Mayor Muriel Bowser & staff, Maryland Governor Wes Moore & staff, the Ambassador of Trinidad & Tobago, Brigadier General Anthony Phillips-Spencer & Government, the Caribbean Diplomatic Corps, the Law Offices of Gabriel J Christian & Associates, LLC and our many other sponsors and well wishers for supporting this effort.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year from CariBeat!

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