

## **Brooklyn Panyard**

Knolly Moses

By subway it is an hour away from my Madison Avenue job, though in many ways it is much further removed. A nearby mosque blares the call of the muezzin at sundown. Crack sells briskly nearby, although Muslims once sent dealers scampering before television cameras from a local news program. One night, in front of several dozen witnesses, an unwilling victim blasted a mugger with a .357 magnum. Even the police stay in their cars in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn where the Metro Steel Orchestra once rehearsed.

When I first arrived to learn to “play pan,” most members of the steel band seemed bemused. In that milieu, a white collar is more disruptive than a ghetto blaster. To survive two sweltering summer months, I had to win hearts and minds. My determination to learn the instrument bred an unaccustomed humility: those who have mastered what was once a crude and folksy instrument from the ghettos of Trinidad tend toward arrogance. Some saw my presence as an anthropological intrusion. I quickly restored the lilt to my accent, and began taking off my tie a block away. Sometimes, I would buy someone a Guinness Stout, the preferred drink in the panyard. But that soon became a costly concession. So I began to depend on my generally pleasant nature and skill at repartee to reconnect with some fellow West Indians.

I had emigrated from Trinidad, the home of the steel band, 18 years before. Somehow, college and graduate school, marriage, and a journalism career had all gotten in the way of the one thing that I had dreamed of doing since I was about four years old – playing an instrument made from a 55-gallon drum. Growing up when the steel band was a centerpiece for gangs, I was discouraged from associating with it. But many nights in my youth, steel-band music lulled me to sleep. Finally, recognizing my mortality in a sober moment, I decided I could put it off no longer.

I picked Metro because of its brilliant arranger, Clive Bradley. A lover of bigband music, Bradley gave to the terribly dissonant steel instruments some of their finest orchestration. He caresses a calypso melody with the warmth of a Caribbean sun. He structures a tune with such fluid logic that you almost guess his next note. One night I came upon several members of Metro encircling someone who was playing. When I squeezed my way through the group, I found they were listening to a Bradley arrangement that was ten years old. Though it’s not written down anywhere, like most steel-band music, this band member had retained all its beauty and complexity. Among the mostly unemployed immigrants who are Metro’s members, uncoun­ted in this year’s census, I found a treasure trove of human values. I discovered a camaraderie and community that was absent from the Madison Avenue jungle where I worked. Most of all, I uncovered parts of myself that assimilation had so rudely rejected. One band member regularly brought his son to rehearsals, so that mine would have a playmate while I labored to distinguish a sharp from a flat note. An unspoken bond

developed the day I took both boys to the Brooklyn Museum. Eventually, the band member began to teach my son to play the pans, as a way to get a permanent playpal for his son. And I noticed that I was the only person in the band he never begged from. The dreadlocked leader of my section displayed Job-like patience with my inability to master the phrasing of the *soca* music that we rendered. Though often amused by the way I phrased questions, and the questions themselves, he became a teacher and a friend. He put me on an emotional high the night he handed me a Metro band shirt. Both underclass challenge and immigrant hope, it proudly proclaimed: “I was born a Desperado.”

Vincent Yip Young, an experienced pianist, gave me his rubber-tipped sticks to coax mellow tones from the harshly percussive steel. Later, he loaned me one of his instruments, so I could practice at home. He was playing the pans again after a five-year lapse, because his doctor thought it would ease the stress that had nearly crippled him when he began a career as a recording executive. He confessed that playing the pans was the only activity that allowed him to relax.

One hot evening, a man who appeared homeless apart from our rehearsal building, and whose breath stank from inebriation, pulled me aside conspiratorially. He told me the band needed people like myself “to steer the fellas right.” “They are some good boys,” he said, “they just need a break.” He seemed to have gone astray a very long time ago, but he was utterly respectful around me after that.

The talent in Metro is immeasurable. No one called Con Edison to turn on the lights. The burned-out building was made structurally safe without the help of an architect or engineer. The steel frames that house the pans were designed and built almost overnight. Band members made some of the instruments themselves. And while no one reads music, they can play to precision anything they hear. Members would drop delicate hints whenever I played the wrong phrasing.

Band membership rekindled roots, and erased our collective memory of how we were lured to the metropolis. Among these young men, the betrayal of their dream once they arrived in New York is tangible. Very few of them can keep alive the kind of hope that Jesse Jackson so often exhorts. In some ways, this explains why they wanted so badly for Trinidad to win the soccer game that sent the United States to Italy for the 1990 World Cup. Randy Harvey, a sports writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, told me in Trinidad on game day that he had never seen people come together so strongly over sport. He would have been more surprised by the response in the West Indian communities in Brooklyn.

Despite the Madison Avenue influences on my speech and style, I forged a strong bond with these young men. A friend of mine, at whose home Nobel laureate V.S. Naipaul has been a visitor, likes to say that the author’s early work was easy. Vidia, as this friend and I refer to him in our conversations, only had to record the riches he

found in these characters. He simply brought to his writing the same talent that is abundant in the activities of the immigrants. Unfortunately, opportunities were not always forthcoming for them, and those that came along were not as lucrative as Naipaul found in the world of letters. Few of them have been able to turn their talents, and their human values, into currency for the competition they encountered in America.