

Culture Scene

Ebony Special *October 2009*



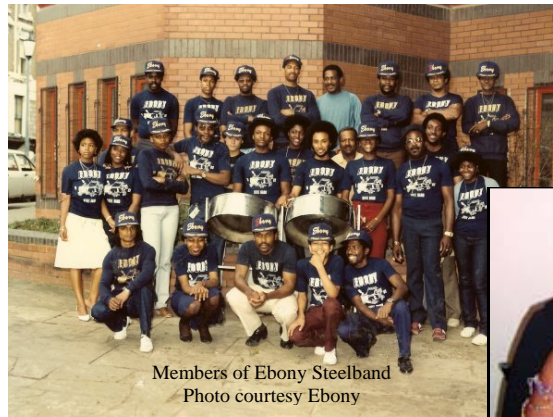
Celebrating 40 Years

Ebony's historical journey began in a humble setting of a chilly autumn of 1969 in Acton, London by Cape James and Winston 'P' Joseph. Cape inherited the steel pans from *The Relatives Steelband* when John Justalyn, a founder of the band passed away. A garden shed at Cape's home became Ebony's first panyard with its original members: Winston 'P' Joseph, Leeford Sylvester, Hugh and Wendell Hargreaves and Cape James. The band comprised of a single cello pan, a set of 4-pan bass, one tenor pan and a double tenor pan.

James proceeded to register the band as the Ebonites Steelband but soon discovered that the name had already been registered and with good intentions, registered the band, 'Ebony Steelband'. And so the birth of Ebony Steelband had joined a family of Caribbean culture already establishing a place into British society.

While Caribbean culture was rapidly growing in Britain, though it was not graciously accepted as Cape and his fellow members found out. The garden shed where they practiced would often be pelted with potatoes and stones. Apart from the cold weather, snow and the presence of racism, Ebony rose to the challenges and soon had the neighbours warming towards the pans and their musical genre. They played songs such as, 'Hey Jude' and 'English Country Garden'.

With these tunes echoing from the pans it soon brought one the neighbours, a Director of a Cricket Club requesting their musical services at the Cricket Club's Bar-B- Que. These humble beginnings became the foundation on which Ebony built on to become



Members of Ebony Steelband
Photo courtesy Ebony



Geraldine Connor
Photo courtesy Trinidad Guardian

one of the UK's top steelband with eighteen Panorama titles in their 40 year history. Cape James along with the other members of Ebony harnessed a cultural strength from their love for the steel pan and inculcated their passion and dedication into Ebony.

The first steel band arrived in Britain in the form of TAPSO. Trinidad All Percussion Steel Orchestra in 1951 led by Lt Griffiths to perform at the Festival of Britain at Festival Hall. Through this venture the steel pan became part of the Caribbean culture to take root in the UK through the Diaspora. Although TAPSO toured England and Europe, West Indians were still starved of this musical phenomenon until the sound of a single pan resonated through the streets of Notting Hill. The rhythms of the steel captivated every West Indian in the environs of Notting Hill in 1964 and became the catalyst to what is known today as the Notting Hill Carnival.

This new development kick started a revolution in carnival culture and many elements of carnival culture began to emerge from individual costumes to carnival bands and steel bands, one of them, Ebony.

By 1970s the national instrument of Trinidad & Tobago was fast becoming popular in UK and attracting not just Caribbean people, but British folks as well. The popularity not only brought people to listen to pan, it also encouraged growth of the culture with a new generation showing enthusiasm in learning to play the instrument.

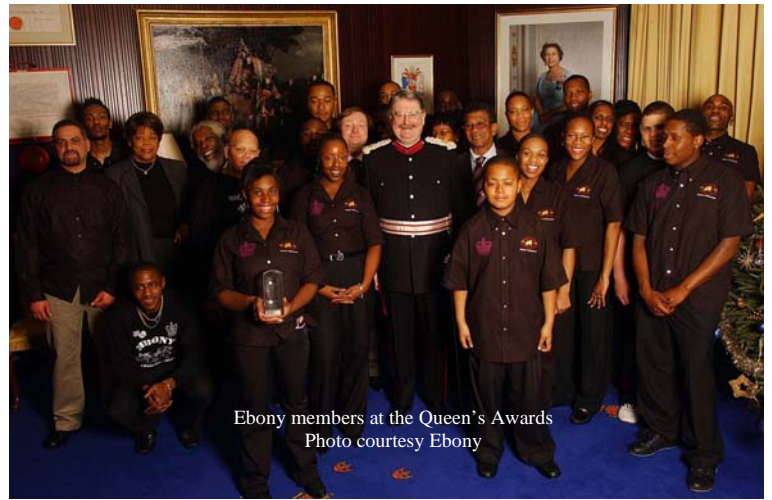
Ebony's membership began to increase with new members such as; Randolph Baptiste, David Mark, Carl Gabriel, Mclean Julien, Hollis Clifton, Isaac McGilvery, Hugh and Wendell Hargreaves, Earl Lewis, Ian Hutchinson, Lee Sylvester, and Pepe Francis previously who played with Ebonites Steelband in Trinidad.

Ebony began making inroads on the entertainment circuit playing at Qualingues Hotel in the West End and the Clarendon in Hammersmith. They also performed at an annual event put on by the Trinidad & Tobago Nurses Association.

Ebony as a steelband began to gain momentum in the entertainment circles and their first gig was the on the Isle of Wight where they performed the late Lord Kitchener's 'The road make to walk on carnival day'. It was from here that the band, in its infant stages began to progress despite the many challenges that they faced one of which was accommodating the growing membership and finding an adequate premises for the band to practice as well as housing the bands instruments. Despite the challenges faced, Ebony persevered and by 1973 they accompanied Notting Hill Carnival first complete masquerade band *Headhunters*, designed and led by the late Lawrence Noel.

The 70s also saw Ebony emerge as a masquerade band as Bertie Delandro, Keith Lakan and Doreen formed the committee that was responsible for the costume design and production of Ebony.

By 1975 they had their first female Pannist and with the assistance of the Lewis and Quashie family Ebony continued to press ahead with promoting carnival arts of Trinidad and Tobago in the UK.



Ebony members at the Queen's Awards
Photo courtesy Ebony

In 1976 the popular television show *Opportunity Knocks* hosted by Hughie Greene became a stepping stone for Ebony and a platform for showcasing the musical brilliance of the steel pan.

The band composed and played for their appearance on the show 'Steel Away' sung by popular London's leading calypsonian Lord Cloak. The same year saw a milestone for Ebony when, they performed at the Royal Albert Hall where they were received with rapturous appreciation for their musical skills. Ebony also played with Mick Jagger and the *Rolling Stones* at London's Earls Court where the Stones kicked off their World Tour.

The UK's National Panorama Championship began in 1978 and Ebony has participated in every Panorama competition since its inception. However, the Panorama title has always eluded Ebony.

After five years and with the title seemingly drifting away from them Pepe Francis employed the services of Kenrick Isadore in 1982 to arrange the band's Panorama tune. Pepe's strategy and Isadore's arrangement propelled Ebony into a new light when they place third at the 1982 event.



Realator and R. Baptiste
Photo courtesy Ebony





Bertie Delandro
Photo cashewmedia

Following this promotion and the ever expanding membership of the band Pepe wasted no time and harnessed the skills of Geraldine Connor. Her intervention in the band along with the pan tuning skills of Dudley Dickson guided Ebony to their first Panorama victory in 1983.

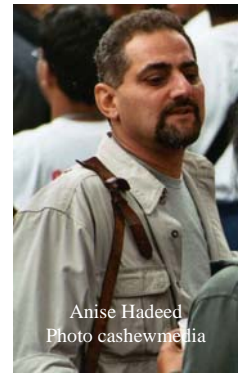
Mary Frank assisted Ebony with their classical pieces and later Anise Hadeed moved up the ranks at Ebony where along with Geraldine and the pristine tuning skills of Dudley, helped to steer Ebony into becoming one of the most successful steel bands not just in the UK but in Europe.

The band never looked back after their 1983 success which led to a succession of achievements by Ebony under the leadership of Pepe Francis and his team of musical maestros that set Ebony on a course for UK and European dominance of steelband music.

Ebony's achievements not only boast 18 Panorama titles, nine of which was won in consecutive years (1991-1999) in its thirty one years, they also placed third in the home of steel pan, Trinidad and Tobago in the 2002 World Steelband Music Festival. The band was specially invited by the Greek Cultural Department to perform at the celebration of Alexander the Great's 200th Birthday at the Amphitheatre in Thessaloniki. In 2000 and 2002 the European Steelband Music Festival in Paris and the Netherlands, the Moods of Pan Festival in Antigua in 2005, the International Cricket World Cup in Delhi, India and FIFA World Cup in Germany in 2006 and the Fortune Cup in 2008 in Abu Dhabi. Ebony also performed for the Royal family of Morocco at their palace in Rabat as well as toured the African countries of Nigeria and Malawi while back in the UK with annual performances at Buckingham Palace. One of Ebony's significant achievements was the Queen's Award for Voluntary work in the community which was awarded in 2005. The award is a milestone for Ebony as it is the only black organisation in the UK to receive the award and one that is based in the metropolis.



Pepe Francis
Photo cashewmedia



Anise Hadeed
Photo cashewmedia

The success of Ebony is not only built on winning but also its contribution to the community in which it exists and serves. Ebony are currently embarked on a number of charitable and education projects that not only promotes the culture of the steel pan but extending the culture to the underprivileged, the disabled and delivering steelpan music to those in prisons, hospitals and academic institutions.

Among these projects is **The Ebony Steelband Millennium Volunteers Project** committed to teaching youth between the ages of 16-24 the art of playing the steel pan and are then awarded with a Millennium Volunteers Certificate. Similarly, the **Ebony Steelband Youth Project** is designed to teach children 15 and under to play pan. The **Ebony Outreach Programme** is engaged in teaching the history of the instrument and working to have steel pan music integrated into the mainstream genre, encouraging people with disabilities and other cross sections of society to embrace the steel pan culture. Although based in the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea, Ebony is currently piloting a scheme in Newham specially geared towards young people.

Ebony's future sits on a solid foundation that has been a pillar of its success through the years of dedication and commitment, expedited by their members from inception to present. However, the band is yet to realise financial self sufficiency in an environment where funding, grants and sponsorships are rapidly evaporating. Despite the fact that Ebony still has to rely on small grants and sponsorship to maintain itself they have partnered themselves with Yaa Asantewa, Mangrove Steelband and the ABC (Association of British Calypsonian) to form what is now known as the Carnival Village.

The collaboration has seen the refurbishment of the Tabernacle, a venue that has a history associated with carnival, pan and calypso. Carnival Village now comprises of two venues that incorporates the village, the other venue is located at The Yaa Centre in Chippenham Mews, where Ebony will find a permanent home. The refurbishment to these venues was made possible by a £4.2 million grant from the Arts Council.

Pepe Francis admitted it has been one of his ambitions to secure a permanent home for Ebony. "When the Yaa Centre is completed that will be Ebony's home, at the moment we don't have a premises." The new venue will serve as a permanent home for the band, an achievement that Ebony have always strived for over the years.

To commemorate Ebony's forty years in the steelband business, a series of events are planned, one of them is an exhibition at the Carnival Village in October that will coincide in conjunction with Black History Month, also an awards function that will chart Ebony's history as well as other events yet to be announced.

Ebony has achieved world status as far as steel band is concerned; however, one coveted title has eluded Ebony, **The World Steelband Music Festival**. "To win that title would be the icing on the cake for me," admitted Pepe. "Another thing I would like to see happen is an International Panorama competition. We are currently in talks with other countries but there are some stumbling blocks".

For forty years Ebony has weathered the difficulties that presented itself to the band however, Ebony has triumphed through all its tribulations to emerge through hard work and dedication that has earned them 18 UK Panorama titles, an achievement that is almost near to impossible to equal.

After almost six decades of pan in the UK, it is without doubt that Ebony has set standards by which others will seek to emulate to take steel band culture into a new realm where the steel pan would be an intrinsic part of any orchestra of any genre.

David Kalloo



Anyone who is interested in becoming a member of Ebony Steelband can contact

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Patrons:

Paul Boateng MP

Mr Billy Ocean

Geraldine Connor

Prof. Ian Hall

Ms Karen Buck MP

Board Members:

Director - Pepe Francis

Administrator - Michelle Francis

Chairperson - Ian Comfort

Company Secretary - Debi Gardner

Trustees - Stephen Cole, David Curtis,

Rev. Pat Stephens, Clyde Bacchus, Christabel Bacchus

Band Manager - Albert Faustine



Billy Ocean
Photo cashewmedia

