

the enchanted steelband

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1047 **COOK**

Percy Thomas Steel Orchestra
recorded in Port-of-Spain

magic in Woodford Square

The strange old man turns an incredible, lopsided somersault and rattles off some energetic gibberish. A few bystanders watch attentively. Enormous baggy blue pants, black shirt, bare feet and a grayish beard all gyrate wildly in the dance. His flying right hand holds an uncapped glass jar from which, miraculously, not a drop spills. He raises it briefly to his lips as if to kiss it, then he and the beard do another dry rolling left-handed cartwheel.

You can still hear these drums on the record; in the square, a soft *bum ti-dum* pervades the atmosphere. Through it, from the big tree by the bandstand, long red-dish shadows reach out on the grass. In the slight cool breeze the shadows dance to the rhythm. Couples sit or stroll, waiting for quick tropical twilight to pass over into evening. This is Port-of-Spain, and tonight Percy Thomas and the steel orchestra are to play.

"Wanga!" cries the old man; everyone looks at him, and at that moment the slim erect form of Percy Thomas appears on the bandstand.

We hurry to finish the field recording set-up before light fails. Percy starts to warm up his wrists, driving the ping-pong hammers hard in the air near the edge of the pan. Eleven men follow suit, except for the drummer, who continues the distant *bum ti-dum*. The discipline of this band is an inspiration; one can tell, — Captain Percy is feared and worshipped by these men. He rehearses them unmercifully, five nights a week, until they don't have to *think* to play. Now, like a dozen radios they are all tuned in on Thomas.

The Thomas hammers disappear momentarily in a hummingbird blur, and then are still. Looking to the north and south against the distant streetlights a huge crowd is silhouetted, all arrived simultaneously on the dot of nightfall. Dim lights at one side of the stand reveal the old man crouched at the foot of the tree, pouring a little water out of his jar into the earth. His head bobbles precariously on his shoulders. *Bum ti-dum*. The tight inner circle of the crowd is moving very slowly in step around the bandstand, counterclockwise.

Now the band is playing, and bewitching music floats over the square like a cloud. Sopranos rise up over a fifty-voice male chorus in celestial pitch. Everything disappears into the starry sky, and time stops running until the music is finished. The old man is face up and motionless on the ground. Gripped rock-tight in both hands, what looks like a feather duster points straight up from his chest. Eyes stare unseeing into space. The tips of the feathers tremble a little.

Papayo is in a possession, so! No one seems to pay much attention to him, all eyes are on Thomas and the orchestra. But they *do* care; that inner spring still unwinds imperceptibly around the stand to help him safely from his seizure. *Bum ti-dum!* The orchestra bursts into music again.

Playing, the band is intent, lost in flying hammers. Sometimes after a number there is a sprinkling of applause, sometimes not. It is hard to say who is the more spellbound when Percy Thomas plays, orchestra or audience.

This vast crowd was rooted to the spot for hours. Now that the concert is over, they have vanished. Old *papayo* is gone, too, but his glass jar stays, over there under the big tree.

Woodford Square is very quiet. In the distance there is the faint sound of a steelband safe indoors, rehearsing.

Curious, I pick up the jar; it is empty. I smell of it; there was no rum.

Enchanted? Well, I think so.

Emory Cook



photo: Cook (1/500 sec.)

... hammers ... a hummingbird blur



Percy Thomas

Side A:

Love Is A Many Splendored Thing

Katzberg

Jean and Dina

Shaver Man

Off Shore

Side B:

The Breeze and I

Tiana

Wonderful Illusion

Anna

Mama Poule

Port of Spain

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