

MC 1040

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OF STEELBAND MUSIC AND CALYPSO

Science and Education

DURING those years when "Black Awareness" assumed cult-type followings, Afro-American activist "Rap" Brown observed, "some people have 'natural' hair but they still have 'processed' minds."

Before Trinidad and Tobago acquired its Independent status, political activists in our midst blamed the British colonisers for the lack of knowledge of "we own history" and non-appreciation of "that which is ours."

As Trinidad and Tobago nears a quarter of a century as an independent nation, some of us who are mere citizens must be forgiven if we assume that a large percentage of our decision makers still have "colonised minds."

It must also be recognised that "ordinary citizens" are, as a rule very supportive of "we own t'ing," for example of steelband music and calypso, and much more so than are our "leaders."

Twenty-five years after Independence, the decision makers have yet to create any kind of showcase where nationals and visitors can go to be acquainted with the history and development of steelband, calypso, Carnival and Parang.

I have been forced to reflect on this official "sin crying to heaven for vengeance" through the circulation in New York City of an attractive little book

written by John E. Slater.

Titled "The Advent of the Steelband" (and My Life and Times with It) this book is receiving word of mouth recommendation in the Caribbean communities, and among the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago in particular.

The author's acknowledgement shows that some TT officials do have their heads in the right place, for he identifies the encouragement of Consul-General Babooram Rambisoon and Consulate staffer Lloyd Joseph for illustrating the book.

He was also assisted, the author said, by Selwyn King and Janet Gamble.

The book's author is revealed to be a veteran pianist whose involvement dates back to "pioneer times."

His book also emphasises that "ordinary people," people who would be identified by some as "culturally deprived" who perhaps, not knowing that they were supposed to be "stunted creatively," proceeded to invent not one, but an entire group of musical instruments.

Vidya Naipaul, whose creative genius is unquestioned, once said of the steelband: "... it is now regarded as an art form but it is a sound I detest...."

It is possible he is not the only one of our intellectuals who feels this way, which may be why the steelband, like other aspects of Trinidad and Tobago's creative output, has not been regarded as worthy of showcasing in a Museum.

Slater is not, of course, the first person to write a book about steelbands.

Several of them have been produced, most notably one by educationist Sylvia Gonzales which should have been used in schools.

Some steelbands also had their history recorded and in fact; one of my most valued possessions is

"The History of the Casablanca Steelband" given to me by Oscar Pyle.

It was actually after a very educating interview with Pyle at his home, on the ground floor of one of the buildings at "La Court Harpe," that I first recognised the urgent need for a

Steelband Museum.

The same mentality that decided to change that beautiful and melodious name of "La Court Harpe" to one which reflects sterile "imitation British" respectability, continues apparently to prevent the recording of the important aspects of Trinidad and Tobago's people and their contribution to the nation and to the world.

Casual visitors as well

as sociologists who study "in depth" the society of our country, often remark on the sophistication and general broadmindedness of most people.

It is this which allows appreciation for the subtle wit of our calypsonian. This wit can be compared (with no apologies) to that of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Aristophanes.

Trinidadians and Tobagonians do not have to be apologetic about the behavioural pattern, the places of origin, or even the personal weaknesses of the individuals who are responsible for our collective creative inheritance.