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Pan tops French folk fes

THE HYDRO AGRI Skiffle Bunch steelband brought home the top award from the Montoire Folklore Festival, which took place at the height of the French summer and attracted large audiences.

The 19-member group, easily the most travelled steelband of its size, spent most of the six weeks of the festival period touring with contingents from 20 other countries and performing in six cities.

The festival played in Le Puy, Montignac, Saintes, Concarneau, Feletin and the host city Montoire, where audiences averaged 2,500 per performance. After the tour concluded, a Best of the Best concert, which was presented in Paris, attracted some 10,000 patrons.

As a way of enhancing the celebration of its 25th year, organisers of the Montoire Folklore Festival decided that pan should be brought into the programme and since 1993 had been specifically wooing the Hydro Agri (then TCL) Skiffle Bunch to represent this aspect of our folk art.

At the end of the festival, the band was adjudged the Most Outstanding Act of the festival and awarded a solid gold medal the size of a fried bake, for winning from the other 20 groups. Voting was done by the leaders of all 21 contingents and (always the magnanimous people that we are) Trinidad and Tobago actually voted for Russia, but at the count emerged winners instead.

Junior Regrello, captain and manager of the Hydro Agri Skiffle Bunch, explained the rationale to the *Express*. "We were thinking that the Russian troupe had presented such a combination of arts, that our playing pan was only one aspect of our culture and could not possibly be more appreciated", he said.

Regrello further explained that their sabre dance was being executed at extraordinary speed, without substituting grace and good choreography, both of which were essential to the very survival of the dancers, who needed to retain their heads in the face of this swash-buckling movement that required performers to thrust and parry—with razor-sharp swords.

"I mean we were watching them doing a dance at high speed, with men thrusting swords at each other and taking swipes at the other persons neck and you kind of get to the point that you feel that someone may lose a limb. We could not think that anything could beat that for visual excitement", he said.

A still amazed Regrello described the heightening of anxieties among his band members, when the dancers shifted into high gear, using spears in the execution (oops!) of a certain movement.

"Oh, don't get me wrong, for our part of the shows we jammed. We introduced them to the combination of calypso and pan through songs like "Mind Yuh Business" and "Mash Up The Party" and we were literally kicking "Dus' in They Face", but the Russians had given two hours of relentless song, dance and music.

"Many of the other groups were fantastic too, so it was no runaway for pan and—yes—it did come as a pleasant surprise".

Other pleasant experiences came from the production of the festival. Yes, it provided a lot of good comparisons too, like how these people prepare for an event like this and how the committee which was working on the 1998 Festival was already going at high speed, even while the 1997 contracts were being finalised and the 1996 show was on stage.

In fact, they contacted us during a tour in Belgium since back in 1993. We were doing a workshop between shows and the Montoire organisers were there scouting for new acts and unusual folk arts. There was no end of following up by the organisers, resulting in our performance there from July 9 to August 19.

"These people really go to great lengths to make the performers feel at home. We have self-contained coaches in which we travel around and meals are catered to facilitate special diets, religion and other preferences.

"They demand details about the size and shape of instruments more than a year before we even ship a pan and they have drawings about exactly where we will be located for each

performance and how they will pack the instruments. These are technical drawings everything works out exactly as planned as there is nobody holding their heads and screaming at showtime.

They even plan attendance at church for the members (in France you have to go to church when on tour). We played there too on one particular Sunday, as we struck the Hallelujah Chorus, the service really turned into a Trini kind of mas".

Regrello is therefore not altogether shocked that pan could completely overwhelm the top f artists of 20 other countries, causing them to declare our national musical instrument as the players of the Hydro Agri Skiffle Bunch the most outstanding act of the festival.

He has been touring with Skiffle Bunch (which actually means a travelling group of troubadours) since 1969, eschewing the lull North American razmataz for the more lucrative UK/Europe circuit and on all of these tours, people still have the same kinds of questions and wish to touch the instrument and peep underneath to see if the playing of the topside activates some other known instrument hidden below the skirt of the pan.

When it was decided that they would be touring band, The Skiffle Bunch opted for markets where they would not be playing to identifiable West Indian audiences, which may have grown so accustomed to the instrument and its music that no new ground would be gained. There was also the dilemma of whether to please the roots crowd or milk fresh circuits which had the capacity to routinely offer large audiences, without fear of being patronised only by the same returning bunch of Trini expatriates.

Not that the band scoffs at pleasing fellow nationals abroad, but "Pan is also a business says Regrello, "and many people get tied up with just the excitement that the players transmit to audiences and forget that entertainers should be paid like everyone else.

"We have played for our people whenever

By TERRY JOSEPH

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CONTINGENTS from 21 countries gather at the start of the Montoire Folklore Festival in France. The Hydro Agri Skiffle Bunch (see sign at left) represented Trinidad and Tobago.

s French folk festival

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we were asked to, says Regrello. In fact, we broke the Montoire Festival tour to fly to Norway to perform at the game when our youth football team was playing. Right after the festival (from August 21 to 24) we played at the Southbank Carnival Extravaganza and then on Independence Day in London, our band was one of the groups appearing at a concert thrown at the prestigious Wembley Conference Centre, by the Trinidad and Tobago High Commission there".

The show, designed and directed by mas man Wayne Berkeley, attempted to feature all aspects of local culture. It was jointly hosted by Trevor McDonald and actors Rudolph Walker and Corrine Skinner-Carter.

The show featured Ella Andall and the Skiffle Bunch, The Mighty Tiger (a London-based calypsonian), The Chinese Spiritual Baptist Choir (which was specially flown in for the event), The Baal Vikaas group, The BT Melodians, Kerwin du Bois, three opera singers (Neil Latchman, Simone Sauphanor and Roberto Salvatori), the North West Laventille Folk group, Mungal Patasar and Pantar, Tricia Lee Kelshall and Marie Joseph-Montano (representing the Syrian/Lebanese community).

"It was a good show and I think that Patrick Edwards and High Commissioner Shellagh de Osuna should be praised instead of pilloried for the effort", he said.

At the end of that show too, the Hydro Agri Skiffle Bunch came out winners, with the crowd calling for even more.

Regrello left Trinidad this morning to rejoin the band in Italy for a three-week tour.

The Hydro Agri Skiffle Bunch will be missing next month's Steelband Music Festival this time around. Regrello said that the management of the band "weighed their options and decided to continue touring Europe.

The cost of preparing for the Festival sometimes far outweighs the optimum accruals from participation", he says.

It seems clear that the larger prizes are to be won in a different place altogether.

By TERRY JOSEPH