

A new dawn for panmen?

By SELWYN TARRADATH PRO, Pan Trinbago

KEN GORDON, Minister of State Enterprises and Tourism made a very strong statement at the launching of the World Steelband Festival recently. He said that in the new tourism thrust, the steelband will be playing a most important role.

We in the steelband movement have long bemoaned the fact that no one in authority seems to recognise the vast potential that this unique art form has in securing much-needed foreign exchange.

Drawing Power

Recent events have proved that the steelband, which we take for granted at home, has tremendous drawing power abroad.

The drop in oil prices has awakened us from our inertia and given rise to a mad rush to discover alternate sources of revenue.

We have been sitting on a gold mine for the longest while and the empty oil drums can well fill the void left by the glut in crude.

The steelband has in the past, been projected mainly as an ingredient in the Carnival culture which has been exported to metropolitan countries where there has been a large concentration of West Indian immigrants.

Commercial Form

Even in North America, most natives still regard the steelband as exotic island sounds, but with the recent exposure given to our more competent bands, music connoisseurs are beginning to recognise the art form for what it is, a very sophisticated and welcome addition to the world of music.

There have been attempts in the past to promote the steelband in a commercial form. Hugh Borde's Esso Tripoli steelband, after being a hit at the Expo '67 World Trade Fair, won themselves a contract with the famous

pianist Liberace.

This relationship saw the steelband being given priority exposure on the West Coast entertainment circuit. Tony Williams and the Pan Am North Stars had also forged a very attractive combination with our internationally-renowned pianist Winnifred Atwell.

These ensembles were giving credibility to the instrument in the U.S.A. while entrepreneur Amral Khan was very successful in tapping the vast Far Eastern markets taking small sides to places like Australia, Thailand, Malaysia, India and Hong Kong.

The initiative used by the individuals, bands and promoters was never appreciated or matched by the powers-that-were. To this day, there has never been a national policy on pan.

Fragile Grounds

Steelbands were given overseas tours only as a political consideration usually accompanying a high-powered Government delegation as a diplomatic weapon to woo over politicians in foreign lands. The commercial value of the instrument was never properly addressed, but of course

in those days we were an oil rich country.

The lack of support at home left our pioneers at marketing the steelband on fragile grounds. Differences of opinions often surfaced, which led to the disintegration of bands and most of the players going their separate ways, many establishing themselves comfortably as musicians and entertainers.

There are thousands of pannists making a living by their art in nightclubs in North and South America, The Bahamas, Jamaica, England and the European continent.

Unfortunately the exposure given is very limited when compared to that received by Desperadoes and Phase II on their recent Daily News-sponsored tours of New York City.

This country is being given another golden

opportunity to expose the steelband to the world on September 11 '88 when the live telecast of the Sports Aid Race Against Time is beamed simultaneously

from seven capital cities around the world. Each of these telecasts will feature one of the top steelbands performing on location.

July 31, 1988