

OUR OPINION

STOP TAKING PAN FOR GRANTED

A MEETING of regional steelband officials is scheduled to be held in Grenada later this month with a view of forming a Caribbean Steelband Association to further develop the art among member states.

It is an indication of the extent to which the instrument, indigenous to this country, has captured the imaginations of the region's peoples and the influence it has had on Caribbean culture.

If steelbandmen are now considering setting up the organisational structure to develop the art further in the Caribbean, it is only because the message of the music which went out first has been heard, art prevailing over the insularities that still divide us.

Indeed, while our Prime Minister can justly feel satisfied with the financial contribution Trinidad and Tobago has made towards the integration process, he can feel equally satisfied with the cultural contribution our country has made in that area, steelband, perhaps being the most popular evidence of this.

Steelband and its twin, calypso for certainly, in the Eastern Caribbean it is the dominant popular music form, a truth sustained by increasing evidence not only of the acceptance of Trinidad's calypsonians in the other islands, but in the manner in which their top calypsonians have managed to impinge on its development.

Indeed, at this point in time, our own Penguin is creating a record of sorts in St. Vincent, he being the first artiste to have four songs from one album on that country's hit parade. That stature has not been given to Penguin here, a fact that may speak more about differing tastes than any notion that we, here, are not giving our own their just due — although the larger case can be made out for this on the basis of the amount of airplay given steelband and calypso in other islands as compared to the country from which both sprung.

It has been argued, validly, by the representative steelband organisation in Trinidad and Tobago, Pan Trinbago, that the art form has not been given its just due by the powers-that-be.

In addition, the organisation indirectly chided Mr. Chambers, lamenting, as it did, "the fact that the initiative had to be taken by the head of another Caribbean government, for such a long overdue project for Caribbean development."

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may yet serve them well if in their regional deliberations they insist that focus be placed on steelband's Trinidad origins throughout its regional and international promotion.

We make this point not out of misguided chauvinism but because we are aware that there have been attempts in the past to steal that bit of cultural thunder from us and it happens to be a national treasure that we will guard as the Jamaicans, for example, quite rightly guard their "reggae."

Looking at the agenda for the Grenada meeting one is struck by the way how it mirrors many of the concerns of our own steelbandmen here, proof positive that Pan Trinbago has influenced to a notable degree the proposed deliberations.

Among them are the standardisation of all steelband instruments, the declaration of a national pan policy by Caribbean governments, the holding of workshops and the establishment of a regional centre for pan to conduct training experiments and other similar activities and the possibilities of getting regional governments to introduce the art of pan playing in schools.

That, given the Trinidad experience, is an agenda, laden with difficulties for example, the lack of success that has attended every effort to achieve the standardisation of Trinidad and Tobago's instruments over the years. Indeed, given the natural individualism of the country's tuners and the fierce loyalties that bands and their supporters have for a particular "sound," it may well be that a regional thrust would have a better chance of success on this particular issue.

That apart, one cannot help but feel that the outstanding pan agenda is a reflection of just how much we have left undone. In fact, the president of the Grenada Steelband Association, David Edwards, has been quoted both as saying that the preservation and development of the regional steelband movement should be addressed at a regional level and not by individual states and that a regional approach to this "burning issue" was needed because the art of steelband music should be preserved and strengthened since it was on the decline in the region.

Many steelband commentators here share this view and while that conclusion ignores the musical strides that have been made, there is no question but that a new dynamism is required if we are to raise pan to its true potential.