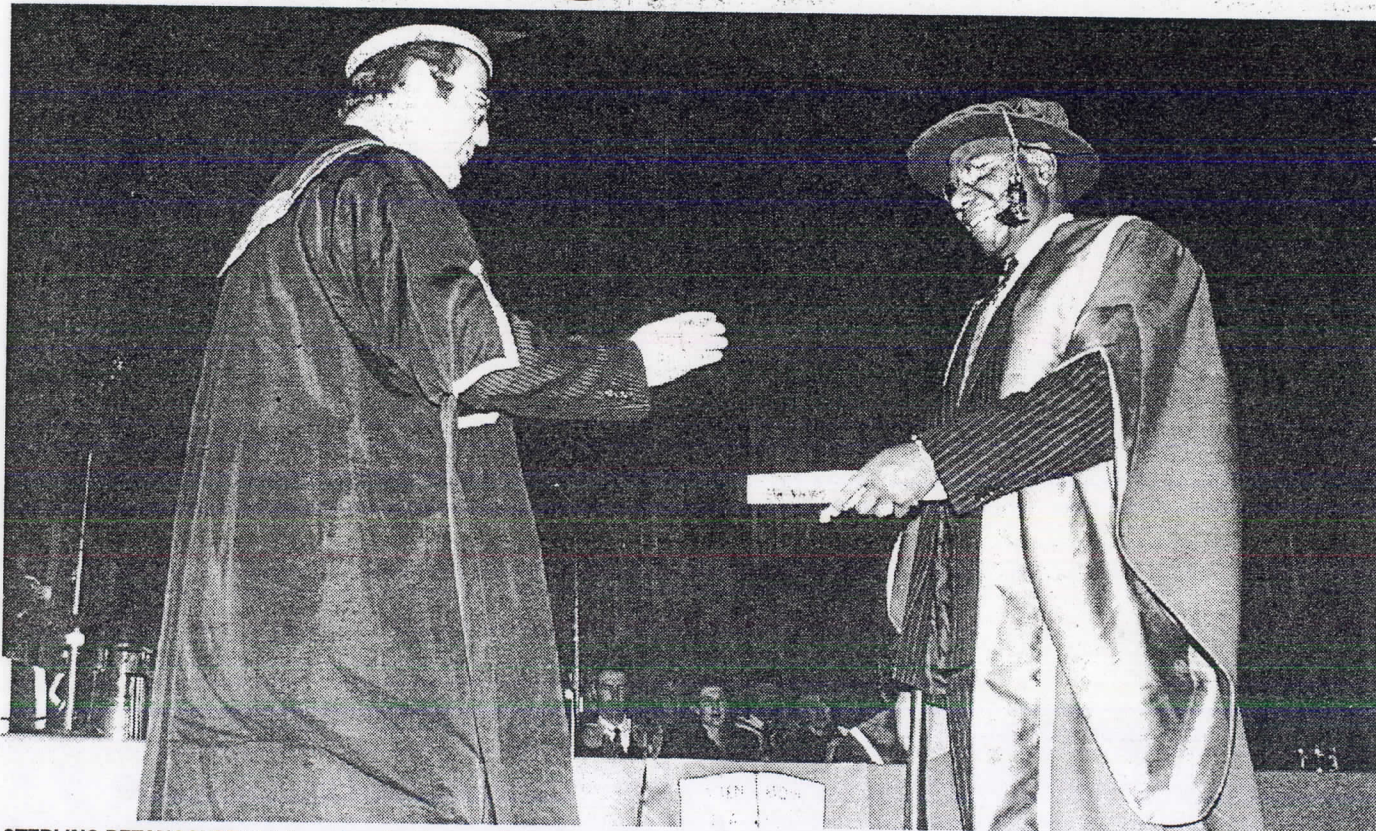


# A sterling contribution to pan honoured



**STERLING BETANCOURT** (right) receives the Honorary Fellowship of the University of East London in recognition of his work in teaching and promoting traditional steelband music.

By **SELWYN TARRADATH**

**STERLING BETANCOURT** is a name synonymous with the pioneering of the steelband phenomenon, more so in Europe than in Trinidad and Tobago, his native country, as Betancourt has been a resident in England since 1952 when he returned to that country after a tour with the highly successful TASPO steel orchestra in 1951.

Betancourt is indeed a pioneer of the steelband movement. Born in 1930, he was soon involved with the bamboo bands from an early age.

When the bamboo gave way to the metal bands and eventually the early steelbands, Betancourt was right on spot in the heat of the action. He became one of the first pan tuners and ping pong exponents and formed the Cross-fire steelband on leaving Laventille to settle in St James.

Betancourt was an obvious choice when a national steelband was formed in 1950 to attend the Festival of Britain the next year in London.

He along with 11 of the best panmen, were brought together to form the Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra, which made a great impact in London and Paris and legitimised the claim of the fledgling steelband body as representing a serious musical and cultural movement, in its early stages of evolution.

Betancourt saw the potential for self development abroad and returned to London as soon as he could, to establish roots there and spread the culture of steelband music.

Along with other steelband pioneers of that era, such as Russel Henderson, Gerald Forsyth, "Zigilee" Constantine

and Natsie Contante, he made steelband music popular not only in Britain but also on the European continent.

Some Swiss-Germans were interested in forming a steelband in Switzerland and were referred to Betancourt, who was instrumental in pioneering the steelband movement in that country.

They now have 80 registered steelbands in Switzerland, with a vibrant newsletter informing the whole steelband world of their activity. They even have a pan factory in that country, which supplies Europe with instruments.

Betancourt has received many honours for his lifelong work with the art form. These include an award ceremony by a New York based organisation in November 1993, in honour of the surviving members of TASPO and, recently, Pan Trinbago honoured him at the Brian Lara Promenade in a special concert at which he performed with the La Creole Pan Groove, a band that he arranges for.

His most recent honour was given in his adopted country. The University of East London has just bestowed on him an Honorary Fellowship, granted by the board of Governors and the Academic Board, in recognition of his work in teaching and promoting traditional Caribbean steelband music.

The youthful looking, 66-year-old Sterling Betancourt is, however, not finished with his contribution to the steelband that has been his life's work.

(Selwyn Tarradath is education officer of Pan Trinbago)