



Andy Norell



PHASE 11 Pan Grove (left) and Desperadoes on stage during this year's Panorama.

THE ANCIENT MARINER

Maybe it is too late already. Carnival planning starts earlier and earlier each year, so maybe what follows can only be considered for 1988.

No matter. Recently the Tourist Board asked the media to be constructive so I propose to write a short series of articles — not all together — on various aspects of Carnival, as seen through the eyes of a typical tourist.

Up to now Trinidad Carnival has enjoyed an excellent reputation but its thrust is mainly in participation and then mostly by our own peoples. It is much less a spectator even than say, our rival Carnivals in Rio and New Orleans. If the Tourist Board plans go through we may see a gradual shift of emphasis. Like it or not, we should be prepared.

Choice Of Target

This time my choice of "target" is the steelband and in particular the Panorama pre-Carnival shows.

First exposure to the steelband often occurs in a romantic poolside setting, with a relatively small band playing recognisable melodies. It is charming, romantic and incongruous. Usually contrasting with a Northern hemisphere winter, this aspect of Trinidad and Tobago lives well up to expectations.

The natural reaction is "where can I see more?" — and quite often the answer is "go to one of the Panorama shows at the Grandstand."

The contrast could not be greater. Very late next morning our tourist will wake up and wonder if it was worth it. He is still sore and bemused. Truly he was out of his depth. Was he even considered? Here are some of his complaints.

A High Price

First off, he paid a high price for the privilege of sitting on a hard metal seat for an extraordinarily long time. No comfortable hotel armchair, hovering waiters and creature comforts.

Discomforts, more like. He probably found someone else already in his seat and had to make do elsewhere.

The stage is totally empty of all softening decoration but overhead is a confusion of most unattractive wiring and lighting.

The backdrop is merely the North Stand on the far side — later this becomes a focus of some amusement for its audience participation. His view of the stage is impeded by numerous officials, photographers or just mere limers — although of course he doesn't know that word.

It is all depressing from the outset. Scheduled starting time comes and goes. Maybe half an hour later, without any apology, the first band appears on stage — not marching on

Panorama and the tourist

Something must be done to make it more enjoyable

with some sort of fanfare, but ambling on and not yet playing. It takes another 15 minutes to get set up and ready.

The first thing that strikes him is the sheer size of the band. It looks like a massed band or its equivalent in his home country. He begins to wonder if this is it — or maybe just one or two more like it.

Little does he know the extent of the pan players in this country. He will get some idea before the night is out.

The next thing he notices is that despite his premium seat he can't see very well. All he can really see is the outer line of pans, everything else is at the same level and stacked one behind the other (with only the rhythm section elevated).

Again, what he doesn't know is that no one has a good view.

Close to the stage the audience has to look up and sees only that outer line. Further back that outer line is at eye-level. Up in the back tiers distance is so great that all detail is lost.

Same Outer Edge

And would you believe it, even television cannot acquire a decent vantage point. If it isn't that same outer edge it is a vast sea of corrugated roofing covering the pan trolleys.

But who comes to see a steelband? One comes to hear it, they say.

Okay. What does our tourist hear? No longer is it as clear, recognisable melody at a reasonable pitch that he could adjust if he so chose at his hotel. It is a veritable cacophony of sound. His ear is uninitiated and after 30 years so too is mine.

His neighbour may have explained that the band will be playing one of this year's popular tunes, the most popular eventually becoming the Road March. What he doesn't realise or appreciate is the fact that nowadays the performances are hybrids.

One Opportunity

The players have spent an enormous amount of time in practice but they only get this one opportunity before the judges. An increasing amount of variation and orchestration has been introduced.

A point has been reached where the original melody is swamped by the complicated arrangements intended to show off the band's prowess.

Perhaps they do, but like my tourist, I am a simple man and don't appreciate these musical gymnastics.

What is more, the very size of the

band has a blurring effect on each individual note. There is no conductor, only the rhythm section in the centre to keep them more or less together. But it isn't crystal clear as it should be.

It Just Stops

After 20 minutes or so it suddenly stops. There has been little or any variation in tempo or volume level.

There has been no noticeable build-up to a finale. It just stops, miraculously all together. Then the audience gives its appreciation or otherwise. They are remarkably knowing — not so our bemused tourist. All he can do is turn to his neighbour and ask: "Was that good?" He has no way of knowing or comparing.

Now for the next 20 minutes nothing happens except for the slow exit of the first band and the setting up of the next. When all is ready off they go — and dammit! it's the same tune again — is it?

Well might he be confused. In an entire evening there may be only three different tunes played — and to an inexperienced ear they are hardly

distinguishable.

The only differences are the band's name, their uniform and the tightness or otherwise of the flag-wavers jeans. And what on earth are they there for? A chorus line, well yes, maybe. But not just that odd one or two, distracting from the otherwise serious business.

And so it goes on for anything up to eight solid, bum-tormenting hours. Mr Tourist has long gone home to bed.

Saving Grace

Before investigating these faults — if they are faults — let me acknowledge a couple of saving graces. Pan-roun-the-neck still retains an element of simplicity, mobility and stage presence. Unfortunately it is treated very much as a junior partner.

Secondly, for the younger, more adventurous tourist, particularly those knowing locals, a great deal of fun, atmosphere, and information is available in the North Stand. But strangers, beware. You'll be expected to participate or go elsewhere.

Now we come to the crux of the question. Should tourists' interests be considered at all? Speaking for my-

self I feel a great deal can be done without in anyway going backwards or doing anything harmful.

My main concern is the visual aspect or the lack of it. I know the problems but everyone has given up or chooses to ignore its existence. Why a totally bare stage? Why a totally flat stage? Why covered platforms at night in February/March? Why the almost total absence of other visual props? Why the lack of discipline that allows individual band members to "customise" their uniforms.

If the answers to many of these questions is money then surely there is an obvious answer. Reduce the number and size of the bands. Eliminate more quickly, have a size limit at say 75 per cent of present figures. Reduce the number of bands playing on any given evening — or at least move them on and off quicker.

At The Start

The problem appears to be the practice of paying "appearance money" as well as prize money to the winners. This encourages mass, unwieldy turnouts, slows up movement and does not improve performance. Pan

Trinbago is protecting its players at the expense of the public. Bigger is not necessarily better.

Organisation must be improved, especially those interminable waits between performances. It is totally impossible to move on and off while still playing — an introduction at the start, a reprise at the end? The same bands will later be moving on the streets.

Are the judges working rules set out correctly? Are the various divisions of point markings in tune with requirements? Do they include anything at all for stagecraft, for instance? Surely if they were, a lot of what I am looking for would tend to come about naturally. The carrot would be there — a big stick would not work.

Manner Of Playing

Can we find some way of introducing musical variety, both in the tunes played and in the manner of playing them? It does seem as if the spectator is poorly served — and only attends because either he doesn't know better or nothing better is available.

So let's see some liaison between the Tourist Board, the Carnival Development Committee, Pan Trinbago and our leading entrepreneurs. Let's imagine we are playing long rows and rows of President Lusinchis!

And it is not impossible. The off-season Steelband Festival is much more enjoyable to the average viewer. Unfortunately our Mr Tourist isn't here then.