

Steelband agenda for 21st century

JUN 01 1999 TQ P. 8



The
Tony Fraser

Column

"YUH think we could go to Cuba and say we have sugar, yuh mad oh my lard; Cuba have more sugar than Trinidad, oh lard, why neglect your culture, yuh making me feel bad, oh meh lard, calypso and steelband is de culture of Trinidad."

The Mighty Power

I CAN find no other way to say this: Pan Trinbago needs to develop a research agenda in the 21st century towards perfecting the pan as a complete instrument.

Those who have accepted and, in many instances, set themselves up as the leaders of the steelband movement must discern ways and means to fund the research and development of the pan and, in the process, transform the steelband movement from the image and reality of a mendicant, forever holding out the begging bowl, expecting everyone else to be responsible for its own emergence into manhood.

And here's one way for Pan Trinbago to do it: develop research packages, in much the same way that government isolates oil acreages with the appropriate geological data, and offer them out to enterprising entrepreneurs to become involved in the creation of the perfected tenor, bass or double second.

In turn, businessmen must open their eyes and wallets to possibilities, like the multinational corporations invest in the creation of new pharmaceuticals, or new digital Swiss watches. It's this investment in research and technology which separates countries into

those which create technology and cutting-edge products and those which merely consume the technology and products of the creators.

Reflecting on his time as a "pan pick upper" in the bad old days of the 1930s, when police "use to cut man arse" when they ketch them tiefing drums, a gentler, wiser Prince Batson looked satisfied and proud of the array of modern instruments stacked up in Hell Yard. He related stories of running through the Dry River in "pitch blackness", losing his footing and falling down with drum on his shoulder but refusing to leave the drum behind, despite the warmth of police breath on his back and the sickening thought of the police bootoo wedged in that space between neck and shoulder.

His friend and colleague, Neville Jules, remembers too being crouched-up on the banks of the Dry River experimenting with the tuning of Batson's drum but having to endure used, perhaps even grey, water dashed on him by someone from the "great house" tired of the noise from the hammer or other cruder form of tuning tool.

We would be forever ungrateful to our elders and unseeing in entrepreneurial vision if this generation of panmen does not carry forward the work of Batson, Jules, Mannette and the dozens of oth-

ers. Enough said on that. Jerry Jemmot spent an enormous amount of time, two decades ago, teaching tunes and arrangements to panmen in the various yards of All Stars. Reflecting on his experiences, the retired police officer wondered at how much more could have been achieved if only those panmen knew music.

Not only would the hours have been shorter, they would have been far more productively spent expanding and perfecting arrangements and broadening the repertoire of bands.

We have to stop marvelling at the fact and bringing tourists to wonder after 100 panmen assembled in a yard, each one totally ignorant of music, but miraculously learning Kitchener or Bach. Time for that done.

Music literacy has to be promoted in every panyard; if the government does something at the primary school level to teach music to the young that would help, but remember the 21st century for panmen must be about self-sufficiency.

Jemmot also told me about the need for the incorporation of conventional instruments in steelbands to create a real orchestra. And as he explained it, it does not mean that the pan is deficient as an instrument compared to, say, the piano; what it will do is to equip us with orchestras to meet any need and mood. North Stars and Winifred Atwell, and the many single pan musicians who now play

with quartets and other kinds of ensemble, have shown the way.

Do we understand when we throw away, every year, those quality Panorama arrangements with the two-piece costumes and standards, that as a people we cast away part of our soul? That frightening reality came to me on the night of the Champions of the 20th Century.

Five, 10 years from now, All Stars' "Woman on the de Bass", Desperadoes' "Rebecca" would be lost. Already, Pan Am North Stars' "Mama dis is Mas", Guinness Cavaliers' "Mas in South", Starlift's "Penny Lane" have been lost. What kind of people are we that we so easily squander our inheritance, our life blood, the cultural artifacts that separate us from the rest of human kind?

We have to do something to preserve this part of ourselves, and once again there are commercial possibilities. Here's some gratuitous advice, Patrick. Concentrate on these things and lay off Terry.

The response said to have come from the bossman at the CDA is the quintessential example of the lack of appreciation for what we have created and the potential for it. I find it difficult to think of anything that could be more deserving of a lot of land at Chaguaramas, or any other place, than a centre for the research and commercialisation of this thing that has been created from our souls. Shadow once sang that we have "degrees in stupidity." Gentlemen and ladies, the agenda is ahead of us all.