

SELWYN TARRADATH, Education Officer of Pantrinbago, continues his series on the steelband.

DOCUMENTING history calls for details and specifics. Events, occurrences, names, dates, places, reasons and other contributory factors must be taken into account, analysed and recorded.

This is why there was a need to identify a name with the birth of the steelband. Winston "Spree" Simon happened to be in the limelight at the right time, and the calypsonian bestowed on him the honour of being the father of the steelband. The media followed suit and a myth was born.

No one can deny that "Spree" was in the forefront of the pioneering movement, and that he established an early dominance among his peers, but there are those who can swear that he bought his first 'ping pong' from Andrew "Pan" De Labastide, another pioneer panman of great repute.

First Hand

The early growth and progress of the steelband was so rapid and spontaneous that even the people involved were hard-pressed to keep abreast of the developments.

The fact that this happened in the obscure environment of the ghettos of Port-of-Spain during the Great World War, allowed the phenomenon to occur right under the noses of society without their knowing what was going on.

There are few people alive today who can give a fairly accurate account of the birth and development of the steelband, and I recently had the privilege of getting a first hand account from two of

them, Oscar Pile and Lennox Pierre.

This was during the opening phase of the Business Administration Course for Steelbandmen being conducted by the Extra-Mural Dept of UWI. Both of them were lecturing to the class on History of the steelband along with Ian Belgrave and myself.

These men are regarded as living archives, and each year they are besieged by requests from foreign, postgraduate students of Anthropology who are doing their thesis on the steelband.

Two persons who have just been awarded their doctorate from studies on our indigenous instrument are Stephen Stuenkel of the University of Philadelphia, and Jeff Thomas another American University student.

Ironically our own world renowned anthropologist Dr J.D. Elder, who is a Senior Member of Staff at the Ministry of Sport, Culture, Youth Affairs and the Creative Arts, has not as yet published any documents on the history of the steelband.

I am reliably informed that Dr Elder was responsible for such a project which was requested by the late Prime Minister, Dr Eric Williams some years ago, and that he has done indepth research in this area with the assistance of Oscar Pile, George Goddard and other pioneer steelbandmen.

The Ministry is also staffed with an ethno-musicologist in the person



J.D. ELDER

of Mervyn Williams, and an historian Michael Anthony. They have in their possession all the material collected by George Goddard before his demise.

The present Prime Minister, A.N.R. Robinson, has recently made a call for the documentation of the history of the steelband. He should check with the relevant Ministry to



A.N.R. ROBINSON



WINSTON 'SPREE' SIMON

find out the reason for the delay.

As Education Officer of Pantrinbago, I have been posing questions to that effect to Ministry officials without getting a satisfactory response.

There are some gaps in the material collected by Goddard, but his family have in their possession his vast personal archives, and they

have already indicated their willingness to hand them over in the national interest.

We are approaching the Ministry to purchase them.

Other people also have personal archives collected over the years, and these could be obtained in the national interest also. I know of at least two people who have a wealth of material in their possession, namely, Lennox Pierre and Gary Simmonds.

We are calling on the Ministry to immediately set their experts, Messrs Anthony, Elder and Williams to get on with the task of compiling the History of the Steelband in conjunction with Pantrinbago, in the national interest, before people like Oscar Pile and Lennox Pierre, who can verify most of the facts, join George Goddard.

The steelband is our national treasure and it is coveted by many. Alas we take both the art form and its practitioners for granted, the attitude seems to be that anyone who can devote his life to the

steelband must have nothing else to do.

The only thing that keeps many of us going, besides the love, is the knowledge that people in the outside world share our appreciation for the phenomenon and understand its value.

The history of the steelband along with other aspects of our cultural heritage should be properly documented and taught in our Social Studies programmes in school.

Foreigners are more interested in our culture than we are, and every week I have to deal with requests for information from abroad. I have compiled a simple document to assist in this respect, but we need something comprehensive which the resources of Pantrinbago cannot provide at this point in time.

Of all the printed matter dealing with the steelband, only Errol Hill's *Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for National Theatre* has an air of authenticity about it, and that book is currently out of print.

For our own information and the education of our children and others, the compilation of the information already in the hands of the Ministry of Sports, Culture, Youth Affairs and the Creative Arts needs to be completed and printed as a matter of urgency.