

BEHIND THE CURTAIN—

By ALBERT GOMES

# Steel Band Considered Most Significant Social Symptom

SOMEONE has written to me about my support of the Steel Band. He does not think that I am doing the wise thing. He thinks that the Steel Bands are not anyway as important as I make them out to be. He uses the word "primitive" very frequently in his letter. He seems to think that I should endeavour to bring the "boys" away from the "bands." Almost gloating with triumph, he cites against me the sudden resurgence of violence amongst the "boys."

I get the impression that what he wants all of us to do is to urge legislation that would make it more difficult for Steel Bands to survive. One meets this sort of person in every community. Civilisation frustrates even as it disciplines and refines. A product of its frustration is the type that hates easily and is always trying to limit and restrict the other fellow's pleasure. An odd tyrant, this....he cannot accept customs and habits unlike those to which he has become accustomed. Inherently effete, he accepts only those fruits of "culture" that are already over-ripe and rotting.

I treat my correspondent in this manner because he (or she) did not pay me the courtesy of signing the letter. I do not ignore the letter because I know that there are many persons in our community who hold the same views. Moreover, I intended to return sooner or later to the subject, and now is as good as any other time. I consider the Steel Band the most significant social symptom that has appeared in our community during my time. It is an encouraging sign.

If it had not appeared, the conclusion that there was no hope

for our proletarian youth would have been inescapable. People who want to express themselves in music and song are very far from being without hope. Indeed, because they have been able, by dint of great labour and resourcefulness, to produce melody from muddle, they have earned their right to redemption and given the lie to our hysterical denunciation of both their methods and their motives.

I am glad that my correspondent has mentioned recent reports in the newspapers relating to clashes between bands during the days immediately following Carnival. Is not the period itself significant? Is there not reason to assume that these clashes occurred immediately after Carnival because it is during the Carnival celebrations that there is the keenest rivalry amongst the various bands? Consider the background to all this. Here are young men who have come from the most depressed areas of the Colony.

Most have only seen a school for a very short period. Nearly all reached adolescence at a time when the Colony was in the throes of a great convulsion. It is reasonable to assume that the Steel Band is therefore perhaps the most important thing that has happened to their lives. And, make no mistake about it, they take their art very seriously.

Rivalry amongst the bands is very keen. It seems to me that what is needed at this stage is not a crusade against Steel Bands but rather some organised effort to bring the competitive spirit amongst the players on to a higher and more reputable plane.

When you ostracise a man and treat indifferently something that is very precious to him, you should not be surprised to find that he has grown sullen and even crude in his social reactions. Needless to say, more and still more opprobrium will only make him worse. The fact that these young men play music indicates very clearly that they are not the insensitive vagrants and ne'er-do-wells so many persons believe them to be. I incline to the view that some effort should now be made to direct their keen competitive spirit into more normal and decorous channels.

THERE is in this field of the Steel Band one of the greatest opportunities for social rehabilitation work of the sort that demands the highest qualities of imagination and understanding.

Some years ago when our Social Welfare Department was in full swing, I had the temerity to suggest to a meeting of voluntary and professional workers that the realistic approach to the problems of the Steel Band boys was not the staid, stereotyped one that is fashioned of moral and aesthetic revulsion, but that of respect, understanding and humour.

I went as far as to suggest that some attempt should have been made to secure the services of one of the "boys" and, through him, to make contact with the others. Needless to say, I was laughed out of court.

Yet I have lived to be vindicated. Those who scoffed yesterday, nod in admiration today. Many persons remarked to me on the excellent organisation of the Steel Bands this Carnival. That

they have improved considerably is obvious.

They have reached a stage where some sort of association is necessary. If they could come together and keep their inter-band rivalry on a proper plane, they and the community would benefit. Let us face the problem squarely; how many of us know how to compete and lose—and still keep the fists of our outraged pride in our pockets?

Opinions Expressed On This Page Are Those Of Contributors And Do Not Necessarily Represent The Views Of The "Guardian"

## Albert Gomes

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