

Golden age of the oil drum

By LENNOX GRANT

Forty thousand people cannot be wrong. And what these people are saying by their presence in the Savannah this weekend is that steelband remains the most popular music in this country.

Panorama, this weekend, in which 82 steelbands will parade in competition across the Savannah, is second in appeal only to the actual Carnival parade of bands.

In the 13 years since the CDC and the now defunct National Association of Trinidad and Tobago Steelbandmen (NATTS) started the show, Panorama has grown to its present monstrous proportions which require that it be put on over two days.

Last year when the holding of Panorama into two instalments was seen to be an obvious necessity, there were 64 bands on parade. This year the number has increased to 82.

That is to say, there are twice as many bands on the show this year as there were in 1971 and 1972, and fully 50 per cent more than appeared in 1973.

The statistics by themselves could suggest a stepped-up production of steelband music. And the crowds on the Savannah today and tomorrow could suggest that the demand for such music has also been increased.

Everybody gone crazy/Shaking dey belly/Who wining slowly/Rolling dey belly...the rhythm of the steelband, sweet steelband/all over the land... Thus sings the Mighty Sparrow in his "Steelband Music" this year, describing in this Earl Rodney composition the hypnotic effect on Trinidadians of the sound of steelband.

Earl Rodney, ace composer and arranger, in late 1973 recorded his "Friends and Countrymen" LP on which he played the double tenor as part of a band of conventional instruments.

The recently formed Gayap Music Workshop has plans to include a steelband instrument in its Ensemble "as in instrument in its own right", on which the player would be required to improvise like everyone else.

More than ever before, this year has seen the use of pan to provide orchestral accompaniment and as a feature instrument by calypsonians. Among them: Kitchener, King Wellington and Chalkdust who, like Inventor two years ago, actually plays a pan on stage during his performance of a tribute to Spree Simon.

At home and abroad, steelband music has established itself. At home we have seen the coming of age of a consciousness, the result of which is that pan is accepted as being part if not always the dominant part - of the musical environment.

Panorama has been called "Block-o-rana writ large". The significance of that observation is that Block-o-rana takes place every Sunday in different parts of north Trinidad, and that steelband music is an integral part of that novel form of popular community entertainments.

In recent years it has been the custom of calypsonians to address their songs to the panmen. It has taken the form of either a frank attempt at currying favour or of an expression of admiration for the artistry or legendary sex-appeal of the panman.

It is the steelbandmen who determine which tune will be road-march, and the calypsonians, seeking the honour of Road-march King, are duly beholden to their brethren behind the pans.

And gradually we have seen that calypsonians have ceased

merely to mamagut the panmen in the hope that they would "beat my tune on Carnival day", and have now become some of the most forceful spokesmen for the plight of the panman all year round.

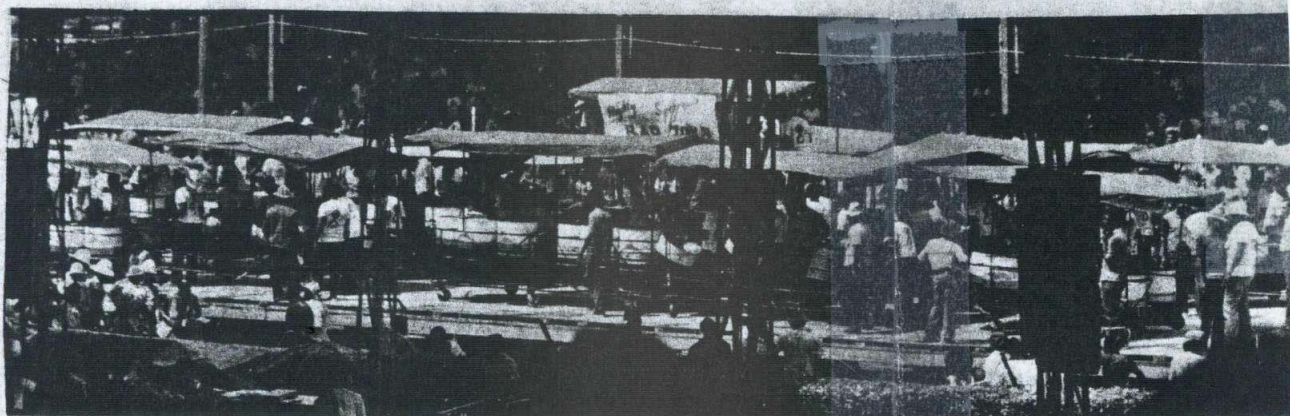
"It's a shame how we treat our musical heroes," sings Francine. She might be referring to anyone of several steelband greats - Spree Simon, Tony Williams, Bertie Marshall, Elie Marnette, Junior Pouchet, to name some.

A Mighty Sparrow observed last year, it is pan MUSIC which has progressed; the panman has not.

Winston Spree Simon, the first man to play a tune on a pan, suffered a stroke last year and was suffering in obscurity when his plight was made known and efforts made to provide him with a home, which for all his contributions to steelband he has not yet acquired.

A Spree Simon Benefit show in Woodford Square drew many thousands, but collections and pledges totalled only \$3,800 against a target of \$25,000. Latest word is that work on building a home for Spree will begin before the end of this calypso season.

Tony Williams, inventor of the spider-web pan, a nd leader for many years of



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PAN MUSIC HAS SOARED TO GLORIOUS HEIGHTS, BUT THE BASIC PROBLEM OF THE PANMAN REMAINS...

North Stars Steelband, remains ill with his nerves at his St. James home, without a band, largely forgotten by sponsors and the public, a shadow of his former self.

Yet Williams and Simon, as they are today, are only symbolic of the general condition of the men who play this hypnotic steelband music.

If we recall how the steelband started among the urban underprivileged, in the face of establishment opposition, it has to be conceded that some improvement has taken place.

Sparrow who has noted over the years the change in attitudes towards the panman and presumably the improvement of his general prospects could sing this year: "People now from all walks of life/Is steelband husband and steelband wife..."

This is not an observation that George Goddard, for one, is in agreement with. Goddard, who over the last 28 years, has worked for the organisation and betterment of the steelbandmen's lot, thinks that a much more careful statement needs to be made now.

In the first place, he says, there are two kinds of panmen: those who are employed and those who have neither job nor employable skills save those related to the steelband.

And Goddard insists that: "The majority of panmen -

no might or maybe - are in the scrutinising category, though false pride may not make some of them want to identify as such."

Since 1949 there has always been some kind of association of steelbandmen. Goddard with people like Sydney Gollop and Nathaniel Crichtlow were founder members of the first Steelbands Association.

In 1964 the name was changed to NATTS, and in 1971 NATTS went out of existence, replaced by the present organisation, Pan Trinidad.

The names have changed, but the problems have remained the same. Ruction, strife and disunity have plagued the panmen perhaps more than other musicians. The original Steelbands Association had come into being as a means of stopping the gang warfare, but the chauvinism, rivalry and bitterness which made the violence inevitable also affected the potential of the association.

The basic problem with steelband organisation remains, regardless of how competent or well-meaning the leaders, and that problem is frustration.

The existence of the organisation seems to imply the capacity to do something for panmen. But what can such an organisation do to ameliorate the conditions of panmen in general when these conditions include unemployment?

The fact is, the steelbandman finds himself in a situation about which only individual acts or projects with limited effectiveness can take place. So NATTS in its time did initiate Panorama, steelband music festivals, generally served as a pressure group for the acceptance of the steelband, and lots of little things here and there for individual panmen, in the main, helping those willing and able to go away.

The basic problems remained. As far as economics is concerned, the steelband movement is not unlike symphony orchestras around the world which, for their size, are nearly always in financial straits; if not subsidised - or, as it would be called here sponsored.

Sponsorship is generally accepted now by thinking people as an indignity. It is interesting to note that of the 82 bands listed for Panorama this year 41 will not be carrying the name of any sponsor. Of last year's 64 bands 37 carried a sponsor's name.

People like George Goddard fear, too, that sponsorship has eroded the

spirit of self-help. It is indisputable that - by most of present arrangements - sponsorship benefits the sponsor more than it does the band.

A training scheme put on by the Government's Central Training Unit was held in

1973 for some 80 panmen drawn from different bands. The course involved training in business organisation, business law, accounting

practice etc, and it was intended to help the panman to help himself in business.

The results are yet to be evaluated.

Spreading consciousness has shown the need for problems like those of the panmen to be seen in a wider context. It is now accepted that nothing fundamental can

be done for pan without doing something fundamental the society as a whole.

Panmen for their part should realise the improvement of their lot involves the improvement of the prospects of musicians in gene

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