

Two replies to an article on an Esso Trinidad show on TTT

WHAT STEELBAND MUSIC MEANS TO US

THE EDITOR: I must once again beg space in your columns to take issue with Andrew Pitman's article on the TTT Special on the Esso Trinidad Steelband. I seem to have caused him great offence by my introduction of the calypso that was played in the first half of the show "so as not to betray our roots".

Mr. Pitman seems to think that this remark was an "explanation" of why we included a calypso in the programme at all and that if it was I thereby "put the steelband's nationality and its very character up for questioning".

These observations open up the whole burning question of "what is steelband music?" and "what should the function of a touring steelband really be?"

Mr. Pitman has made the implicit suggestion that steelband and calypso are irrevocably connected. Calypso he says is: "steel-

band's strongest cultural connection".

I do not see how this can possibly be when the two art forms sprang from entirely different sources, and neither depends on the other for its existence. Calypso, by its very nature is essentially vocal and no calypsonian that I know of uses a steelband for his accompaniment.

Public Opinion

If there is such a cultural connection between steelband and calypso it seems an enormous betrayal of this connection for touring calypsonians, for instance, to use "foreign" instruments for their back-up music.

No, the whole point is that when a steelband plays a calypso it doesn't, in fact do that. What it does is play a massive ically simple vocal line and rearrangement of a bas-

converts it into an instrumental composition.

I defy any calypsonian to sing to a steelband version of a calypso, unless the band is playing strictly within the limits of a line of accompaniment.

The question "what is steelband music?" is, as far as I can see, the same as asking "what is music". Steelband cannot be bound by musical barriers any more than a Trinidadian voice can be prevented from singing anything other than

Hungry

Mr. Pitman complained that the band played "all sorts of foreign tunes" on its half-hour programme and that if this was typical then "the band has not done much for our country abroad".

Come, Sir, you cannot be serious! Of the six pieces we played the first "Jump-up" was composed by Kenrick Headley, the Leader of the Band, and the other five were specially chosen to demonstrate the various types of music that a steelband can perform.

We could have given a calypso concert, but that was not what TTT asked for, nor is it what one hundred percent of our bookers in North America ask for either. And as a professional touring band our daily bread and butter depends upon giving buyers what they want.

We could be stubborn and refuse and thus go a little more hungry than we often are.

Capers

But by "selling the idea" as Andrew Pitman puts it, the Esso Trinidad Steelband has, by its "international capers", I think successfully demonstrated that a brilliant folk art form can hold its own in the face of all comers, and while remaining essentially Trinidadian has never once had to bow its way out when pitted against the fiercest international competition.

I apologise to Mr. Pitman and all others whom I have apparently offended. It was no more malicious than when, as a Welshman, I occasionally break out into "Men Of Harlech" so as not to betray my roots!
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