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Steelpan awards held in London

The Commonwealth Arts and Cultural Foundation, in association with T&T High Commissioner Garvin Nicholas, held its Steelpan Awards 2011 at the Trinidad and Tobago High Commission, London on July 26.

The event was held to celebrate the diamond jubilee of the Trinidad All Steel Percussion Steel Orchestra (TASPO) and the Golden Jubilee of the Dixieland Steel Orchestra. To recognise and commemorate these two historic events, 2011 has been designated and declared the Year of the Steel Pan.

TASPO was the first steel band to perform in the United Kingdom. This steelband performed at the South Bank, London on July 26, 1951. T&T was the only country in the British Empire to perform in the UK even though all the other British colonies were invited, including India and other African and Caribbean countries. It was organised by the Steel Band Association and headed by Sidney Gollop, the first president of the Steel Band Association.

In May 1961 the Dixieland Steel Orchestra came to the United Kingdom after winning the National Steel Band Music Festival in T&T.

Nicholas, in his welcome address, spoke about the significance of the steelpan and its contribution to the musical art form in the United Kingdom. He acknowledged that the steelpan was making significant inroads into most countries on all continents, but that people must not forget that T&T was the birth place of "this fine instrument." He commented on the contribution of Sonny Blacks, artistic director of Commonwealth Arts, who was instrumental in organising the evening's event.

The High Commissioner also informed the invitees that he was able to present a beautiful tenor pan as a gift to the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge as their wedding gift. He read from the letter received from St James' Palace thanking him for the gifts:

"Your Excellency, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge have asked me to convey how deeply moved they were

that you should think to send such a generous gift in celebration of their marriage of the splendid steeldrum, and also the very nice crystal decanter full of Trinidadian rum. It was truly so kind of you to think of Their Royal Highnesses in this way, and no doubt they will have much pleasure in playing the drum whilst drinking the rum," the letter stated.

Nicholas ended his welcome by wishing the honourees all the best for the future, and thanked them for their contribution in making the pan the most versatile instrument ever invented, and for helping to put T&T on the world map together with other great musical geniuses.

A number of steelpan icons were present on the night, among them, Keith Diaz, president of Pan Trinbago and Nestor Sullivan, of Pamberi Steel Orchestra. Diaz, in his speech, spoke about the history of pan which he described as "a chronicle of extraordinary achievement and of extraordinary men and women who sacrificed life, limb and reputation in their attempts to place the instrument in its proper niche." Diaz spoke about the three day international conference on the steelpan to be hosted next year by Pan Trinbago, and his impending visit to Nigeria to meet people interested in pan.

The List of awardees included Sterling Betancourt-TASPO, who received an award from Her Majesty on behalf of TASPO. Betancourt has been acknowledged as the main steelpan player and tuner responsible for keeping pan alive in the United Kingdom.

Other awardees included Miguel Barradas, Dixieland, Alfred Totesaut, Dixieland, Trevor Cumberbatch, Dixieland, Lennox Langton, Dixieland, Russell Valdez, Dixieland, Michael "Natsi" Contant-tuner of Dixieland (RIP), Angela Christopher, dancer of Dixieland, Sonny Blacks, manager of Dixieland.

Two surprise awards were also given to Peter Joseph and Cyril Khamai for their contribution to the steelpan movement in the United Kingdom.