

Trinidad's Privy Council of pan

By PETE SIMON

AND so the English have stolen a march on us. They are manufacturing steel pans on the assembly line—standardised, of course! And Trinadians are ready to burst a blood vessel. In Creole parlance "dey turning beast."

How? Why? When?

The questions keep coming thick and fast. How could we allow such a thing to happen? Didn't we realise that we had a dam good thing going for us? A money-spinner? Why did we have to drag our feet so long after having talked about such a project at such length? And everybody is blaming everybody else.

One point on which there is consensus however, is that the English are no more nor less than a gang of cultural hijackers, exploiting our creative native talent, the brain-child of the grass-roots, for a few dirty pieces of silver.

But I am somewhat amused by this display of indignation and unbridled rage, for, when all is said and done, whether we want to admit it or not, we have been going out of our way, unwittingly or otherwise, to promote this untenable situation—putting the English in the driver's seat.

EVOLUTION SAGA

Ever since a day, we pride ourselves on the fact that we, and we alone, discovered and developed the steelband. The saga of the evolution of the steelband—technical and social—is one which is most dramatic and compelling, to say the least.

The steelband has been called by experts "the musical revelation and revolution of the century." It is unique—simply out of this world.

Masters of the music world—Arturo Toscanini, Leonard Bernstein, Xavier Cugat, Pablo Casals, Liberace, etc etc—were left spell-bound, aghast, dumb-founded, when they were initiated into the magical and fantastic world of Pan.

They just could not believe their ears. Such angelic music from steel drums! They felt the pans; inspected them; virtually put them under the microscope! Incredible!

They simply ran out of superlatives in their to



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grass-roots achievement.

Yet, in spite of all these claims to unique distinction, what do we do? In our shining hour, in our crowning glory, when PANOLGY is bathed in all its splendour; when the giants of Pan are doing battle with one another as they display their native artistry and skill in the highly-publicised Steelband Festival—again I ask, "What do we do?"

We do the most illogical and harebrained thing imaginable. We send for a perfect stranger from out of the cold—a non-native, one of our erstwhile masters, and actually make him the most important figure of the night.

He virtually has the panmen like puppets on a string and the whole country hanging in an agony of suspense. In effect, the panmen are not really playing for the audience, but to catch the ear of MASSA since, on his say-so will be determined the WHO'S WHO in the world of Pan. He then returns from whence he came until he, or another of his kind, comes again to do his thing.

And what is the grand rationale for this situation? "Music is Music!" Supporters of this view are, somehow, convinced that Trinidad is still in its musical diapers.

Only distinguished musicians from countries with a long musical tradition—in this case, England—can qualify to perform such an important exercise. What an over-simplification. And this in the most identifiably native of our art-forms. Exhibit A...

prefer the more euphonious word, "indigenous," but is "de same old Khaki pants!"

In the fields of technology and professional expertise—medicine, law, engineering etc—we must, perforce, pay due deference to Europe and the United States. They are the bosses in those fields and so, we are pleased to learn from them.

Even when it comes to music—traditional and time-honoured, and played on the piano, the violin, the cello, the saxophone, the clarinet etc—we bow to their superior knowledge. We must give Jack his jacket, and Jim his gymboots.

But when it comes to the steelband, well, that is a different kettle of fish. And I could never be charged with Chauvinism—the besetting sin by which one gives pride of place in everything to one's country—when I declare that no one, and I repeat, no one, especially one who is transparently lacking in cultural empathy, and this notwithstanding how musically prestigious he might be, could presume upon himself to tell us Trinadians about Music, when it relates to Pan.

Why can't we make use of our native judges to judge our native culture? Is Trinidad so musically sterile, or is it that the native product is always considered sub-standard?

FRANTIC SEARCH

The frantic search for a "Massa" adjudicator for the recent festival somehow impresses that if no such a one was found, there would have been no festival at all. Imagine that eh!

It was not possible to secure the ideal, an Englishman, so what do the organisers do? They settle for an American.

It is my contention that if they had failed in the last instance, they would have scrambled up a Scotsman or Irishman, so long as he was in the Massa image—to adjudicate on our own native culture; our grass-roots phenomenon.

What a slap in the face of all natives. Natives, keep out! Ah never see dat!

The American, one Professor Manoff, was really something else. It is to be hoped that his performance, or lack thereof—for what he did and nothing



DR. SYDNEY NORTHCOTE, the first adjudicator.

etc, the professor said not a word, even though there was a resounding upset.

The strange thing is that nobody questioned his rulings! Massa had spoken with finality. So be it! And

so it was.

The irony of the whole thing is that, at no time did these people ever ask to be recognised as the Privy Council of Pan, for had they had their way, there would have been no such thing as Pan, and the world would have been much the poorer for that.

If we were sensitive and sensible, we would have got the message ever since a day, that our eventual destiny in the world of Pan had to be carved solely by our own efforts, on our own steam.

For we have reached the heights we have reached—paralogically speaking—in spite of Massa.

To Massa Pan—as were Carnival and Calypso before it—was barbaric, primitive, savage, pagan, crude, and disgusting." In fact, every known condemnatory epithet was readily utilised to describe same.

Frequent police raids, and swift and severe court action, more than lent teeth to this official dis-



PROFESSOR TOM MANOFF, 1973 adjudicator

pleasure and disgust; and adult citizens can attest to the social concentration camps in which panmen of yesteryear found themselves.

But we never got the message since we were swamped by the edifying under-tow of a vicious colonial backwash and, like Pavlov's dog which always salivated at the mere ringing of a bell, we rushed straight to Massa Land, at the mere thought of any unresolved issue, so that we could get his nod of approval and that he could share in the reflected glory of our achievement. Without him, nothing!

But Massa, erstwhile, even so—could always be depended upon to take command of a situation in which natives are concerned. He accepted with alacrity and, even while recovering from his pleasant shock, camouflaged his abysmal lack of empathy by simulating a post of ultra-professional detachment as he fluently verbalised a steady flow of musical expressions and technical jargon, as he gave his assessment of individual band performances, with an air of authority.

The audience applauded vigorously as Massa Adjudicator got into his act. Dat man is a giant. He could talk for so.

Implied in this, "so long as the man could talk, he must know plenty about Pan."

The question thus arises: "Why must we continue to go out of our native genre whenever there is some matter of contention among us, natives?"

Why do we still perforce with the Colonial Office complex?

Why still have a measure of our erstwhile master's come and pontificate issues which are native, from the end; while the roots of the smell of the roasting

Is it naïf? quackery? slave-control? worth are Cont...

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