

Towards a revival of the steelband

By HAMLET JOSEPH

IF the steelband movement fails to reassess the future of the steelband in the national festival, in the next five years or thereabout steelband would just be a memory in Carnival.

There is no doubt that the Carnival Development Committee (CDC) is doing all in its power to bring this about with the utmost speed.

The junior Carnival is a case in point.

When it is examined for all intents and purposes, it is clear that a whole generation of people is being made to identify with DJ culture. No thought is given to the psychological damage that can result from this madness. And the authorities seem determined more than ever to continue with it as part of the national culture. The only concrete and tangible evidence of a people historically and culturally different from the rest of the world is cast aside with a contempt and scorn only surpassed by that of apartheid in South Africa.

It is perfidy, in fact high treason, when generations are indoctrinated in the ways of other peoples' habits. Not only does it implant obstacles in the way of growth and development of the individual, but also debilitates him in a way that makes it impossible for him to survive and live with any degree of respect.

Such behaviour and action cannot be allowed to continue. We must put a stop to it now... not later but now... if we are to save the art form.

This year there seems to have been a small increase in the number of steelbands which came on the road. But it holds no hope for the future. The threat of extinction of pan from the festival still remains a distinct possibility.

This no doubt is in direct contrast to what used to be obtained years ago when bands were seen in every street with hundreds of supporters jumping to steelband music. Today, only a shadow of what seems to be a steelband is seen. The bands are almost totally deserted.

The truth is Panorama is at the root of the threatened demise of steelband. No longer are there the hundreds and thousands in attendance at the panyard with the usual burst of enthusiasm and curiosity. The yards are completely deserted, left only to instrument, artist and God.

PRACTICE

Pan musicians spend too much of their time practising the Panorama tune. The more than burning desire to make that tune the best in competition occupies almost 99 per cent of the musician's time. He expends so much energy in perfecting the tune that there is little time left for the practice of others.

The almost insane desire to become Panorama champion is seen in the thousands of dollars spent in arranging these tunes. In fact, the preoccupation with the competition is now religion. The artist has no other interest than to participate and win.

To be honest, Panorama is business in music. Its main interest is to make money. It provides revenue to the state and wealth to private enterprise. But the real upkeep of the business, the steelband men and women, never share in the profits of the business.

So lucrative is the competition that decisions have now become matters of court proceedings. Protests and uncertainties have become the order of the day. The cultural expression which was once founded in the competition has disappeared

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completely. And the lust and greed for materialistic values have laid waste the spirituality of the festival. Panorama, in fact, is now the biggest challenge to steelband development.

The effects of Panorama must be viewed with a deeper concern than what has gone before. When a band fails to qualify, the artist comes to feel a sense of defeat and frustration and withdraws in total disgust with himself and the rest of the world. The result is that a lot of bands fail to appear on the streets, leaving the Carnival to DJs and the string bands.

This is the level to which Panorama is able to reduce the artist. The competition in more ways than one has deculturised him, so much so that he is now contributing to his own annihilation.

What all this means is that the pan-man is now a virtual prisoner of the competition and his inability to think through clearly the road he must follow is

very cloudy. If he is to pull himself out of the hole he has fallen into, Pan Trinbago must be able to see further than the notorious and meaningless Panorama competition.

The competition is meaningless and does not in anyway reflect the best playing band of the year. There are too many complaints and protests about decisions given by judges. It is even worst when judges come to their tables tired and sometimes late as well.

This is understandable when one considers the long hours that judges spend in adjudicating. It is really beyond human endurance and the effect of tiredness must have tremendous consequences on the ability to judge with any degree of competence.

When all is considered there is no doubt that there is a strong case for scrapping Panorama. Scrap Panorama and let the steelband re-enter Carnival. Let Carnival be what it used to be. Let the steelband vie for honours on the road as it

did in the past. Let the Savannah and Down-town competitions be a cultural revival and a spiritual re-awakening of the festival. Bring back the Bomb competition and let the people's choice be a regeneration of the greatest show on earth.

Panorama can be replaced with a series of attractive exciting pre-carnival shows culminating in Monday and Tuesday Carnival.

The dull and unattractive Steelband Music Festival every two years or so can be restructured along the lines the Panorama competition takes. The main thrust is to keep steelband culture alive all year round. So instead of every two years, the festival should be in August of every year, taking us straight into the Independence celebration.

This approach will not only go a long way in reviving the steelband but it has the twin effect of enriching the national culture and providing much needed bread to the artist.

SURVIVAL

Even more important than all of this, steelband men and women must become conscious of the three major ingredients towards their own and continual survival. The first is that pan around the neck must be scrapped. It is something of the past and we must move on. Whilst it is true that the past informs the future, we cannot appear to be living in it forever, or else we can impede artistic development and growth. More than life, it is also the essence of colonisation to think that we must relive the past to inform others of what we were.

The second is informed by the first. One of the greatest drawbacks of pan is its unmarketability to the public. Pan needs a filip and therefore two things in this request stand out: (1) it is a foregone conclusion that pan must go electronic; (2) it must be put on trawlers if it is to compete with conventional instruments.

The pulling and pushing of pans can no longer remain part of the pan culture. As an adjunct to the steelband, it had its usefulness in a certain era. Today, if pan is to maintain its cohesiveness and harmony in music, it must be innovative in mobility as well as others. Pulling, in fact, distorts the music, as pans run away from the pushers. It also leaves the player motionless as he watches his instrument in complete contrast with the rest.

It is true that most bands will not be able to afford either float or amplification, but with joint effort by Government and sponsors, Pan Trinbago should be in a position to set the stage for the future.

It was in the mid sixties that Bertie Mar-

shall gave Trinidad and Tobago its first amplified pan. At that time it was thought that Bertie was mad and totally detached from his senses. Nineteen years later, Bertie's ideological perspective is to be the catalyst in the revolution of pan.

Perhaps the steelband movement may eventually have need for its own journal or magazine, dealing with all aspects of the steelband and the personalities involved. Pan Trinbago itself will be in need of some restructuring in order to accommodate the beginning of a new dawn in the life of the steelband man and in the life of the movement as a whole.