

Making panmen professionals

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Now focus must be on opportunities for employment and developing that talent

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RECENT activity in the pan world has been centred around the Pan Ramajay competition and the Pan-Jazz concerts. Both have been privately run shows, one with the assistance of Pantrinfago and the other with our blessings.

Some people in the steelband movement have expressed negative views about these events because the business sector has been heavily involved with both.

The steelband is Pantrinfago's business, but Pantrinfago is not a business, as much as some people advocate that we should be.

Pantrinfago is a voluntary service organisation. Our role in both undertakings was to see that the panmen were properly handled (both financially and otherwise) and that we received adequate exposure for the art form.

Live Entertainment

This brings about the question of the professional panman.

Many people would like to see the steelband remain as a cultural entity. While this would serve the purpose of people, and interest groups who would benefit from perpetuating this situation, it would ensure that our gifted pannists be always frustrated and starving in the name of culture.

Sports and Entertainment are not an industry locally, as they are in the metropolitan countries, and they are not subsidised by the state as they are in countries of the socialist block.

The sportsman or entertainer who decides that he wants to develop his full potential in the field by doing it full time must migrate or starve.

We have no professional sportsmen, as we do not have the infrastructure to support professional sports; even our cricketers have to go abroad to seek employment. Our culture is based on entertainment. Picong, song, dance and music are second nature to us. Yet very few of our entertainers can afford to be home based, although we have live entertainment on a continuous basis.

Steelband Activity

For the steelband to earn international recognition it must become competitively commercial. We are doing our best at home to prevent it from becoming so. We have competitions that encourage big bands whose expenditure extends the financial capacity of bands to the very limits.

Sure, a hundred man panorama band is almost a wonder of the musical world, and the thrill of hearing 75 pan players performing the works of the classical masters is a music lovers dream come true. But can we afford it, or even more important, can we exploit it commercially?

Panorama and Steelband music festivals have become part of our national tradition and are here to stay, but we

need to diversify steelband activity into more commercial spheres where the practitioner can be financially rewarded.

No longer must steelband activity be regarded as a mere labour of love.

The panorama and festival have reduced the panman to the status of a repertory performer who simply learns off an arrangement with out any input into the music. The better players become lead dogs in the various sections in that the others depend on them to carry the music while they relax.

Even the lead players falter when placed in a situation where they are suddenly thrust with the responsibility of carrying the section by themselves, they have become complacent in the security of the big band.

The Pan Ramajay competition brought the players back into a situation that existed in the early days around the fifties, when the bands numbered between eight and 14 members.

Each member had to hold his own, and as there was no dominant arranger, every one had to be able to play his instrument competently enough to put in his own parts.

The early panman became a musician capable of playing all the instruments; doing simple arrangements and "revving" out improvisations.

Main Musician

Most of the stars had to migrate in order to pursue this capacity to make music. Travellers often bounce up on real veterans like Ziggily, Belgrave Bonaparte, Sterling Betancourt, Cabot Paul and Theo Stephens plying their trade and making a living in much the same way as they did 40 years ago.

Some, like the late Art De Couteau and Earl Rodney branched over to conventional instruments where there was more scope to develop their musicianship, others like Rudy "Tulef" Smith pursued formal music studies, but stayed with the pan as their first instrument.

The fact is that the atmosphere in the panyards of the early steelbands was conducive to the development of musicians.

The big bands, caused by the ascendancy of the panorama and music festivals over other steelband activity, brought into focus the arranger, as the main musician and source of all creativity in the band.

The player's main role was to become competent at executing the music as put down by the arranger. Hand speed and precision became priorities, development of ear and creativity were not necessary. We entered the era of the robot panman.

The legacy of "Cobo Jack" and "Cattarrh Nose" did not die a natural death. Their successors Len "Boogsie" Sharpe and Robbie Greenidge are leading a new generation of pannists into the areas of improvisation and creativity.

These new panmen are the ones who

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