

# Take pan to the university

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The Tony Fraser Column

TAKE the creativity from the streets (Port-of-Spain of the rough and experimental times of the 1940s) to the University of the West Indies campus at St Augustine. This is the objective of Ellie Mannette - he wants to teach the university that it must recognise and learn from original thinking, creation and research.

I listened, enthralled by this master panman for over an hour, and marvelled at the civilisation that produced him. Ellie Mannette, Trinidad, Invaders and the United States, were being honoured in Washington by the wife of the US President for bringing the steel pan to that pioneering society.

"We were 'badjohns', we got into fights," Ellie told his interviewers in a very matter-of-fact fashion: not dwelling on it, not boasting about it, not being apologetic for the rough life they lived on the

## 'Ellie spoke incessantly about the steelband times of the 1940s'

streets, but simply providing an account of what life was like in those days. In the same breath, he moved easily into talking about his work over the last 30 years across the face of the United States.

Before we move on, the spirit of "Big Sacks" and the others who have gone to Valhalla and those still amongst us constrain me to say something about this badjohn thing.

Many years ago I learnt from Rudy Piggott that we have to view badjohns and badjohnism with eyes and sensibilities different from those which were given to us by our colonial insensibility for ourselves: the badjohns were the war generals who had to preserve the pans from police and other interlopers, protect the bands from the anger of the age, and ensure that young middle-class boys like Ray Holman were

able to come to the panyards and express themselves, and so open the door for the youth of today to walk through.

Meet Rudy (Invaders and QRC - panman and scholar) any day walking through Woodbrook, where Ellie got his thing, and he would tell you the story of the Invaders' badman of the day who, when he heard that Ray would not be allowed to "beat" pan on Carnival day, went to Ray's mother and assured her "that once he (the war general of Invaders) in the band, nobody could touch Ray". Not even General Powell could have given such an assurance to his soldiers in the Gulf.

Genghis Khan, Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Billy the Kid and Geronimo have been accorded their place in history, even in notoriety. To our historians at UWI and those students writing theses, there is a monumental amount of work to be done on "Sacks", "Barong", "Mastifay" and all the other generals who fought for the pan, for the love of their women and to make a statement to a colonial society.

But back to Ellie, not that we had ever left him. He was saying that the life in the 1940s was the preparation for the life of the present. At his moment of triumph in Washington, Ellie made no claims to creating the steel pan, but spoke incessantly about the steelband times of the 1940s and other steelbandsmen who were part of that life and the experimentation with the pans.

Inevitably and most importantly, Ellie sought to convince anyone who was listening of the need for Trinidad and Tobago to engage

Bertie Marshall and Anthony Williams in research and experimentation to finish the work on the pan started in the 1930s and 1940s.

But what I admired most of all was the finished personality and statesmanship of Mr Mannette. He declined politely and graciously, the invitations by his interviewers to comment negatively on what Pan Trinbago, the Government, Prime Minister Panday and Trinidad and Tobago were failing to do for the steel pan; he was not going to be lured into uncalled-for controversy on that glorious day in Washington when he was receiving the award for himself and those who laboured with him in the 1940s.

There was no bitterness in his person about the society that had not adequately recognised, honoured and learnt from him and the pan fraternity. He was focused: he wanted to bring his students to Trinidad, take them to the seat of learning and allow them to create pans for the society; allow the university the opportunity to recognise original thinking and creation to, perhaps, better position it for creative and technological intervention in the global economy.

The thought of Ellie, his students, Bertie Marshall, Anthony Williams, Neville Jules and Oscar

## 'He wanted to bring his students to the seat of learning'

Pile, at St Augustine experimenting and creating pans could lead to an assured understanding of ourselves and real economic possibilities. It would be the finest hour of the University of the West Indies. Tidco, in the persons of Carlos John, Vishnu Ramlogan, Andre Vincent Henry, Patrick Arnold and every profit-oriented entrepreneur in this country, make this thing happen.

Carlos, Vishnu and Andre, in the same manner that you persuaded the Government to invest \$8 million in the World Beat Festival, assure Mr Panday and his Cabinet that this venture far surpasses the potential of World Beat; get the money in this election year, after all, politicians have always used panmen for their narrow ends; allow the pan to use the politicians and the resources of the country for the larger good. If the politicians get some mileage out of it, so be it.

Just as important as the creativity of such a workshop experience would be the focus of the media

## 'Focus the minds of the youth on our creative elders'

(and I am certain that my colleagues Terry, Peter Ray and every other journalist in the media would recognise what's happening at St Augustine) on a few real heroes of the society. For two months, focus the minds of the youth on our creative elders; let them understand that we have a history of original creation.

Mannette wondered why we haven't made Williams and Marshall adjunct professors at UWI. Simple, Ellie, we still have not recognised the creative sources of the society; so that every Independence morning we engage in this mock military facade we inherited from the British; in the evening we shower praises on one kind of achievement and achievers.

Power 102 should be highly commended for bringing Ellie Mannette, live from Washington, a day of real recognition for the steel pan and our ancestors. The managers of Power should take the decision to re-broadcast Mannette's interview on every day of national importance and place a copy of the broadcast in the national archives.