

STATE OF THE NATION'S PAN

SOUNDING ALARMS about the state of pan in Trinidad and Tobago used to be, not too long ago, a "voice in the wilderness" type of thing. No more. To their credit, a lot more people are joining the chorus.

Not a majority by any means, but there have been some key voices willing to forego the well-beaten path of pan's "glorification" in favour of enunciating serious concerns about the general direction, as of late, taken by this marvelous creation of ours.

Most Eloquent Echo

The Calypsonians, our precious bards, have laudably been in the vanguard of this action. Merchant's "Pan in Danger" in 1985 had its most eloquent echo to date in Cro Cro's "Wey Pan Reach" this year.

Cro Cro, as others have been wont to do, made due mention of the annual dose of devilment that comes so innocuously packaged as the Panorama competition.

Those of us who've been on to Panorama's insidiousness quite early in the game can take a bit of comfort, I guess, in the fact that the ranks of Panorama detractors seem to keep swelling.

But the truth of the matter is, there's so much fundamentally wrong with Trinidad and Tobago's mind-set about the steelband, that allocating a huge chunk of blame for pan's ills to Panorama is a little like shooting the messenger for the bad news delivered.

Collective Perception

The bad news began back when Trinidadian society's collective perception of pan was allowed to be shaped in a manner which just about guaranteed the stunted growth to which we now bear witness.

Panorama was precisely the kind of end result that our woefully blurred vision could be expected to produce. Here was pan, up from the ghetto where it had refused to die the early death that our misguided "upper-crusties" would rather it did.

So from jump street pan found itself in a "problem child" mold. But the salve that the Establishment thought to apply to the "problem area" was predicated solely on there having occurred a sociological happening which needed to be addressed.

There is nothing wrong with thinking of the emergence of pan in Trinidad and Tobago as a sociological phenomenon. There is everything wrong with thinking of it as a sociological phenomenon, period.

What we have at the core of pan's difficulties is a society which by and large, even after almost half a century, has still not dealt with pan in anything but recreational terms. The steelband is a palliative for restless youth — it "gives them something to do," it "keeps them off the street." That, after all, was the selling point for mass steelband sponsorship.

Give something back to the community, Mr Businessman." It has never gotten any more significant than that. And, yes, pan can fill and has filled the role of community beacon, positive alternative, etc. But we missed the boat by having not seen it as one helluva lot more.

Permanent Fixture

Where, in the society that spawned it, are the outward and visible signs of pan's complete acceptance on a musical level? Where is the pannist who is a permanent fixture in Sound Revolution or Charlie's Roots or any of the other premier dance bands?

The Police or Regiment would think to perhaps assemble a Police or Regiment steelband, but does it not behoove those positioned to do so to see it as no super brainwave, but merely logical, that a military band in Trinidad and Tobago should be one with a difference — one which sports the sound of musical steel, the sound we invented, as an integral part thereof?

Where are the pubs or lounges or hotels featuring small pan groups, or combos with resident pannists, or solo pannists? None of this exists because the imaginary line that we long ago drew in Trinidad and separating "music" on the one hand, from "pan music," still exists.

There seems to be some sort of built-in "balk mechanism" which simply would not allow the average Trinidadian to appreciate the pan's right to equal co-existence with horns, synthesisers and the rest.

Need it be said that even if in every other nook and cranny of this universe there prevailed such a jaded view of pan's claim to musical preeminence, that in Trinidad and Tobago it's a view

which borders on sacrilege. At least, it ought to.

Of course, if there are problems even at the level of musicality, who's to be surprised that pan (in Trinidad and Tobago) has had, is having, a hard time of it. If we don't think pans worthy of inhabiting the same space as our own wizards of "conventional" music, why would we think this was something to foist on the rest of the world?

Market pans worldwide — gleaming chromed tenors, double-seconds, etc? Mount a campaign