

FOCUS ON THE ARTS



by
Clyde Hosein

What's happening to steelband movement?

By CLYDE HOSEIN

IF NEVILLE JULES, Bertie Marshall and Tony Williams were to pack up and go from Trinidad and Tobago I wonder what is going to become of the steelband. It might just die.

I wish to point out emphatically that this exodus is more than hypothesis on my part.

I often wonder what metal hardens these brilliant men to commit their unusual talents as tuners, and sometimes arrangers, to a country which pays only lip service to the development of its most unique form of cultural expression.

Now, having said that, I want to draw your attention to the fact that there is an application in with the IDC for the establishment of a steel pan factory.

The applicants' names are not necessary. The point is a group of people have decided to do something positive in helping the steelband ethos to develop and spread locally, even into our secondary schools where pan can be taught to senior boys and girls, and to the vast international market which has a genuine interest in the steelband.

The latter statement can be supported by the various British Music Festival adjudicators who have visited the island over the past ten years, by the steelbandmen themselves who have travelled over the world, (witness the reception given to the then Esso Tripoli Steel Orchestra in the North Americas especially, and the patronage given by that great artist, Liberace) and by visiting tourists.

It is believed that the IDC is still considering the application. Further, it has been intimated that the proposal has been made that if Messrs Jules, Marshall and Williams are to be employed by the steel pan factory they would have to accept civil

Jules suggests that pan instruments should be standardised just as, say, the manufacturers of clarinets maintain a basic quality control on the instrument in terms of musical capacity, range, harmony and tone.

By adopting this some control could be maintained, even if Jules and company decide to leave the country, or, heaven forbid, pass away.

I see no reason why, in addition, Government should not employ the people who can write music for the steel pan to sit down and write that music. It can be done if only the ambivalence to the steelband were removed.

Pan theatre

Is the steelband still a collection of impoverished hooligans making noise, molesters of our mothers, sisters and daughters, cut-outs, juveniles, touts, louts, etc? Obviously not.

Have you ever been to the Casablanca pan theatre? Then you should go when next the theatre is open. Arrangements could be made for this with Mr. Mike Charbonne, Public Relations Director of Angostura, himself an ex-steelband man.

You can see there how the steelband developed in the historical sense. You

might want to combine that experience with the excellent music theories of Supt. Prospect that are contained in his book — "The Art of Making Musical Instruments — Steel Drums."

To me personally, it is tragic that this title has to indicate how inefficient we really are. Why did the steelband music history have to be part of a series on musical instruments?

Why, with all the loud noises about steelbands and steelbandmen, could not the history of the steelband be written, published and printed right here in Trinidad and Tobago, not in 1970 but several years ago, say 1965, when the modern steelband was born?

I hear you say (you have been saying it for years) that your steelband is a wonder of the world!

Might I ask you "which world?"

And, as a matter of interest, can you tell me why you do not send your children to learn playing a pan instrument in the same manner and with the same intent as you cart them off to piano lessons?

There are so many contradictions in the whole attitude of the people to the steelband that I could fill this column every Wednesday for the rest of the year. Is this not the truth?

cation. Further, it has been intimated that the proposal has been made that if Messrs Jules, Marshall and Williams are to be employed by the steel pan factory they would have to accept civil service salaries.

I ask you, what kind of nonsense is this?

Besides, what really is happening to the steelband movement?

Technical art

Superintendent Anthony Prospect has recently received three hundred copies of a book he wrote over the past three years in a series put out by the altruistic Liberace. He is finding it difficult to get Trinidadians in business circles to handle the distribution.

Besides which, a local printer who is working on a second impression of the book, had promised delivery of Prospect's order, but on the appointed day for delivery disappears and cannot be found by his own staff.

This is local appreciation of things local. Can we expect better then? I think Supt. Prospect also subscribes to the idea to build a pan factory; it is a very sound business idea.

It should be followed through by the IDC and by the Tourist Board, those who remarkable institutions that help our country develop and increase the velocity of dollars circulating in the economy.

If, or when that factory is established the operators would have to make it quite clear that men like Jules, Marshall and Williams would have to be given positions of authority and paid as professionals.

Why could not posts be created as music consultants? Really, besides the laborious and highly technical art of tuning of the pans, these men are in fact consultants. Who else would tune the pans? George Goddard?

When I spoke in February this year with Neville Jules he was concerned about the fact that pan tuners are migrating overseas to jobs which offer better standards of pay and better working conditions.

He told me he had a simple plan to solve the effect of that exodus, perhaps only partially, but significantly.