

Marshall: Need to standardize the steelpan

By **EXPRESS**
Feature Writer

"PAN IN Danger" says Merchant in his calypso, and one of the oldest and best tuners in the country, Bertie Marshall or "Father Harmonics" as he is known in the steelband world, described the state of the art in the country today.

An innovator in the art of pan tuning, Marshall was responsible for introducing the fuller, more complex notes on pan known as "partials" and "overtones" and enriching the harmony.

Marshall says that one of the main obstacles in the path of the steelband is the failure to standardize. "We need," he says, "consistency in the metal and consistency in the manufacturing.



"Father Harmonics"
Bertie Marshall

This is the only way we would get better pan and also the pan would last longer."

Standardization, he believes, goes hand in glove with research, which in turn is impossible without a grant or some form of Government aid. To those who feel that panmen should be more self-reliant, and not always look to the Government for financial assistance, Marshall's response is that research is a costly venture.

Research would call for the combined expertise of metallurgists, engineers, arrangers and tuners, Marshall says. "I did research on my own, I tried to develop a brass pan and I did research on combining electronics with pan, but I had to abandon it. It was too expensive." He explains for example that, "if you buy a piece of electronic equipment, to do some research and you find it can't work, you can't carry that back to the store. You also need things like a sound proof room."

Standardization of the pan is also a time-consuming affair, he said, and would involve the standardization of the position of notes. To do this all tuners would have to decide together on the best position for the placement of notes.

As an example of the kind of work that needs to be done, Marshall talks about a trip he made to Sweden a few years ago to investigate application of a new technology to the tuning of pan. The particular device is used in the motor car and other industries where metal has to be fashioned in different shapes and forms.

According to the manufacturer it is capable of shaping any sheet metal without conventional tooling, and can make many different shapes and forms.

Marshall found that it

could be adapted effectively to the steelband, and that in exactly two minutes, a pan could be sunk to a prescribed depth. And most importantly, for Marshall it could eliminate what could be termed the tuners' woe. Each pan could be sunk in exactly the same manner to the exact same depth.

For those wondering why the steelband movement did not pounce on the technology, the problem of finance raised its ugly head.

Asked whether the trend towards tuning the steelband along the lines of a classical orchestra will ultimately affect the future of pan, Marshall replies in the affirmative.

"The steelband" he maintains, "is organized along the lines of first violin, second violin, cello, etc. like a classical orchestra." He agrees that it is often easier for the steelband to make a more pleasing rendition of a classical European piece than it is to render some calypsoes.

Another factor causing problems for the steelband is the reluctance to amplify. He says: "It's years now I'm calling for amplification." He says that lack of amplification, he considers necessitates super large bands which are then forced to move too slowly on Carnival days and results in "disjointed harmony." A smaller group of players with amplified pans would be much more effective and could achieve a higher level of professionalism.

Marshall disputes the belief, based on reports of the large sums demanded for tuning pans, that pan tuners are well heeled. Says Marshall: "It is only now pan have a little money in it. Before that, before bands had sponsors, tuners used to have to wait until bands play in a dance before they could get pay."