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Our pannists on par with yours says manager

By VALENTINO SINGH

STEELBAND MUSIC in Guyana is on the rise, and according to Sydney Williams, manager of Bidco Invaders, the Guyanese steel orchestra which was among the semi-finalists in this year's World Steelband Music Festival, his country's pannists are in no way inferior to those of T&T.

Williams told the *Sunday Guardian* that the steelband movement in Guyana has come a long way since it started in the mid-40's and that a new type of social acceptability had been given to panmen since the country's Prime Minister Hamilton Greene became President of the Guyana Steelband Association.

Street Attacks

Tracing the history of the movement, he said that like this country which had experiences of street attacks and "badjohnism" in its early years, Guyana was no different.

"We used to have lots of fights just like in Trinidad," he explained, "but that is no longer so since the people have learned to behave themselves."

Williams further pointed out that pan in Guyana is no longer a seasonal thing but that bands enjoy yearly patronage from the population.

"In Georgetown, there are some 12 bands and most of them play right through the year at dances and night clubs and in many instances, at the hotels."

Williams explained that while several of the pannists were otherwise employed, steelbands in fact provide employment for others.

Pointing out that Invaders was one of the oldest bands in his homeland, Williams said it cost the band's sponsors more than (G)\$500,000 (Approx TT\$210,000) to have it participate in the festival.

Among the major costs were airfare (\$TT30,000), cost of getting its equipment nickel-plated, uniforms and air freight.

He said the band learned of the festival from reading the newspapers. "I saw a story which said that Pan Trinbago had invited Guyanese bands to the festival. This was news to me since my band was the champion band in the land and we had received no such invitation."

Lots Of Confidence

He said he was forced to write to Tourism Minister Ken Gordon who directed his letter to Pan Trinbago. "We later wrote and got the relevant data and then approached our sponsors. They never gave us any trouble."

Churning out lots of confidence, Williams said that Invaders left Guyana hoping to gain some experience from the visit and with the intentions of reaching the finals.

"We stay at home at Carnival time and listen to your bands at Panorama and other competitions and we all have our favourites. Now to come and compete against them is a real thrill."

He explained that when he left home, he promised his chairman "to bring back something."

"And so far we are in line for TT\$15,000."

As to the band's two tunes "Mashmarani Fever" and "Take The A Train", Williams said that the former, a Calypso which was done in

Guyana by Mighty Intruder, was handled differently to what the local steelbands were doing.

"We have found that your bands play at a medium pace and for very long. They also repeat a lot of their passages, but we don't like anything so slow, we don't repeat. We get on with it and make people want to jump."

Soft Spot For Despers

The same he said was the reason why his group chose the jazzy "Take The A Train." "We knew what your bands were going for and we were

Pan rising in Guyana

looking to be different." He described the crowds as very partial. "But it seems to us if you don't please them, you're dead."

Admitting that he had a soft spot for Witco Desperadoes, Williams warned that the boys from up the Hill will be improving quite a bit as the competition progresses. "They were very casual first time out, but they know what they are doing," he said.

Williams was also impressed with Exodus and feel that they would be the surprise in the festival.

Commenting on the future of the steelband in Guyana, he said that one of the major problems could be drums which now cost as much as \$600 each.

"This is quite a price and then you still have to get it ready to play. If we were to commercialise pan it would



probably cost \$2,500 each, but of course that is not for us to do." Williams further stated that most of their drums were from gas stations and they were already "beaten up."

"I think that this is one area in which you have the edge on us, because you have access to pans which were never used for anything, and therefore you can tune them to your advantage, but we have to depend on drums which are quite often smashed."

Neck On A Block

He said that he would put his neck on a block and prove "that from guitar pan right down to bass, Guyana was on par with Trinidad and Tobago," but that on the finer pans

from double second up, they could not compare. "This is where you are out front," he stated.

Williams ended by expressing the hope that an exchange programme between T&T and Guyana could be set up in the near future so that both

countries would benefit from each other.

"We want your panmen to come to us and ours to come here."

As to staging a festival of the present magnitude, Williams said "certainly not at this time."