

history

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booktalk

Voices from the hills — Despers and Laventille

VOICES FROM THE HILLS — DESPERS AND LAVENTILLE by Ancil Anthony Neil (Published in Port-of-Spain and launched last week at Cosmic Book Store, West Mall)

THIS book starts off with the statement that Trinidad is the birthplace of the steelband and that Laventille is where it originated.

There are some no doubt, who may disagree and put forward other claims as to the origin of this unique form of music.

Trivial Argument

What should matter, however, and indeed does matter, is not where in Trinidad the steelband started, but that Trinidad is in fact always recognised as its birthplace.

We have already lost much time with trivial argument and already a lot of places are laying claim to our music and manufacturing steelbands to enhance that claim.

A necessary step of course, is historical documentation such as Neil has provided in this book, which clearly shows the writer as a man deeply committed to his community and anxious to record its virtues and shortcomings from many perspectives.

The Minister of Culture, Jennifer Johnson was due to officially launch the book last Monday, but at the last minute could not make it.

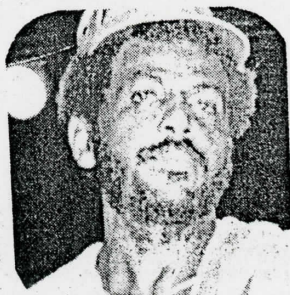
She was in Parliament arguing the case for the establishment here of the EZP's through which it is hoped, many jobs will be provided in the short-term to relieve the crushing unemployment.

Great Panside

This is significant, for Neil ties the steelband with the poverty, stigma and violence in the community known as Laventille, and out of which the great panside, Desperadoes, emerged.

The book contains five chapters beginning with an historical perspective of Laventille, its geographical boundaries and so on.

In a series of essays, Neil presents the association of Carnival with pan,



RUDOLPH CHARLES
legendary leader

the role of the church in Laventille, the establishment of such organisations as Servol.

The book moves through the area, as it were, and the reader cannot be but impressed.

There is an interesting section on "hustling," a word that entered our vocabulary decades ago and has its own colourful meaning.

A great deal of space is given, understandably so, to Rudolph Charles, who today is immortalised as the great panman of all time and who died prematurely some three years ago.

In fact, the book is dedicated to Charles, Wilfred "Speaker" Harrison and Donald "Jit" Steadman. There is a lot about Charles's funeral, his burial in a "pan" casket and excerpts of the many tributes paid to him.

Anyone interested in the history of the steelband should read this book. There is much to learn and the story of the community on the hill is told with warmth and feeling by someone who knows his people, their place of life and their struggles and triumphs, signal among which of course is the emergence, development and achievement of Despers.