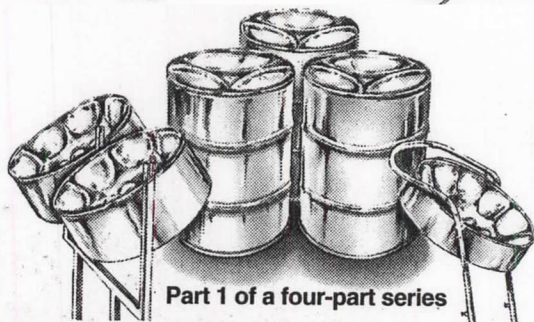


Pan leadership

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passing away



Part 1 of a four-part series

PANMEN Nestor Sullivan and Ian "Teddy" Belgrave were the authors of a three-part series on the state of the steelband movement which we published on August 29, 30 and September 2. They painted a bleak picture of the way leadership in steelband innovation is gradually passing from Trinidad and Tobago, where it was invented, to the rest of the world.

Today they return to the subject, providing some of the reasons for this lamentable turn in steelband affairs and, perhaps, more importantly, offering some prescriptions as to where we should go from here.

1. International Status

Trinidad and Tobago, notwithstanding all that has been described in the preceding analysis has been able today to maintain its international status of "the Mecca of Pan", a designation which may not last another ten years (we will argue in Section C).

We really owe this honour at the present time to the following two factors:

(i) The great steel orchestras and steelband virtuosos e.g. Renegades, Desperadoes, All Stars, Phase II, Pamberi, Skiffle Bunch, Exodus, Panazz and Robert Greenidge, Len Boogsie Sharpe, Othello Molineaux, Rudy Smith and others, who regularly perform, without equal, internationally.

(ii) Bertie Marshall who, notwithstanding the high esteem with which Ellie Mannette is held internationally and the advanced scientific work which he (Ellie) has done with the instrument, remains the most highly regarded tuner in the world and the one who possesses the deepest knowledge and clearest understanding of the science of steelpan production.

2. Steady Decline

A most glaring reality, however, when we look at the Trinidad and Tobago scenario, is the steady decline, over the last 20 years, in the number of conventional steel orchestras. A parallel development of equal significance, has been the steady growth in the number of "pan-round-the-neck" or "old-time" orchestras.

Although the increase in the number of performances/competitions available to steelbands/ensembles throughout the year has succeeded in bringing some measure of stability to this picture, this apparent paradox continues.

The six major reasons for this decline/growth phenomenon are:

(i) The exceptionally high unemployment levels among steelband musicians.

(ii) The astronomical costs to produce a competitive conventional orchestra.

(iii) The overly high weight of achievement given to the highly competitive Panorama competition despite the best efforts of Pan Trinbago to turn this around.

(iv) The paltry returns to steelband musicians from performances/competitions.

(v) The significant decline in corporate financial support/sponsorship for the individual orchestras.

(vi) With the steady decline or impoverishment of former "steelband communities" throughout Trinidad and Tobago, has come the inability of these communities to support their steel orchestras.

3. Tuners' Crisis

Of a far more serious nature is the lack of growth in the sector of pan tuning. There is cause for worry on two fronts:

(i) the inadequacy of the number of calibre tuners being produced to meet the demands of the local and international market, and

(ii) the absence of any organised programme for the upgrading of skills/ techniques of our tuners or the transmission of the price-less knowledge of the master-tuners to the young and inexperienced technicians.

When one considers that a brand name steelpan instrument can now fetch a price of TT\$2,500 on the local market and retails at US\$970 on the North American market, the lack of growth in this sector, gives even greater cause for alarm.

There are three major factors for this most untenable situation:

(i) Contrary to popular opinion, our pan tuners are grossly underpaid. In possession of perhaps the rarest technical skill in the world and existing in a most stressful profession, our tuners survive in a seasonal, local market, on a remuneration that is a fraction of what is paid to tuners abroad and without any of the perks of pension plans, health care programmes etc., which are now normal prerequisites for the job in foreign countries.

(ii) The Brain Drain of tuners, which began with Ellie Mannette in the mid-1960s, has now reached epidemic proportions. Today some of our best tuners are being lured to the lands of "amazing technologies", where their "genius" is being constantly acknowledged.

(iii) The lack of collaboration between tuners persists, even though the era of competitiveness amongst them has long ended. The elusive "oneness of mind" of our steelband technicians continues to stall the process of standardisation and retard the cross-fertilisation of new ideas and technologies which so many foreign tuners enjoy to their great benefit.

4. Steelpan Manufacture

The nation needs to applaud the entrepreneurial spirit of the two pioneers in the local field of steelpan mass production. Both Lincoln Enterprises and the Trinidad and Tobago Instruments Ltd (TTIL) have

T&T must always be the 'mecca of pan'

held the Trinidad and Tobago banner aloft on the international stage of steelpan industry. Both have succeeded in achieving very high product standards. The former, employing a very efficient system of commissioning instruments from a range of tuners and then acting as a distribution centre for the local, but mainly foreign market.

TTIL has gone the way of a full-fledged factory, employing full-time, half a dozen young tuners, with the master-tuners operating on a contract basis. Its products, also, are focussed on the international market. It is of note that, over the last year, it has concentrated all its production resources on the lucrative international steelpan toy market.

5. Research and Development

History is now showing that the greatest body-blow that the steelband movement has ever suffered in this country is the cessation of the major research project at the

Caribbean Industrial Research Institute (Cariri) at the UWI, St Augustine, in the 1970s.

This inspired government-sponsored project was led by Richard McDavid, a young, capable technocrat at Cariri and included the great pan scientists and master-tuners Bertie Marshall and Anthony Williams.

The work that was being achieved here was far in advance of what was taking place at that time in the rest of the world. The pan factory at Bern, Switzerland, had not yet started, and the one in Akron, Ohio, was not yet even a thought.

The vital experimentation work on the optimum metal alloy composition and gauge specifications for the instrument had reached an advanced stage. Another critical area of research was the development of a mechanical sinking and grooving process for making the instrument. This work had actu-

ally reached the stage where an appropriate hydraulic press was located in Sweden by a visiting project team comprising McDavid, Marshall and Arnim Smith, the then president of Pan Trinbago.

This project was stopped abruptly for reasons which still remain unfathomable!

The result is that today, although the odd pan innovator continues to do his thing here and there, there is absolutely no organised research and development of the steelpan instrument taking place in this country, not even in our fledgling manufacturing plant; and this is happening in a world gone mad with steelpan research and development, with the application of the most advanced technologies. Now we have to follow, almost as if pre-ordained, where just 20 years ago, we led!

• Tomorrow: Pan in the Education System.