

# Problems of panmen are so complex

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Steelbands TST P10

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THE first time I saw or heard a "iron band" was sometime in 1939 on the banks of the Dry River somewhere near to Hell Yard.

With other teachers-in-training, all of us resident at Bishop's Hostel, used to stand on the eastern embankment and watch on as a number of men, many of them very young, beat out "sweet rhythm" on what were parts of discarded motor cars.

I was not then interested in the development of what was to become a very exciting musical and social movement in Trinidad finally, to have tremendous cultural and social repercussions of this society, and on the world. That was way back in 1939.

## FROM INSIDE

World War II came in September of that year. Many of us left Teachers' College and were thus separated from the city of Port-of-Spain.

But in the heart of our metropolis the evolution of pan was taking many shapes.

In 1945 I was in Trinidad and was able to observe the great strides made in the technology of steelband instruments as well as the changes that had occurred in the techniques of playing.

But I was more so attracted to the transition that had taken place in the organisation of the bands—the groups of players, their territorial loyalties, the dynamics of forces that kept them together and gave them their own identity as groups of musicians and inventors and experimentors.

## AT CLOSE RANGE

Even at this point I now realise I had not seen the groups from inside the movement.

It was not until 1950 when I was attached to the Extra Mural Department that I had opportunity to work with Errol Hill (now Prof. Hill), Lennox Pierre, Lisle Lashley and Mr. Scoon and many others (many of whom worked on the Gomes Committee)

and was able to see in perspective, the various problems that had emerged steadily as the steelband movement itself.

I was able to study some of their problems at close hand as I observed the TASPO expeditions being set up by Lennox Pierre for the United Kingdom.

In 1962 some of the problems were becoming chronic and, along with some social welfare workers, with Mr. Cyril Barnes then Supt. of Police, and his men was detailed to solve the problems faced by bands located on the Laventille Hills, Basilon Street and Harpe Place.

There I met and worked among panmen whom I can never forget — like George Yeates, Oscar Pite etc. Boots Davidson and Nicholson. I had known in Tobago before.

In that year with the help of Inspector Wilson and Corporal Solomon, a truce was signed between the groups of these two areas.

In 1958 while in England and "Boots" Davidson and a few other panmen whom I met there assisted me in putting on a few pan concerts over the B.B.C.

It was not until 1971, however, that I was able again to work with our steelbandmen in a foreign country.

This time it was at Temple University where I taught, that I had the pleasure to see the Desperadoes bring the house down.

At Manu in Philadelphia City, later on, the group under Mr. Charles again electrified a November Parade Day for the people.

In this year 1973 I can look back at all this in retrospect.

The National Consultation on Steelband exposed facts about the Movement that are encouraging as well as some that are shocking.

On one hand we see an art form that is exciting, full of history, and based on a technique which is potentially exploitable.

One saw a body of young people full of life, of the urge to live, willing to grapple with their problems (and in many cases solving those problems) but also open-minded enough to admit that they need help.

There is no doubt that the steelbandmen know, deep in their hearts, what they want. It is clear there must be many needs that were not expressed at the



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forum.

To my mind it will take a few years and many more consultations, to unearth all the problems let above, solve them since all of them are very complex.

One thing is very clear — the decision by Government to provide a forum for the panmen's free expression of their views is proof that high state level notice has been taken of the steelbandmen and their problems.

The next phase of the action must consist in very careful examination of the "case": (1) of the panman as a citizen who has his economic, educational and cultural needs, and (2) the steelband movement as art and as industry.

## GOOD INVESTMENT

Both man and art are national resources and in any development programme, good planning must recognise these two as equally valuable assets — they go together.

Spending public funds on both is good investment. As of now both need money until they are capable of paying their way as independent citizen and viable industry.

Whatever is done by Government must have the effect of preserving the pride, confidence and bravery in the face of difficulties which I saw displayed among those hundreds of young Trinidadians and Tobagonians at Chaguaramas.

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