

STATE
OF THE
NATION'S
PAN

By LES SLATER



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THE FACT that Trinidad and Tobago is not the pied piper is of course a rude awakening to many. And, not unexpectedly, it's a notion that's rejected outright by many more. Tell them that the comfort zone which resulted from our invention of steelband music went on to induce a bit too much comfort, and it elicits a blank stare. How can the progenitor not be automatically installed as pilot-for-life? Rather easily, it turns out.

The pilot's job is an earned one. Take care of business and you're in. Get sloppy, show indifference and, most importantly in the case of Trinidad and

Demon called 'Panoramania'

Tobago and pan, demonstrate a total lack of imagination and you're in trouble.

For Trinidad and Tobago's officialdom not to have seen pan in more than patronisingly limited terms is NOT taking care of business.

Lesser Consequence

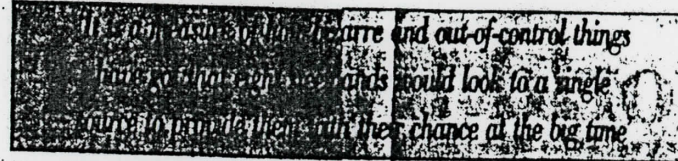
For the pan establishment to have aided and abetted officialdom through its disproportionate emphasis on matters of lesser consequence, while likewise ignoring the big picture is NOT taking care of business. Ditto the public at large for cultivating values which put pan, if not in music's "leper colony," certainly not in its "grand palace" either.

So the task of taking pan to really lofty heights is one Trinidad and Tobago abdicated either knowingly or in ignorance.

It was the late George Goddard who commented in 1986, after returning from witnessing some eye-opening pan happenings in the American Midwest, that such inspired developments were taking place abroad "while we here place importance on Panorama and Music Festival."

As if on cue, that ubiquitous Panorama demon rears its head again — taunting, daring would-be assailants. While Panorama is not, as aforesaid, the totality of what's wrong with pan in Trinidad and Tobago, it commands too much of a presence to go unscrutinised in any overview.

It ought to be said that in the very broadest sense Panorama is a welcome



idea, that sense being a massive outpouring of pan music at Carnival time. It ought to be simultaneously mentioned that Goddard had continuously taken pains to point out that what Panorama had latterly evolved into is not what he and others had envisioned at the outset.

With all due respect to those who have navigated Panorama through its present course, Goddard had every right to put lots of distance between himself and what became, with a steady infusion of all the wrong elements, "Panoramania."

Proper Material

The trail of negative or, at best, questionable outgrowths from this particular showcase of Carnival pan is a crowded one.

But the Panorama syndrome has given rise to another problem. The rush to a small cadre of "top-shelf" arrangers has the effect of stifling the development of would-be talents down the line.

The "Boogie phenomenon" of multiple band arrangements finds Boogie Sharpe absolutely without fault. It is a measure of how bizarre and out-of-

control things have gotten that eight different bands would look to a single source to provide them their chance at the big time.

Panoramania's accompanying egomania should therefore surprise no one. It is ego, and nothing less, that would have a Ray Holman, or whoever else, making a standing pre-determination that no Calypsonian's work would be suitable enough for his purposes, that he alone can create the proper material with which to do battle.

This is not to suggest that original compositions from within the pan ranks aren't very much in order. Of course they should be encouraged. But an pansist's categorical declaration that the outflow from the Calypsonians' camp is to be perennially stamped "unacceptable" is an avowed discourtesy to fellow folk artists. More regrettably so since so many Calypsonians, as noted have devotedly taken up the pan cause.

Panorama, or whatever it becomes in a reincarnation, should be an explosion of pan music that has the people's enjoyment of the generated sounds as the foremost consideration. Any Carnival-time pan music which cannot put a

change into revellers on the street or patrons in a fete (and modern-day Panorama offerings do not, never mind the antics of the obligatory corps of band faithful) has failed in its Carnival mission.

Carnival, let's not forget, is what begat Panorama and what Panorama is still supposed to be a part of.

Mention of revelry and all naturally brings to mind the other disconnecting progression vis a vis pan and Carnival, namely, the poor approximation that has come to be pan music on the road.

Steelbands on the road, to the extent they bother to venture there, have for some years now been but very distant cousins of the energy package they assemble for the Panorama stage.

The road foray now seems no more than a token gesture. The question is, whether the current version of pan on the road is really its last gasp — the end of the line.

In Trinidad and Tobago, if nowhere else, the demise of pan as Carnival revelry music should certainly be seen as a very undesirable turn of events.

An Indefinite Hold

And if steelbands would back up a bit, take a break from being, for the most part, their own worst enemy, maybe the impending death knell for pan on the road could be put on an indefinite hold.

If, for Carnival 1989, Silver Stars, installed on a truck, could be such a delight reprising "Elizabethan Serenade" from 1964 and Starlift, also holding forth from an innovative mobile platform, could emit such fullness and clarity of tone, then there's more than a flicker of hope here.

The presumption that pan does not belong, can't make it, in the electronic maze that is new-age road music is quite wrong.

The unwieldy caravan of racks that has constituted a Carnival day steelband should have been jettisoned as totally ineffectual even before DJ's gained the ascendancy.

So that a more compact unit, bolstered by electronic technology, should have been the direction steelbands looked to take as far back as the late 60s early 70s. (Bertie Marshall first brought amplified

pans on the road with Hilander's in 1965.) Not having seized the initiative back then, the steelbands, if they care to survive as a bona fide road entity, must now play catch up. But better than that not to play at all.

The present downward spiral of Carnival day pan music, if not arrested, would be one more episode in the pan story identifying us as possessing an insensitivity toward self that might well be unique.

With all of these shortcomings, all of these areas of "softness" in the grand design of pan in Trinidad and Tobago, a feeling of uneasiness is entirely justified. The blame and shame for this state of affairs are collective.

Ultimate Responsibility

The steelband sector tends to cite the Government or the public when certain things go awry. But playing into the government's or public's hands, giving them an out by not heading down luminous paths when there's opportunity to do so, invalidates such citing.

Even so, even acknowledging that every John and Joan Citizen shares in the indictment, ultimate responsibility for what and what not to do about pan in Trinidad and Tobago has to rest at the apex. Cro Cro's lines concerning the umbrella steelband body are pertinent: "...they need help generally/To put pan internationally."

Indeed, talk of a steel band association needing help from the Government to internationally propagate pan is patently cart-before-horse.

If the country's leadership can't recognise pan as a national resource, what's to be expected from the rank and file?

All Not Lost

That leadership has to understand that sending the occasional band on a trip somewhere is little more than the same patronising stuff that has no place in any new, forward-looking scheme of things. Let it be again emphasised that pan as industry must pick up where pan as recreation leaves off.

The days of pretending that pan music is our own little secret have long gone. Like it or not — and there's absolutely no reason not to like it — the art form is "out there" in abundance.

All is not yet lost. There is still time for us to command respect from the world's legion of pan conscious and those yet to be initiated.