

# Trinidadians take their pan seriously

S/EXP Aug 31 1986 P 9  
ML1040

OVER the past few weeks, in some areas in the past months, as darkness creeps up men and women throughout Trinidad and Tobago have been quietly and determinedly gathering together in pre-determined spots. Down rocky lanes, behind buildings, under tamarind trees, in vacant lots, in makeshift sheds, if you know where to go, you will find them there, eyes narrowed, senses alert, listening, evaluating, fingers clenching and unclenching. There is a distinctive kind of tension in the air as you look around. Then, over the gentle murmuring and shuffling of feet you hear.... "Ping" "Ping" "Ping".

And the air swells and trembles with the resonant melodic sound of the drums, as steelbands — men and women, under the critical eyes of their supporters move into action, once more preparing for the Steelband Festival. It is 1986 and Pan is Rising. For a few hours every night the music, sweeter and cleaner than ever, swallows up thought of debt load, receivership, recession and depression, uncertainty and doubt. Vehement debates 'sotto voce' go on over the interpretation of the second movement of the deceptively simple test piece, over the wisdom of this band's tune of choice, that band's calypso.

People in Trinidad and Tobago take their pan very seriously. One distinguished and determined matron has already booked an entire block of seats for the entire seven nights of the festival, to ensure that she and her family and friends won't miss a band, a tune, a shade, a nuance as the music grows to a climax. Stalwarts mark out their favourite listening spots in the Stadium in advance, taking bets as to which bands will come first each night, and which will end up in the finals even before the preliminaries have started. After all, it only happens

once every two years! In taxis and cafes rumours fly and speculation is intense.

"Boy, you hear Birdsong not in the festival this year?" "Nah man, they bound to be in. You don't remember how close they came last time to win?" Looks of pained disappointment. "I hear they not playing." In offices and conference rooms, the queries pass among the chairs. "Does anyone know about Casablanca? Are they playing or aren't they playing?" Dark suspicions are voiced about the stability of the sponsoring organisation. "It looks dicey." And an enormous pride-full excitement surging up the Hill as the word spreads that yes! It's true: for the first time since 1973, Desperadoes have entered the Steelband Festival. Boastful supporters parade "Let all comers beware! Despers will play dem out de complex! They will demolish dem with music!" and the echo wafts back: "Demolish! Who talking about demolish?" If is anyone to be demolish is Despers". "Wait till the adjudicators hear Tokyo. Despers will be lucky to place!" "And what about Catelli? They could beat all of them!" Fighting words!

Behind the scenes, the organising committee meets day after day. Details about security, transport, the feeding and accommodation of the musicians, the printing and selling of tickets and programmes, the training of ushers, the arrangements for sound and lighting, advertising, the performance schedules themselves, — the never-ending mountain of administrative detail that attends a music festival of this size, proceeds to pulse with a life of its own. Festival organisers desperately try-



Diana Mahabir

ing to raise funds exchange worried glances with other organisers unable to pare down any further needed expenditure. "Government just say they have no money" someone groans. "It's in the budget, it's approved. But no funds to disburse" "Have you tried Muriel?" someone else enquires. "Weeks ago." "Let's try again, we'll work it out." And the work goes on.

Royal Bank with an admirable and enthusiastic commitment has offered a significant underwriting and practical, hands-on assistance in tackling the administrative mountain, taking over from a grateful organising committee the exhausting job of enumeration, sales, tallying, and accounting for tickets. As of September 5, all Royal Bank branches will have available tickets to all seven festival nights. Trinidad and Tobago takes its pan seriously. Angostura, National Brewing, United Bank, Bank of Nova Scotia, Kenny's Sports, Nemwil, Consumers' Food Mart, Warnerville Grain Mill, have all come forward, offering assistance — not demanding extensive PR mileage or even specific mention in return, their concern for the festival and their commitment to pan, obviously coming first.

Oblivious to all this, night after night, fans make their rounds of the pan yards. Standing, listening, noting changes and improvements, comparing notes, comparing bands. There is something unique in a society in which the man on the street in a festival year, can, and often is, discovered discussing 'con brio' the comparative handling of a scherzo in a Mozart test piece by two competing bands. Something unique about a country where on the night of the Festival final in an entirely filled sports stadium, one can hear not so much as the rattle of a sweet drink bottle nor the drop of a pin as the musicians stand, their sticks in hand, pans gleaming. The conductor raises his arms in the air and throughout the Jean Pierre Complex breathing stops, awaiting the first beautiful notes of some of the most beautiful music in the world.