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Inside T&T entertainment with DAVE ELCOCK

The panman is still an outcast

TOMORROW our twin-island republic commemorates a quarter century of nationhood. From August 31, 1962 to the present, we have almost run the gamut of experiences as a people free of colonial domination — from the mutiny and subsequent social upheavals of 1970 through the heady, extravagant years of our oil bonanza and the demise of Dr Eric Williams, widely acclaimed as the "father" of the nation, to the massive downturn of today and the advent of a new regime at the helm of our ship of state.

For many, this is a time for deep reflection on all aspects of national life, and to this end I decided to seek from Arnim Smith, president of the governing steelband body in Trinidad and Tobago, Pan Trinbago, his thoughts on how the steelband has fared over the 25 years of our independence, and more specifically, the 11 years of his presidency of Pan Trinbago.

The deep-voiced, burly steelband administrator seemed gratified for the opportunity and his views on the subject gave cause for concern.

Q: Arnim, are you happy with the position of the steelband movement and steelband music in Trinidad and Tobago after 25 years of independence?

A: Dave, the answer to that is "no." I am definitely not happy with the steelband movement after 25 years of independence. Trinidad and Tobago has created the only musical instrument of the twentieth century, and after 25 years, we don't have a home. The steelband headquarters is a fire-hazard — it is a condemned building that has been handed over to the steelband movement. We still have to look at keeping our schools' steelband music festival, in the 25th year of our independence, in a sports-complex because we don't have a concert hall, as such; because, I would imagine that if the Government had undertaken to build a proper concert-hall, they would have specially designed some part for steelband concerts. And this is so, after the steelband movement has done so much to help establish Trinidad and Tobago on the world map in terms of tourism and selling our culture through Carnival. Jump high or jump low, 90 per cent of the people who come here for Carnival, come here to hear pan; and if one can remember, after the 1970 Panorama boycott, everyone who came to these shores was disappointed — they didn't hear pan, they didn't see pan. And after all that, we're still without a home, we're still without a concert hall, and we are still not accepted in general by society. The instrument itself is accepted, and I must say I'm satisfied on that score, because we have seen a vast improvement in terms of the instrument; we have seen the invention of the twelve-bass, nine-bass, quadrophonic, chrome-pan, bore-pan, etc, where our genius has gone to work and carried the instrument to greater heights, but as far as the panman is concerned, I still think he's looked upon in some quarters as an outcast after 25 years of independence.

Q: Arnim, it's interesting you should say that, because given the fact that today, pannists come from even the higher social brackets of the nation, what gives you reason to say he's still an outcast in some quarters — I thought the panman was now accepted?

A : Well Dave, there are reasons and evidence for that, okay? You take the pannists from Federation Park, Valsayn and St Clair, and observe that you wouldn't see any of them playing with Carib Tokyo...because Tokyo is from John-John, which some people consider a slum area, but you'd see them in, let's say, Phase Two or Starlift, or in some cases, Birdsong, and that kind of thing — so you see, the discrimination is still there! You look at Desperadoes, and in my opinion, without fear of contradiction, I would say Desperadoes are the pacesetters in steelband in this country — if they are not the number one, they're one of the greatest and they have records to back it up — but I would hardly believe that Desperadoes could survive without a sponsor, as Phase Two would, and I still say it's because of class segregation, because Despers is from Laventille Hill and Phase Two from Woodbrook, and Phase Two could go to the business community and get that kind of response because of where they're from. Coming from Laventille Hill, as great as Desperadoes is, without West Indian Tobacco, they can't spend $125,000 as Phase Two would be able to spend for Carnival and prepare themselves!

Q: What do you see, Arnim, as the main reason for this discrimination in the society? Is it that the state has not done enough to lift the panman by whatever means, or is it just a reluctance by certain sectors to accept the guy from John-John or Laventille?

A: Well, both, eh — I think the state has not done enough to lift the panman. Secondly, I think the major thing is that the people who had created the steelband movement, who invented the steelband, came from the slums, and as a result, some people still look at it as coming from the slums and they don't accept anything that comes from the slums! As against something like the Great Race, and you watch 10,000 people go to the beach to see a couple millionaires drive their boats inside — y'know — and ministers and such find themselves there! And that is a pleasure thing — if you can't afford, you can't be involved! Fifteen men who can afford a boat for over a quarter million dollars and who could spend the most money could win the race. And they are accepted; and if the people who had created the steelband had come from the same environment as the people who created the Great Race, the steelband would have been accepted and it would have been dominating throughout the world with the kind of promotion it would have got. And this is where I say we are still discriminated against! Now, in the year of our 25th anniversary, on Monday I have to receive the Trinity Cross, which is the nation's highest award, on behalf of the steelband movement, but while we're receiving that, you would see the Minister of State Enterprise and Tourism would appoint a tourist board without a panman on it. And I would say without fear of contradiction, that the minister did that because he feels we are not suited to sit among the people he has on his board! And I have evidence for saying that, because he asked a certain panman privately to be a member of the board and the man came to Pan Trinbago and asked me,

Arnim Smith

and I said, "No, let the minister come through," and the man was loyal to the organisation so he refused and since he refused as an individual, the minister did not appoint any panman rather than coming to Pan Trinbago, because probably they feel that if they came to us we might nominate somebody like 'Doctor Rat'! And even our Minister of Culture — she appointed a National Commission on Culture with nobody from Pan Trinbago or even calypso, because they feel we are not capable of making a contribution... we are from the slums!

Even though we have proved our point beyond any possibility of a doubt! We have staged everything successfully in this country over the past 10 or 15 years. When you are speaking about an organisation which has contributed to this country's independence, its's Pan Trinbago; we have staged festivals, we have created *Champs in Concerts*, which is the best show in Carnival! We've carried pan to the schoolchildren and hold our school festivals and that kind of thing, and with all that we are still not considered to be on a National Cultural Commission even though in 1980, Pan Trinbago was the first organisation to call for a national policy on culture and we have documents in the Ministry of Culture since 1980 proposing that. And here is a commission set up to look into a national policy on culture and Pan Trinbago is not on it! You see a national Carnival commission set up, which is the policy-making body for the CDC, and Pan Trinbago is not on it. But when you look at the people who are on it — it's people who come from society... who are not related to culture, but they are respected for their names in society — they went to universities, or they're directors of companies or they're from a French-creole bracket... and this is not race, but this is what we have to face. So they still look at the panman as an outcast.

Q: Arnim, how much do you think the panman is to blame for this? Do you think the panman has maintained an image that perpetuates the prejudice, or is it just perpetuating itself?

A: The prejudice is perpetuating itself. I think gone are the days when the panman was not a man who could fit into society. Today he can sit and discuss and run his own affairs. Pan Trinbago holds general membership meetings which run for hours without any confusion. You don't see the media reporting that one of our meetings mash up in confusion, and all our meetings are productive. At the end of the day we come out with the results that we sat down to discuss. Panorama, the show that draws the most amount of people at any one time, is run incident-free! When last did you hear about a murder or chopping-up and that kind of thing? And I think right now the panman is bending over backward — and he's being advantaged! Imagine 67 men **and women** who practise night and day, playing on the road and a DJ would just "throw on" and drown them out, and he takes that! He accepts that. So no longer is the panman a violent man and a man acting off muscle. But, I say that there are still elements in this society who are not prepared to accept the steelband. We had it from one government; okay, we've had a change since 1986... I guess the whole steelband movement breathed a sigh of relief... and within seven months, we've seen evidence of a new government charting the same trail by the actions of Ken Gordon and Jennifer Johnson. So we are saying that if the Government doesn't make the right approach and promote the steelband movement, then society would continue to look at us as outcasts.

Q: For some time now, Arnim, Pan Trinbago has been awaiting the handing-over of a parcel of land approved by the previous government for your national headquarters. What are your major plans for it when you get the land?

A: We plan to include in our headquarters, the pan factory, offices, archives — because we don't have a place for our archives...I mean the history of the steelband is scattered in people's homes! We plan a museum of pan and we have a pictoral exhibition of the whole history of the development of the steelband from its inception to the present. The land we're supposed to get is about six to seven acres and since the land is situated near the old Invaders Bay and there's still a beach there, we propose to erect a hotel there so that we could put up guests for Carnival and so on, and earn our own money.

Q: Arnim, a main topic of conversation over the years has been the standardisation of pan. What are your views on this, and what is the position at present?

A: Well, personally, I think we should have standardised all ready. It would take some time because the way the movement has developed, is that everybody threw in their own ideas and did their own thing, and as a result there are people who don't want to move from their stylings. But what has happened over the years is that the 'fourth and fifth' styling, which is a Tony Williams invention where he started with the "spider web", is already used by practically every band — tenors, double-tenors and double-seconds. So we are on the road to standardisation, in that most bands have the same rotation of notes in their frontline instruments. We're now looking at cellos, guitars, bases and so on. Between 1981 and now, we've had two tuners' conventions with some of the country's top tuners taking part and we got a very good response from the tuners. We are now formulating reports and meeting with a few individual tuners; we may have to have another convention on standardisation. You see standardisation without having a steelband factory creates a lot of problems, because when the tuner has to work on his own in his backyard, there's no guarantee he'd be that disciplined and wouldn't do his own thing — but if you create that avenue of employment where they could all work together in a factory, standardisation would be much easier. Also, we could mass-produce for export and bring in the foreign dollars to the country —we can do it!

Q: Let's talk about the schools steelband music fesival. Recently, you lost Textel as a sponsor and you've been quoted in the media as saying that the festival will still take place. What kind of help are you getting?

A: Well, the budget for this festival is just around two hundred and twelve thousand dollars. Traditionally, the Ministry of Culture takes care of a little over half of that budget. They handle police, fire services, rental of the venue, transportation and so on. So, although we have not had any positive response from this new Ministry, we hope they'd continue to help us as in the past; so we would be looking for anything like ninety to one hundred thousand dollars. We have decided to approach a number of people in the business community and so far, the response has been encouraging. Nobody has offered to sponsor it so far, but we'd get ten thousand here, a five here and eight there that would eventually bring the thing together.

Some years ago, for the first schools festival, we got no government help and we used some reserve funds and staged it ourselves so as not to disappoint the schoolchildren — it was not a financial success, but it went on — and that was the *first* one; so now that it's an ongoing thing, I don't see anything stopping us.

Q: Arnim, if you had to send a message to the powers-that-be, in terms of placing the pannist on the pedestal where he or she belongs, what would that message be?

A: The message would be that they should see the steelband as what it's supposed to be — our most indigenous art-form, something the whole nation should be proud of. They should not give it lip service and just talk about promoting steelband and put steelband on our stamps and that kind of thing. I mean, you have it on the stamp but not on the tourist board! So, I think the first thing the powers-that-be should do is to sit down seriously and, not deal through a minister, but have a commission appointed by Cabinet to look into the overall acceptance and promotion of the steelband movement — not through a minister who has a million and one things to see about, but some inter-ministerial committee should be appointed to sit with the steelband movement — respect the movement. Don't pull people individually who would say what they want to hear them say, and who'd agree with what they want them to agree, but deal with the people who are speaking for the thousands of panmen out there, because we didn't appoint ourselves. It's the panmen who appointed us to do their business. So there should be some Cabinet-appointed commission with a specific time to report back to Cabinet, so that some action could be taken to develop and promote the steelband in the direction that the steelbandsmen and women feel it should be going.

D.E: Thank you Arnim Smith and happy independence anniversary to Pan Trinbago and all pannists in Trinidad and Tobago!