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Lennox Pierre— Man who helped steelbandmen gain respect

LENNOX PIERRE

By WILLIAM DOYLE-MARSHALL

STEELBANDS in Trinidad and Tobago experienced a very rough start. One national who has figured prominently in the nurturing of this artform is Lennox Pierre, whom Dr Brinsley Samaroo termed a "living national treasure."

As most nationals take steelband for granted, experiencing the sound of "sweet pan" at Carnival annually, few are aware of the role Pierre has played in this industry. Acquaintances charge that he walks around with the difficult history of the movement in his head and heart.

The steelband arose at a time when most Caribbean people were convinced that anything local was not good. As a result, Trinidad and Tobago's cultural tradition in music, dance, song and literature were imported from abroad.

Notwithstanding, stubborn steelband pioneers persevered in their efforts to produce something of their own. Their role followed that of Canboulay revellers whose processions were stopped in 1880 by Captain Baker, Commissioner of Police.

It is well known that steelbandmen experienced rather harsh treatment at society's hands. Stories circulate still about the scorn with which these pioneers were forced to live. Because steelbandmen were seen as outcasts, employment for them was almost impossible.

They were victims of constant Police harassment right up to the 1950s. According to the records, Police were summoned by "decent" and "respectable" citizens of society whenever steelbandmen tried to play their instruments.

Most Important Event

Amidst the fight for survival, a group of "men of vision" came forward in the 1940s to save the steelband. Their motive was to let society know steelbandmen were creating a new Caribbean sound.

In that team of visionaries was Port-of-Spain solicitor Lennox Pierre. Associated with the move were Carlisle Kerr, Sydney Gollop, Albert Gomes and Canon Max Farquhar.

Because Pierre had a private legal practice, he functioned independently in his quest for steelbandmen's respect. Although society frowned on the art form, Pierre and his colleagues persisted.

When the first government-appointed committee was established to investigate steelband's potential, Pierre was a member. Out of that, he spearheaded an initiative to advocate for the formation of a steelbandmen association.

Securing employment and vocational training and other self-development exercises for panists were among the gains of the body. That was the foundation upon which Pan Trinbago became a reality many years later.

"The most important event in the cultural history of Trinidad and Tobago is a lecture-recital that was given in 1943 by Edric Connor," Pierre said. It was in response to an invitation by Mrs May Johnson of the Trinidad Music Association.

Connor's performance was related to his research in folk music. Under the title "An evening of West Indian folk songs and dances", Connor gave three presentations. One was to association members at their Chancery Lane location and two were public sessions at the Princes Building. The public presentations were sponsored by the Organising Committee of the Trinidad and Tobago Youth Council.

Emancipation Day

According to Pierre, this 1943 event was the turning point in the development of local culture. Not only was Connor's recital important for steelband, it also gave the limbo dance its first stage appearance in this country.

This Port-of-Spain solicitor was intimately involved with the formation of the National Youth Council and the steelband movement. This link gave steelband its first radio play in 1947 on a "Voice of Youth" programme produced jointly by Dr Errol Hill and Pierre.

How did Pierre get involved with steelband?

"My own interest in the development of the steelband, developed as a result of my being puzzled to understand why it is that the 1st of August, which is Emancipation Day, the day when the slaves were emancipated in the British West Indies, why it is that Emancipation Day was not a public holiday in Trinidad and Tobago?" he explained.

This concern started Pierre's enquiry. In the process he found that emancipation was celebrated in Trinidad and Tobago in 1834 and for a considerable period of time after that. In Tobago for many years, he said, the day was unofficially observed.

Canboulay was the institution through which ex-slaves carried on the celebration. Somewhere in the middle of the 19th century Canboulay's date was switched and it became the starting procession for Carnival. This practice continued until 1883.

As Pierre acknowledges steelband's difficult history, he notes, "the background of the steelband struggle is the struggle for Canboulay." The removal of Canboulay from cultural ceremonies is seen as a great loss and Pierre laments its disappearance.

When the Government enacted Emancipation Day two years ago, this veteran steelband supporter was among nationals who heralded the political move.