

By LENNOX GRANT

It seems we can take just so much



PERHAPS Trinidadians hear as much pan as they can take in the two months or so that constitute the Carnival season.

Pan which is omnipresent and heard all the time during this build up season retreats into what is a kind of forced hermitage after Ash Wednesday.

As absurd as it may seem, pan does become a strange and novel sound in the land of the steelband at any given time in the year.

The tourist who can be taken around the pan yards during January and February will have to content himself with records or the sad little aggregations he may encounter in night clubs around town.

Let him go to any of the dance halls puzzle over the paradox that the steelband — our own music — doesn't form any staple part of our regular musical diet.

And he'll see that there are aggressive, more flexible and manageable little groups called combos that effectively manage to upstage pan for all but two months or so of the year.

When people don't have to worry about paying them or accommodating their bulk it's all right. But otherwise it isn't worth the trouble.

So that apart from the charity appearance at the odd church-bazaar or free

concerts in the square or serenading tourist boats or command performances for the sponsors, steelbands remain largely unheard during the year — and, as they are led to think, unwanted.

Fanmen despair of ever

being able to make a living off pan in the land of the pan. Happily, the time is past when steelbandmen as a body are unemployed otherwise. Now that panmen come from different levels of the society there are many who can do better

and who are panmen only for the love of it.

It is this "love of it" that keeps the pan world alive for ten months of the year when a activity is but a shadow of the pre-Carnival commotion.

Which makes the panmen

willing to play for free — just to be heard.

But which also makes panmen susceptible to the notion that pan like man-goes, is something we could always get in our backyard and which we don't have to buy.

HARD CORE

What happens to the hundreds of panmen you see in the streets on Carnival days? In all the steelbands the story is the same.

The numbers are just so many hiredhands at harvest time; each band which can swell to anything like 100 to 120 men on the road maintains a hard core of only 25 members who form a "stage side."

They are the regulars — the real panmen for whom pan is a way of life. They are the ones who keep the steelband going during the year. And what a futile and profitless job this is!

The chances are that all but the top seven or so steelbands fail to get engagements to play for dances — the only way for musicians to make any real money.

Fanmen are understandably bitter about this and attribute it all to the amazing penchant of Trinidadians to deny their own. Others like Junior Pouchet can take a more reasoned attitude.

"There really aren't jobs for 60 odd steelbands," Junior admits.

FACTORS

Well there aren't really, and if a steelband were to be engaged in every dance that takes place during the year there would still be factors inherent in every steel band to militate against its being economically sensible.

It hasn't yet reached the stage (thank God!) where people positively dislike the steelband sound as an everyday thing. Nor will they not attend a fete at which a steelband is playing for that reason.

But last year's festival was for the most part poorly attended. Steelband records hardly have a comparable local market with, say, soul music.

Nevertheless, a crowd quickly draws round a steelband playing in Woodford Square on an afternoon. And there will be large crowds at other free concerts in the Rock Gardens or in Princes Building Grounds on a Sunday.