

newsviews

Today

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Pan Trinbago's new president:

By TERRY JOSEPH

BY NOON yesterday, his first day in office, Pan Trinbago's new president, Louis Patrick Arnold, had appeared on the TV-6 *Morning Edition*, held several meetings at the Edward Street headquarters of the organisation and one with Culture Minister Senator Dr Daphne Phillips at her office; quite apart from being interviewed by journalists wanting to know more about the man nobody knows.

Arnold suddenly shot into the lime-light on Sunday afternoon, having beaten former President Owen Serrette and hopefuls Nestor Sullivan and Neale Greaves at Pan Trinbago's biennial election. Serrette had served as president for the four terms previous.

Better known as Patrick (his middle name), 57-year-old Arnold has been involved with the steelband since his pre-teen days. At age 14, he founded a band called Symphony Stars in his hometown of Scarborough, Tobago, and two years later started Our Boys Steel Orchestra, of which he is still manager.

Coming from a family of 14, Arnold has been for the last 30 years a pan tuner as well, circling the globe, tuning and selling instruments. Small wonder then, that it is one of his primary concerns now that he is at the helm of the steelband movement.

The father of one surviving girl (who lives with his wife Lucille in Toronto), Patrick is the brother of former Harbour Master George Arnold and now operates his own business largely out of Trinidad.

He is the holder of a BA degree, having graduated from the University of Toronto (1972), where he led the Canada Steeltones Orchestra. On his return home, he worked with the Community Development Ministry in Tobago, before going back to the US, where he founded the BWIA Sunjets Steel Orchestra in New York.

It was on moving to San Francisco with his steelband that things really began to work well for him. He founded the Louis Arnold Steeldrummers and did the club circuit, with the help of famed American pannist Andy Narrell, who got gigs for the fledgling band.

So from 1980, Arnold has been back full-time with Our Boys (Berthill St Clair had captained the band while he was away) and by 1982 had got the band into the senior league, when Selwyn "Parry" Paul arranged music for them and brought the band to the top in Tobago and into the national semi-finals of the Panorama competition.

In 1985, he engaged Len "Boogsie" Sharpe to arrange for them and the virtuoso took the band to the national semi-finals for three years in a row, having won the Tobago leg on each occasion.

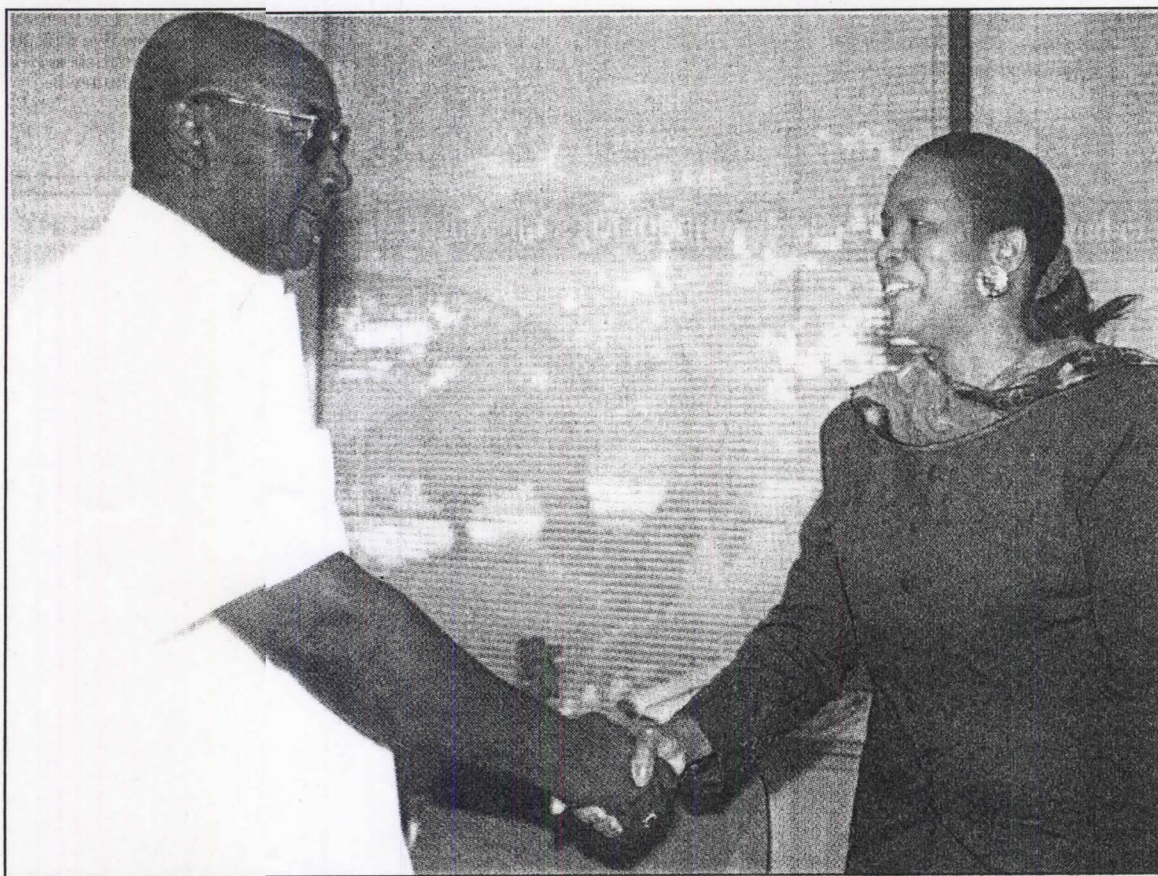
Eventually, Arnold took the Our Boys band up to San Francisco and got them onto the circuit, again with the help of Narrell, who recorded with the band in 1988, producing a compact disc and cassettes on the prestigious Mango/Island label.

In 1989, Arnold and Our Boys toured San Francisco, Mexico and North Africa and on their return in 1992, engaged Jit Samaroo as their arranger and made it to the national semi-finals again for three successive years.

Now, having toured the world and performed in many of the major capitals, Arnold is ready for the challenge that the presidency of Pan Trinbago is certain to present, but he has a clear vision — focussing on the instrument, instead of the trappings of office.

"Well, I had been complaining for a long time that the steelband movement was not, in fact, moving," he said, "so I

My priority is the drum



NEW Pan Trinbago president Louis Patrick Arnold meets Minister of Culture Senator

Daphne Phillips at her Jerningham Avenue Office yesterday. Photo: KEN CHEE HING

decided that I should seize the first opportunity to run for some kind of office to see whether I could make a difference.

"I feel that we must start with the drum itself. As a tuner, I can tell you that this is where our problems originate in a lot of circumstances," he said.

Arnold explained that the very sourcing of drums to make pans is one of the largest problems.

"You have to go down in the back of the National Petroleum Company dump in Sea Lots in your tall boots and jeans to try and select drums, most of which turn out to be unsuitable and some may have contained hazardous waste, but you cannot know that until you pay for them and try to sink the pans.

"In the metropolitan countries there are factories producing drums from steel that has been decided upon by metallurgists, because they want to improve the quality of their instruments, while we are still poking around in the dump for the raw material for pans.

But Arnold, who has worked with the likes of George Goddard, Roy Augustus, Arnim Smith and Owen Serrette, is not limiting his lament to the sourcing of instruments.

"We also have to try to get the pan-in-school programme going again, if only because the people in England, Canada, Japan and Guyana already have theirs working well. In

fact, Guyana even beat us to having a national steelband in the nineties.

"Then, there is the question of getting the youth involved, so that we could get a fresh set of ideas about how this instrument can be taken forward and into the next millennium.

"We also have marketing problems, not the least of which is the problem of poor performance styles by most of the players, who only seem to smile for the camera or to dance when they are on the Panorama stage. We have had several complaints over the years from producers and talent scouts coming here, who say that the players always seem to be annoyed when they are performing.

"It is only when the bands and its players learn all the rules of discipline and performance that they will be able to attract the big-league business, like Las Vegas and California clubs," he said.

Arnold also expressed concerns that steelbands had not been recording regularly and have to rely on the kind of recordings that they get from the Panorama stage, which he feels are not commercially viable.

"Perhaps the concept of the national steelband will automatically help solve some of these problems, because when people see the government hiring steelbands and treating them with respect, instead of parking the group under a tree in the back of the yard, like happens at some places here, perhaps the people will come to recognise the full value of this drum. Certainly, the people outside already recognise it," he said.

"Look at when a band wins Panorama or the Festival. All that happens is that they go back to the panyard and drink a rum and, by tomorrow, people in the street are asking who won. These bands should be — as a matter of course — be made to play command performances at the President's and Prime Minister's houses at special parties to publicly acknowledge their superiority in that particular contest.

"And it is all well and good to say that Panorama is killing the steelband, but right

now that is where it gets its best recognition, so it is little point trying to crash that and you do not have something to put in its place," he said.

Arnold intends to call his first executive meeting to talk about Panorama, the preliminaries of which begin in five weeks' time.

"We have to get serious about this Panorama thing, which Andy Narrell calls The World Cup, and not let it slip into just a big party, out of which the player gets little money and the instrument even less recognition.

"If we really wish to establish Trinidad and Tobago as the world centre of pan, then a lot of things have to change. For one, this thing of banning foreigners from submitting tunes for the steelband, although those songs are written specifically for the instrument, cannot be such a good idea. If we are afraid of those songs, then we really have something to worry about," he said.

"We cannot be seen to be so insular and then want the whole world to embrace pan," he said. "Imagine, Narrell even requested to become a Trinidad and Tobago citizen, just to be able to get his songs to play here, and he is not the only one with this problem.

"We either want to win the world or we don't. We must make up our minds," he ended.