

ML1040

# In tune with the needs of pan

ACCOMPLISHED veteran pan tuner Leo Coker has knocked the quality of drums available for the steelband industry, saying that there has not been a supplier of a high-quality drum product since the folding up of major supply company Van Leer Containers Limited years ago.

"You ain't getting proper drums for the pan now," Coker said, taking a short break from his daytime tuning activity at the Neal and Massy Trinidad All Stars pan-yard last week.

"Since Van Leer off the scene now, the drums you're getting are sub-standard. They might be looking pretty

but they do not give you the quality of sound as before. Then again there is a question of their durability. You need proper steel," Coker who was born and raised in Buenos Ayres, Erin in South Trinidad, said.

Van Leer Containers was a South Trinidad based enterprise of Dutch linkage involved in the production of steel drums used to export asphalt, oil and other products.

Coker said it was imperative that something be done to arrest the decline in quality of the steeldrums which have to be imported.

"Pan Trinbago must not appear to be just a smokescreen unit. This

is not meant as a criticism of them but a suggestion that they can do a lot more than they are doing for panmen. The matter of a patent for pan is one point still to be formalised, for example," Coker said.

Coker called on pan tuners in the field to bind themselves closer for the benefit of the steelband industry and their profession.

"We can come together for ol' talk if that's what you want. But seriously you got to come together with money, so that when you're buying together you could import the raw material," Coker said.

He said a united pan tuners group could

establish an outlet for the sale of drums.

"That way you could create employment and you could also compete against whoever's out there trying to cash in on our culture without giving something back," Coker said.

A tuner who has been in the pan business since he was 14 years old, Coker warned that Trinidad and Tobago panmen should guard against selling their talent for nothing on the international market.

"We as pan tuners are servants of the panmen, the people, who themselves are custodians of the pan. I say this because I believe the panman must recognise that he must have control of his own destiny.

"We have all to be careful of selling our talent to people, especially to people who have access to technology and the real resources," he said.

Asked whether he thought the Japanese were a threat in this regard, Coker responded with an analogy on Chinese cuisine.

"If you go to China or Japan and get a nice dish and was asked by the provider what were the ingredients used, he will tell you, wouldn't he?"

"But would he honestly tell you or his competitor what he put in it or how he arrived at the finished product?"

"All type of foreign people will try to get into the pan business. They'd want to know the essence of the thing, about tuning pans and all that. But will you sell your birthright?" he asked.

Coker who currently is making the tuning rounds for bands like N&M Trinidad All Stars, Exodus, Petrotrin Deltones, Sun Valley, Solo Pan Knights and Carib Tokyo said every tuner approaches his task in a different way.

"Tuners look for a number of things when they're doing their work. Everybody has his own flavour, his own taste, his own expression, his own technique," he explained.

"In the end it's the sound you know oh so

well that you want to hear.

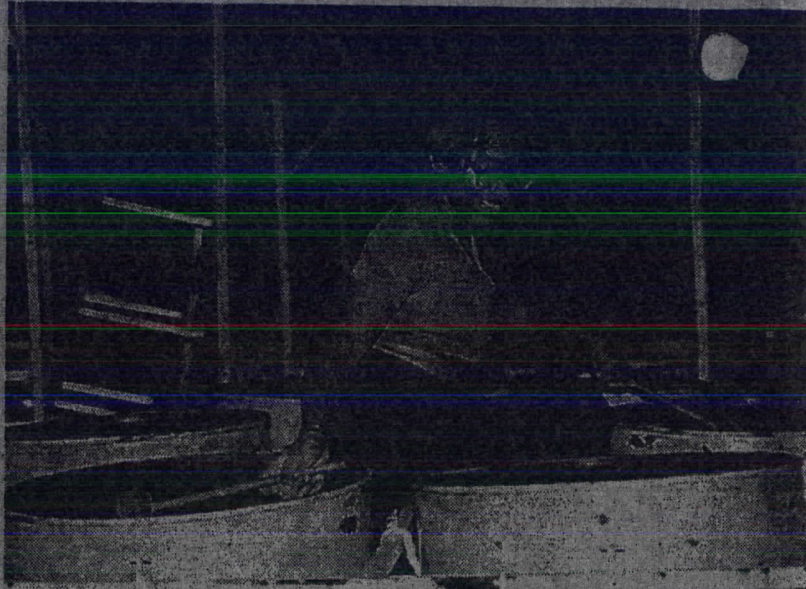
Coker, who tunes the whole range of pans available, has not taken formal courses in pan tuning. Rather it has been his close association with the steelpan as a player with Easo Standard Oil Southern Symphony and as the nephew of one who was heavily involved in pan that has given him the ear and the feel. The influence of a neighbour, Peter Vin Courtney and the presence of the Bonaparte brothers band from La Brea also built his interest in music. He also honed his skills in the much quieter paradise that is Tobago.

"My tuning of pans is by trial and error. People can't teach me to tune a pan.

He sees more competitiveness rising in the tuning business as a result of the number of pan schools and tuning courses that have surfaced within recent times.

"What we have to be careful of is saturation," he says.

He however acknowl-



A YOUNG member of Point Fortin United Orchestra. Leo Coker sees the young as the ones to continue pan. Provided they stay away from drugs. Photo by Tony Howell.

edges that pan tuning needs continuity as a craft, and puts its future in the hands of interested youths.

"Pan tuning will always be a necessity. The youths can be the ones to pick up the craft provided they don't get into drugs and spoil themselves and the work.

"A little liquor to keep the stomach warm at work is not bad but turning to hard drugs is very, very bad indeed."

Coker said he did not really have a favourite bend.

"What happens when you're working for a

band is that you more or less develop a relationship that is more like a family thing.

"In serving as a man in the pan game you don't have favourites because when you do you tend to do things one-side. I am a servant and the servant is not greater than the master," he said.

The longstanding tuner said he considered the National Carnival Commission's offer of a \$100,000 first prize for a steelband competition on Carnival Days as a great incentive.

"It is a challenge for the steelbandmen to go

out and do more. They need all the incentives that can be offered," he said.

Coker, however, warned panmen about the dependency syndrome and passing blame.

"Panmen must mobilise themselves to do things and get things done.

"We have a tendency to blame other people. We must develop a better attitude. We must get rid of the dependency syndrome, the fear to do things on our own. To do that.

Coker was back to work on a tenor.