

ML 1040

By TERRY JOSEPH

THE IMAGE of Trinidad and Tobago as "land of the steelband" and supplier of the best pans in the world, is being swiftly eroded by a critical shortage of the raw materials used in making the national instruments.

Pan tuners are joining the ranks of the unemployed, even as they continue to receive orders for thousands of instruments. They cannot deliver because of the poor quality of oil drums available locally.

Foreign customers are already turning to other sources of supply, pulling the bottom out of the industry.

Local steelbands are in a quandary, too, over the delays in getting new instruments.

Reigning South/Central Panorama champion the Hydro Agri Skiffle Bunch has been waiting on nine tenor pans since 1995. Band captain Junia Regrello said that of another 40 drums purchased (at \$250 each) last December, only six were suitable.

Pan manufacturers across the board report that the locally available drums seldom survive the tuning process. Attempts to sink the playing surfaces to the required depth often result in the skins splitting open, rendering the drums useless.

The problem is exacerbated by entrepreneurs who make bulk-purchases of used oil drums to resell them to the highest bidders across the Caribbean.

Steelbands are unable to match prices with firms competing for the drums to use as shipping containers.

It is the price of progress. The age of the supertanker has brought with it bulk-storage and transportation of oil, reducing the global need for drums.

Those that are still produced are made from cheaper alloys as the drums are no longer required to withstand the wear and tear that would have been normal before the supertankers. Pan-making was simply never a consideration of oil drum manufacturers.

Pan Trinbago, the body that has traditionally assumed responsibility for the growth and development of the national musical instrument, has itself turned to Venezuela as a source for supplies of oil drums of predictable quality to feed the production lines of its proposed pan factory. Samples of the Venezuelan imports have already been approved by some of the more respected tuners here.

Now add to the drum problem a simultaneous shortage of preferred woods for the making of the sticks with which the finished pans are played. Even the surgical rubber tubing, which is used to cover the playing end of sticks used on front-line pans, is hard to come by. When available, the rubber tubing is being sold for prices as high as \$40 per foot.

Curtis Pierre, who runs the Dixieland Pan Academy, spent the past month trying to source wood and surgical rubber to make new sticks for his students. On Thursday last, after having searched at several hardware stores, he settled for

Pan shortage ...even good sticks now hard to find



wood that did not fit the specifications precisely. Pierre is yet to locate the rubber. Some bands have opted for conventional snare-drum sticks, which they reshape for playing pan.

The price of chrome-plating the finished pans has also become prohibitive. It now costs about \$400 to get a proper job done on a single-tenor pan, the smallest instrument

in the orchestra.

The large scale manufacture of this country's most famous indigenous product is now therefore completely dependent on components from abroad, the prices and supply of which vary without warning, affecting the cost of the finished product. A chrome-plated tenor pan currently costs about \$3,000.

Pan Trinbago president Patrick Arnold, himself a professional pan tuner, describes the situation as "a national scandal" and says that it is caused by a lack of vision on the part of successive governments, none of which seemed to consider the supply of indigenous culture an industry.

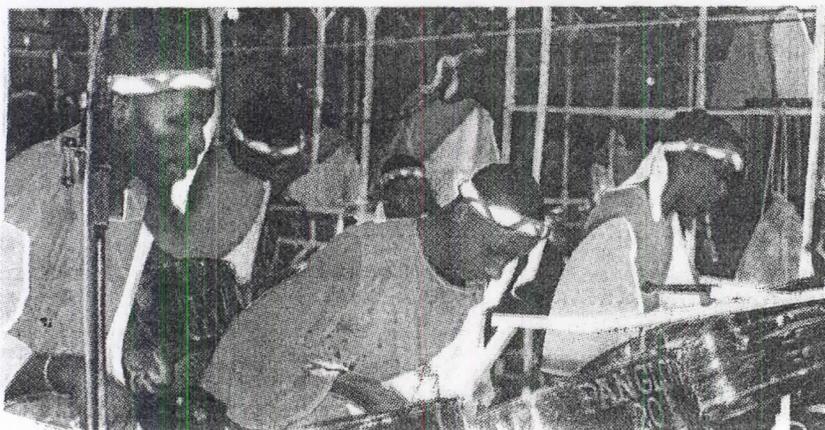
"We therefore find ourselves now having to depend on another country to supply us with drums to make

pans, because Government does not see pan industry as something serious," he says.

"It is bad enough having to play round with any investment in raw materials, what we have to go through to see drums is also demoralising. It is pitiful to watch fellows like 'Zuzie' [veteran pan tuner Kelvin St. R.] having to go down to the filthy dump behind National Petroleum to try and pick out suitable drums and he could quite possibly come back home with a single drum."

Arnold also notes that there was no one of knowing which the discarded drums had originally contained corrosive toxic chemicals.

It was for these reasons that Pan Trinbago set out to address the problem. Using specific



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tions developed by the Caribbean Research Institute (Cariri), Pan Trinbago sent a team to Venezuela last April to find good drums. Although the mission was successful and the test drums received rave reviews from respected tuners, the organisation cannot now afford to import the quantities necessary to kick-start its factory and ease the current shortage.

Trinidad and Tobago Instruments Ltd, a pan factory in which Pan Trinbago has a minority interest, has meanwhile been forced to import some of its drums from England.

"Our files are full of complaints from steelbands and tuners about the quality of the drums available here," said Arnold adding: "Government is obviously not interested in helping to solve the problem and we can do nothing until they give us the outstanding money that they have for us. In fact, we cannot even bring in the containers that are already loaded for shipment from Venezuela."

"And we have major orders too. Right now, Antigua wants 1,200 pans and the numbers from the US and Canada are doubly impressive, but we cannot even get our factory started unless we get our money. The way it looks right now, bands may be forced to buy complete pans from factories in Ohio

or Sweden for Panorama next year, but apparently nobody cares about that," Arnold said.

The Pan Trinbago president argued that the money the Government gave the organisation to start Panvesco is no help, as the pan body cannot get a business loan from government.

"The money that this country spent on the steel mill has not done the steelband movement any good. We should have been supplying the oil industry here and abroad with steel drums and keeping the best of the used ones for making pan to also sell to the world, but instead, we have to be begging other countries for raw materials.

Something is very wrong here and the Government does not seem concerned with our problems. Even our request for a waiver of import duties on the drums we have to buy from Venezuela has remained unanswered," Arnold observed.

Director of Culture Dr Hollis Liverpool, said that while the Ministry was aware of the problem, there was little that could be done to alleviate the shortage since all money matters were dealt with by the Ministry of Finance.

Well, at least Pan Trinbago has been able to do something to ease the hardship of albeit just one of the unemployed tuners. Last week they hired him to paint their offices.

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"It is bad enough having to play roulette with any investment in raw materials, but what we have to go through to select drums is also dehumanising. It is pitiful to watch fellows like 'Zuzie' [veteran pan-tuner Kelvin St Rose] having to go down to the filthy dump behind National Petroleum to try and pick out suitable drums and he could quite possibly come back home with not a single drum."

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