

Death of community steelbands in TT

By SELWYN TARRADATH

COMMUNITY steelbands are almost a thing of the past, a victim of the Panorama syndrome. The only steelband that can boast of still being a community institution is Desperadoes of Laventille, which still encompasses all facets of village activity on "De Hill". Even in Tobago where the communal vibes are still very much in evidence, the village steelband, more often than not, finds itself operating in isolation from the core of the community.

In its embryonic stages, 1935-1940, the steelband was restricted to certain areas of Port-of-Spain. During the formative years, 1940-1950, this musical phenomenon quickly spread throughout the island and to Tobago and other West Indian territories. Even the most rural and remote village was exposed to the steelband experience in some form or fashion.

The attraction to the steelband among youths was enormous at that time, just as dub music fascinates today's young people. It was spread either by young men returning to their villages after a sojourn in the city or by panmen coming to the area from the city to "cool it"...which usually took the form of "breaking warrant" as the practice of running from the law was then called.

One San Fernando-based steelband historian credits the start of the movement in that city to just such a situation in that a young man from John John called "Youth" started a band called Bataan while domiciled in the southern town for reasons unknown.

The steelband quickly became the focus of community activity, taking its place alongside the cricket and football teams, the village council and church. In fact, in many communities there

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was total inter-action between these groups, with the steelband supplying music for all festive occasions, be it sports day, church harvest, fund-raising fete, wedding or christening.

The steelband was a very compact and mobile unit up until the early Sixties, when the demand for a wider range of notes led to the demise of the single pan band as more drums were used and small ensembles became big orchestras. The demands of the Music Festival

and Panorama competitions also changed the focus of the steelband from local activity to the national stage.

Small bands were assimilated into larger groups and the rural steelbands, which could not accommodate this new development, became stagnated and obsolete.

The steelband is now almost the exclusive domain of urban and suburban communities, so much so that there are wide swathes of territory without the service of

steelband instruments or expertise.

These areas include most of the South/Eastern part of Trinidad in the counties of St Patrick, Victoria, Mayaro and Nariva. The North/Eastern counties of St Patrick and St David never had much steelband activity, whereas County Caroni, which once had its fair share of steelbands, can now boast of only one major band in the urban centre of Chaguanas. The Eastern part of Tobago is also void of pan.

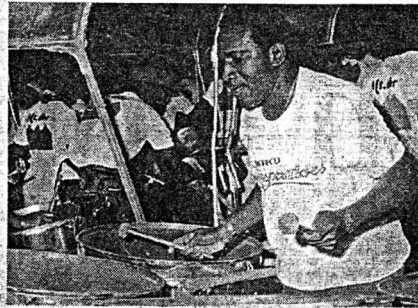
There is a great need to restore the balance in the equitable distribution of access to steelband facility and expertise throughout the nation, by creating activity in areas now deprived of steelband lore. This has nothing to do with the Panorama band, but rather with the establishment of local programmes within each community.

I have found that there is a great yearning — in areas as distinct and apart as Mayaro, Cedros, Toco, Charlotteville, Maracas and D'Abadie — for steelband activity.

I have been approached by people in these areas, as co-ordinator of the "Pan in Schools Project", begging for the programme to be brought to their community so that it could serve as an embryo for the development of a steelband project for the entire area.

Such a programme would need either the assistance of a corporate sponsor or involvement of the Ministry of Culture. It would necessitate training people of the community to appreciate the steelband in all its component parts and to teach them to maintain, utilise, service and propagate the national instrument once it becomes established in their community.

(Selwyn Tarradath is the Education Officer of Pan Trinbago.)



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