

Steelbands need to focus on the future

(*PAN BEAT is a series of articles on the steelband movement by the Education Officer of Pan Trinbago, Selwyn Tarradath, which reflects a personal overview of steelband activity as seen through the eyes of the author.*)

Steelband Week has come to an end after a flurry of activity sponsored by my organisation, Pan Trinbago, in commemoration of the declaration of the steelpan as the national musical instrument some four years ago. The pan week idea is not a new one, as a previous Pan Trinbago administration had initiated it many years ago. There was even a pan day a while ago, when we asked the electronic media to feature pan night and day for twenty four hours.

One of the feature events carded for steelband week was a debate entitled "Let's Talk Pan." This was rescheduled from the Central Bank auditorium to Radio Tempo. The panel comprised President of Pan Trinbago, Owen Serrette and myself, representing the steelband organisation; economics professor at UWI and political analyst, Lloyd Best, Professor Ajumu Nyomba of Atlanta University, USA, who I remember as a regular member of the Solo Harmonites steel band in the sixties, and author/researcher Gideon Maxime with Sookram Ali as moderator.

Each member of the panel was asked to make an opening statement.

I made mention that, in my opinion, the steelband movement was more intent on preserving the past than in inventing the future, to the extent that there has been no real progress in the movement locally for the past 30 years, and that we have left the field open

to foreigners to now exploit and further develop steelband technology to their own commercial advantage.

I used the year 1966 as the zenith of our developmental thrust. At this time the Panorama monster effectively took hold and directed all our collective energies to the Savannah centre stage. This was when the brilliant Bertie Marshall was already working zealously on his ill fated Bertfone, and the genius supreme, Anthony Williams, was also getting into electronics having already set the tone for scientific tuning to last the remainder of the century.

Ellie Mannette had just migrated to the USA, probably never to return to his native land. He is now Artist in Residence at West Virginia University, where he is teaching advanced pan technology to American students. Neville Jules was about to follow suit and migrate to the land of opportunity, but in his case, he had already made his enormous contribution to the early development of the steelband and felt that he had no more to offer.

The other master tuner of that time, Alan Gervais, was establishing a legacy to be completed by present day tuners Lloyd Gay, Bertram Kellman, Leo Coker and the late Errol Moore, of durable, sweet pans from the southland.

The only notable additions/improvements to steelband technology that I can think of locally is that of the auxiliary pans, the quadrophonic and the six pan which Rudolph Charles had designed for his band, Desperadoes.

Lloyd Best had originally prepared a paper for the symposium at the Central Bank Auditorium, his theme was entitled "Schools in

Pan" and his main argument, as perceived by us, was that the steelband, having being identified as a centre of excellence and discipline should be deeply involved, through utilisation of the panyards, by the society at large, but especially by the political directorate in effecting massive social upheavals.

He envisioned a major panyard programme designed as an alternative to the existing formal educational system where students would be taught language skills to facilitate the global spread of the pan culture. He envisioned the panyards as having the potential to be hubs of commercial activity, each panyard becoming an economic processing zone producing a full range of consumer goods.

He saw the yards as research centres on par with technological laboratories in developed countries. In other words, according to Mr Best, we have in our hands the capacity to be anything we want to be, whether it be research facility, industrial complex or beach head for implementing socioeconomic policies for the entire nation. Of course this is flattering to the steelband movement, that an intellectual luminary like Mr Best could applaud us in such glowing terms.

This position is diametrically opposed to another social commentator, Morgan Job, who continues to portray the pan yard as a den of iniquity where young girls are raped on a regular basis by drug-crazed Africans playing primitive music that would make Bach and Mozart turn in their graves.

We should be eternally grateful to Mr Best for his confidence in us, but alas the steelband movement has a bitter history of Greeks bearing gifts.