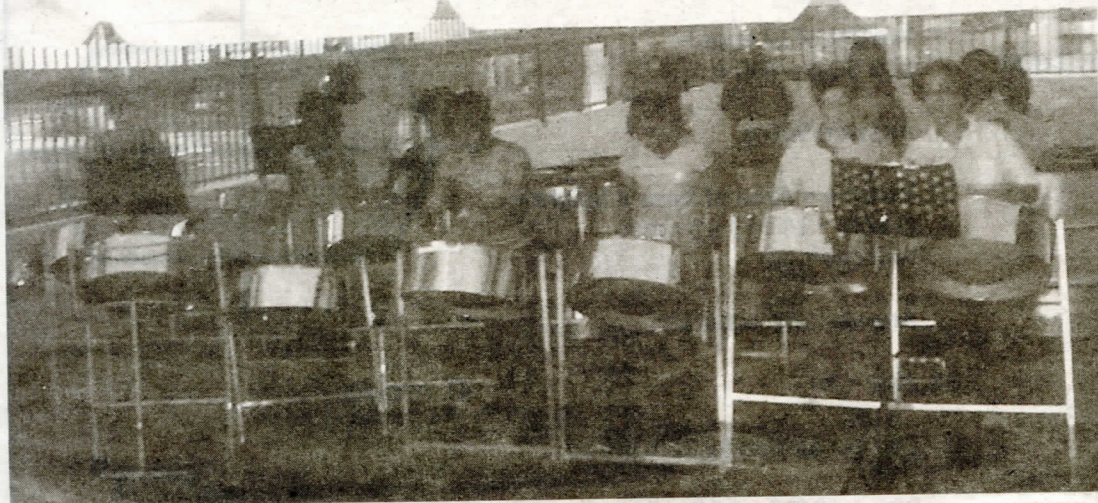




Members of TAGS practising in the carpark.



Practice held under a tent in the Trinity car park.

Pan school looking
for new home

The old Gospel song says, "Tell me the old, old story" and the tradition—bad as it is—continues as another steelband is on the streets.

Trinity All Generations Steel (TAGS) and School of the Arts is an ongoing community outreach programme established in 1994, and registered as a not-for-profit organisation under Trinity All Generations Foundation in 1999.

The school offers music education, both theoretical and practical, for youth in the Port-of-Spain area and its environs, at little cost. Membership in TAGS is not restricted in any way.

There are no pre-requisites for entry, no membership fees or required subscriptions because of the target population that is served. All instructors/teachers/tutors also operate on a voluntary basis.

Although the main catchment area is the Port-of-Spain, East Dry River, Belmont, Gonzales and Laventille area, participants have come from as far west as Carenage and as far east as Matura, and, as the name implies, enrollment starts as early as five years of age and extends well into adulthood. TAGS' music education is supplemented with instruction in self-development and positive mental attitudes.

Along with a focus on practical application on the pan, there is also instruction in piano, drumming, guitar and dance, all at very limited cost to the participants.

The school's success rate has been extraordinary thus far. Students are prepared and presented for the theory examinations of the ABRSM (Royal Schools of Music) twice yearly, and for the practical examinations on pan of the Department of Creative and Festival Arts at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine each November.

The overall pass rate is approximately 97 per cent, with about 66 per cent of the passes at the Distinction level (90 per cent and over in theory and 85 per cent and over in practical), and several 100 per cent passes in both theory and practical.

TAG's latest accomplishments include a bronze medal in the 2009 Junior Panorama competition, and two gold championships in the 2010 Music Festival in the Chamber Ensemble class and the Junior Pan Ensemble class, where TAGS Junior Ensemble attained a perfect score—the first time a performer has ever been awarded 100 per cent in the history of the festival.

Since then, TAGS has also achieved third place in the National Junior Steelband Festival in 2010, and placed fourth in the National Junior Panorama 2011.

Since 1994, however, the programme has expanded exponentially in numbers. Without any sort of publicity campaign, each year many people come forward to apply and register to join TAGS. Although the administration tries to accommodate as many as possible, there are still several who are turned away annually.

The programme has been a part of the

congregation of Holy Trinity Cathedral for the past 17 years.

Several of the founding members still function in both capacities as students and/or teachers in the programme and active Trinity parishioners who serve as vestry members, choristers, chalice bearers and members of various committees that serve the church. However, somehow a rift has developed.

"Our instruments have been out of the church for almost seven weeks now. We've been seeking an urgent audience with the Dean and Vestry to discuss the situation, and now we've been told that we have to wait at least another month to have the discussion.

"Although I think it would be a great loss to the church, maybe it's a sign that it's time to move," said founder and principal, Dr Phaendra Pierre. For the past month, the group has been practising in the Cathedral's car park under a tent—what a familiar story.

A brief history may illustrate the problem. In the late 60s father John Sewell came to Trinidad and found the steelband invigorating and refreshing.

He could not understand why it was not incorporated into regular church activities. He started a series of steelband concerts in the Cathedral Church of the Holy Trinity.

Later in the 70s Melville Robin, Cathedral organist and choir master, planted the seeds of what is now TAGS in its leader Dr Phaendra Pierre.

TAGS came into being in 1994, but has never truly been embraced by the Cathedral Church of the Holy Trinity. Even under the stewardship of the venerable Dean Knolly Clarke, a number of incidents reared their ugly heads.

Today, these have been magnified, and now under the guise of preparation for the consecration of the next Anglican Bishop, TAGS has been unceremoniously thrown out of the church.

The challenge for TAGS is to find a suitable alternative location. This has to take into consideration a place that would be accessible for its target population. The community outreach nature of the programme has encouraged participation by individuals who may not be able to afford music lessons under normal circumstances.

The Cathedral location is also central to "disadvantaged" communities which would limit transport costs of students.

What also needs to be considered is a building that could accommodate the various activities of the group—theory, practise on pans, drums, guitar and piano, and dance on both an individual and group basis.

This just accommodates current offerings, and does not include long term plans to begin instruction in other instruments and areas of the arts.

A letter requesting a visit and discussions was sent to the Ministry of Arts and Multiculturalism.

The only response has been an acknowledgement of receipt and an instruction that the letter has been forwarded to the Ministry of Planning. Thus, another steelband is on the streets.