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Pan — it ain't beautiful yet

By TERRY JOSEPH

EVEN as they launched the Steelband Music Festival, which is this year being held in her honour, feature speaker Pat Bishop quelled the pervading euphoria, by announcing that she could not agree with the title "Pan is Beautiful VIII".

Speaking at the launch which was yesterday morning held in the Central Bank building, Bishop said that while it would be ungracious to not accept the honour, she was surprised when asked to be the Festival's special guest.

"This dedication of the festival to me is inkeeping with Pan Trinidad's usual level of folly", she said half-jokingly but added: "I really consider it inappropriate while people like Anthony Prospect and Jerry Jemmot are still alive and with the memory of Lennox Pierre, who first went down into Invaders' panyard and attempted to transform pannists into musicians".

It was to form the main plank of her 25 minute address, which did not, as its theme implied, set out to pillory the steelband or Pan Trinidad. In fact, Bishop graciously accepted the honour and repeatedly offered assistance to the organisers.

"But it's not easy for a woman to break into the brotherhood of the pan, nor is it easy for the steelband itself to move away from the custom of teaching music by rote.

"When at the turn of the century, the Surrender Boys of Cocorite were arrested for making noise, they were sent to jail, where they stayed from Christmas until Ash Wednesday—no one is certain about what was considered noise at that time, but then we were given a clue from what happened in the forties and fifties".

It was one of several references to the struggle that pannists have had to

undergo in the evolution of the pan. Bishop also traced the difficulty of getting pannists to learn to read music right down to its origins.

"Pan came from the community and the geographical considerations, so that the rivalry was between groups in communities and not through the music. The music always came later and it still does", she said.

Bishop developed her theory to explain that all decisions made in the history of the steelband had been calculated to suit the needs of the community and not of the music. "It is always the elders, the community or the ethos, but never the music", she said.

"When an arranger comes into the steelband, he has to fight uphill to get the music across. The arranger hears the music first, but the band hears the community and its needs. Soon enough, the arranger learns the reality.

"The diminishing interest of both the players and spectators is also explained in much the same way. The same is true for Music literacy and scientists who can help to fix the top notes of the tenor pan, which are virtually unplayable".

The highest notes on the pan are very small and hardly ever reflect the same tonality as the larger and lower notes.

"Pan has to stay community based, but must seek to join that thinking with the realities.

"Several of the more experienced players, who should now be turning into musicians and using their experience to become arrangers are simply not there.

"They have migrated to the metropolitan societies, where they still are not musicians, so they become involved in menial jobs at the lower end of those societies, only to get their green cards.

"This is the reality against which the Festival is located and people should understand this. It is therefore not beautiful at all.

"It is a question of spooning every note into those players who are non



PAT BISHOP (Right) speaks at the launch of the Steelband Music Festival

musical and who are perhaps less enthusiastic than the arranger. It becomes a whole new species of Penance.

"Yet when the music breaks through (and sometimes that is at dawn of the day following the night when we tried to start the tune), when they hear the real music for the first time, they become no longer just panmen, but musicians", she said.

Bishop admitted, however, that she had never heard another musical form that offered anything half as sweet as pan.

"If arrangers are a dying breed", she said, "its because there is too much of a demand on them. The way out of the dilemma is not easy. It is the community which has to be offered the first alternative. We cannot only do it for the pannists, but for the community as well", she said.

Bishop then gave an anecdote about the UWI scientists who were attempting to do a project in acoustical modelling of the pan and went to the International Development Bank (IDB) for a loan, only to be told that the project should be shifted into a social development activity and must be viable in two years.

She sought to emphasise the responsibilities of partners in attempts geared toward the progress of pan.

"But even where that fails, we cannot call the sponsors to account, because we did not vote for them", she said.

"If these new partnerships of sponsors and pannists are to work, we have to hope that there are a couple of really honest brokers acting as middle men; so that we can begin to look forward and it would no longer be necessary to attempt to sustain the myth that—at this time—Pan is Beautiful."