Introduction

The reason why I say “false pride” is simply this:
They enjoy the song, they enjoy the music and
yet they so damned prejudice . . .

If your sister talk to a steelband man
The family want to break she han
Put she out, lick out every tooth in she mouth. Pass
You outcast!

Mighty Sparrow, “Outcast” (1964)

Invoked in many writings and conversations over the years, these lyrics by the Mighty Sparrow affirm a central premise of the steel pan’s story, exhorting Trinidadians to remember the hardships endured during the instrument’s transformation from junk metal into steel orchestra, from vulgar underclass pastime into national instrument. Tellings like these accentuate the pannists’ musical accomplishments by setting them against a historical backdrop of deprivation and prejudice, and chastise the false pride of those who would shun the artists even as they celebrate the art form. Forty years after he first recorded it, Sparrow’s song is still invoked to hold middle-class culture lovers responsible to the lower-class communities where most of that culture has its roots.

If there is a single community that can be said to symbolize those roots, it is the one referred to by the term “behind the bridge.” As a geographical place, behind the bridge is only one of several neighborhoods where the
steelband has important beginnings. The title of this book should not be read as a claim about where pan began, nor does it have any relationship to the rivalry between east steelbands (from neighborhoods such as Laventille or downtown) and west steelbands (from St. James, Woodbrook, and Newtown). In the chapters on origins, tuning, and arranging, it should be evident that key contributions were made by people from all of these neighborhoods. “Behind the bridge” also connotes a condition of social and cultural strife, however, whose role in the steel pan’s development is more generally agreed on. Steelband historian Felix Blake expands on this sociocultural concept:

“Behind the bridge” is, geographically speaking, anywhere East of the Dry River which randomly provides a line of demarcation between the city of Port-of-Spain and its Eastern suburbs nestling jauntily on the hills of Laventille. . . . The other meaning of “behind the bridge” is profoundly sociological, providing clear reference to a person’s socio-economic standing as poor, under-privileged and dispossessed—classic profile of the Afro-Trinidadian whose ex-slave forbears [sic] had settled in the hills of Laventille and who, three generations later, was still society’s outcast. . . . Today, Laventille can boast of having produced two of the best steel bands in the land (Despers [Desperados] and Tokyo), and despite tough economic circumstances, the residents of Laventille remain proud, headstrong, easily aroused and rebellious, sceptical of authority! (1995: 71–72)

Enumerating the African ethnic groups represented in Laventille, Blake goes on to describe the neighborhood as “a bastion of strength against the cultural incursions of the colonial authorities . . . one of the strongholds of the Orisha cult, in open defiance of the ban on drumming which was an integral part of this African religious practice” (73–74).

The association Blake draws here between pan, drumming, and African cultural resistance evokes a narrative of the steelband’s origin that often begins with the nineteenth-century carnival disturbances known as the Canboulay riots. At the Port of Spain carnival of 1883, neighborhood stickfighting bands, animated by drumming and singing, joined together to defend themselves against a police attack, and the incident was used by the authorities to push for greater restrictions on carnival performances. Three years later, in 1884, the colonial legislature passed the Peace Preservation Ordinance, which among other things restricted drumming during carnival. The rest is history, as drums were replaced during carnival by an ensemble of . . .

1Desperados is from Laventille, and Destination Tokyo is from the John John neighborhood at the foot of Laventille Hill.
bamboo stamping tubes called *tamboo bamboo*, and it was out of these bamboo ensembles that the steelband emerged around 1940. Blake's characterization of behind the bridge thus invokes a folk lineage that marks pan's very invention as an act of defiance and as a defeat for colonial authorities who sought to silence and constrain the African people in Trinidad.

This lineage is claimed not just by residents of Laventille, though. Other neighborhoods in Trinidad, such as St. James on the west side of Port of Spain, have also been socially and economically deprived and have been active sites both for the practice of the Orisha religion and the early development of the steelband. Even some of the bands that were located in or near middle-class neighborhoods, such as Invaders in Woodbrook, or Alexander's Ragtime Band in Newtown, were made up of disadvantaged youth, some of whom traveled from other neighborhoods to practice there.² I therefore use the term "behind the bridge" not in its geographical sense but in what Blake calls its sociological sense, as a metaphor for the sociocultural conditions in which the steelband first developed. I mean it to refer, that is, to a condition of marginalization and strife. During pan's heady journey to the status of Trinidad and Tobago's national instrument, this sociocultural condition has constituted an enduring touchstone for what Trinidadians call the "steelband movement."

In employing "behind the bridge" as a metaphor, I acknowledge the contentious debates about steelband history it evokes, as well as the contradictory social, cultural, and political meanings attached to the term. Arguments regarding the contributions of other neighborhoods, other social classes, or other ethnic groups to the development of the steelband are often framed in relation to the way behind the bridge is privileged, as both a sociocultural and a geographic space, in the political and intellectual discourse about pan. Politicians have traditionally supported Laventille steelbands (Desperadoes in particular) as cultural institutions that can help them garner votes in the area (Lee 1997).

And many Afro-Trinidadian intellectuals have promoted a positive image of Laventille as a cradle of Afro-Trinidadian culture, symbolically identifying themselves with that community and its heritage (Ryan 1997: vii). On the other hand, communities of the East Dry River are also associated in most people's minds with problems like crime, unemployment, and drug abuse that are typical of urban slums everywhere, and these negative connotations of behind the bridge continue to plague the steelband move-

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²Norman Darway told me that many of the youth in Alexander's Ragtime Band, for example, congregated in the Big Yard on Woodford Street in Newtown, but lived farther south toward the waterfront, near Wrightson Road. Ellie Mannette's parents lived next to the invaders yard on Tragarete Road, but his band (who originally called themselves Oval Boys) consisted of poor boys who were attracted to the Queen's Park Oval sporting grounds across the street.
ment. Thus for Trinidadians, behind the bridge may signify cultural values, social problems, politics (both in the narrow sense related to government, and in the sense that arguments about cultural origins and ownership are political), or all of these things. As a metaphor that evokes both positive and negative reactions, I find “behind the bridge” a useful place to begin thinking about the fulfillments and frustrations of steelband musicians and their communities, which are the main concern of this book.

First Impressions

On my first visit to Trinidad in 1989, I spent the carnival season rehearsing with Pandemonium steelband in Belmont and participating in the annual Panorama steelband competition. I knew little then about the politics of party affiliation and government patronage, but the politics of festival competition were quickly obvious. My first lesson came even before Panorama, when my friend Michael “Mannish” Robinson invited me to play in his father’s pan-around-the-neck band (a smaller side patterned after early steelbands in which each player walks with a single pan strapped around the neck). I was excited at the opportunity because I had been listening to another pan-around-the-neck side every night near my house in Belmont as it practiced a simple two-chord party song called “Conga Line.” In contrast to the meticulous phrase-by-phrase rehearsing I was doing with Pandemonium, this band played a simple arrangement over and over again, with a rhythmic drive and percussive force that drew me out to watch. The players enjoyed themselves and smiled at each other, and people from the neighborhood came by to watch and talk, sometimes to dance a step or two. The easy enjoyment of playing and listening in this small panyard was a nice contrast to Pandemonium’s more regulated rehearsals, in which we memorized complex arrangements through exhaustive drilling.

Politics in its narrowest meaning generally refers to the pursuit and exercise of government power, in which Lavoiselle figures importantly. But a broader definition in Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language is the “use of intrigue or strategy in obtaining any position of power or control.” I generally use the term “politics” in this broader sense to mean power relations, including the accumulation of cultural status, which is an important goal of the steelband movement and a bone of contention among people from different ethnic, class, and regional groups.

The term “side” is used in Trinidad to refer to a sports team and also to a steelband. I don’t think it is commonly used for other musical groups, so perhaps it connotes something of the competitive nature of steelbands.

Recorded that year by the Barbadian band Spice on its album In de Corajine.
With the pan-around-the-neck competition only two days away, though, our band still had not rehearsed. Finally, on the day before the competition about fifteen of us met with the arranger, who quickly taught us parts to Len "Boosie" Sharpe's "Fire Down Below," a more harmonically and formally complex song than the Belmont band's "Conga Line." Our arranger also added virtuosic variations on the original melody, in much the same way (though on a smaller scale) that calypsoes are arranged for the large steelbands in Panorama. By the end of the rehearsal, I could barely keep track of the order of things, and we were all struggling too much with our parts to play with verve. The following day we had a quick review in the panyard, and before we could arrange an ending we had to load our pans into a truck and drive down to Woodford Square for the evening competition. As we assembled our band on the street and awaited our turn to play, I asked Man-nish how we were going to end, but he didn't know. No one seemed to know. We arranged ourselves in front of the judges' desk anyway, counted off, and began to play. Our performance lacked anything you might call nuance, and with the exception of a few sure-handed "crackshots" who carried the night, it was also relatively spiritless. As we neared the conclusion of what we had arranged, I grew anxious about the ending we didn't have. Then, without any signal that I could see or hear, we turned away from the judges and walked off altogether, playing our last bit of music as we went. I didn't know whether the others had known that would happen, or whether they simply trusted that something would happen.

A few hours later, I was surprised to learn that we had scored well above the Belmont band! Apparently the judges preferred our variety and virtuosity over their cohesiveness and energy. I soon found out, in any case, that many of my companions were less concerned with how they had placed than with receiving their share of the band's appearance fee. These young men, who were used to hustling for money, "scrutining" day to day, saw steelband competitions like this as another way to make a little change. Later, I saw some of the better players doing this with as many bands as they could—a quick rehearsal or two, a brief appearance on stage, another day, another dollar. The pan-around-the-neck competition gave me a preview of some tensions—musical spirit versus formal complexity, and community-building versus financial gain—that characterize the Panorama competition as well.

An important difference when it came to Panorama, however, was that my companions in Pandemonium were decidedly not indifferent to winning, and their preparation was meticulous. Every night our arranger, Clive Bradley, taught new parts to a small group of section leaders and skilled players, who then took the music back to the full band to drill. After each phase of the competition—preliminaries, zone finals, semifinals, and finals—copies of the judges' evaluations and comments were delivered to the cap-
tain, posted on a bulletin board in the yard, and discussed among band members. Bradley proclaimed his disdain for the Panorama judges and his uncompromising commitment to creative music (to his “madness,” as he put it). But I did not believe he could ignore the judges’ opinions; the people who were paying his fee wanted too badly to impress them. Night by night, Bradley gradually pieced together a spectacular symphonic arrangement of “Somebody” (a calypso sung by Baron that year) for a hundred players. During the month and a half between New Year and carnival we rehearsed every weekend for four or five hours.

When the day of the preliminary round arrived, we mounted our pans on their large racks with metal canopies and wheeled them out the gates. There we waited to cross the road and enter the Queen’s Park Savannah, where the horse racing track in front of the grandstands was converted to a huge outdoor stage for carnival season shows. As we watched other bands (all of which had traveled farther) unload their pans from trucks and assemble them in the field or on the paved track leading to the stage, I was nervous and excited, reluctant to move far from my rack. I knew we were already behind schedule, and I didn’t want the band to start without me. My band mates, though, seemed unconcerned as they relaxed and joked in the shade, some of them sipping beers or sweet drinks. Finally, as if by an unspoken signal, they put their shoulders to the racks, pushing and shouting directions to one another, and the whole band suddenly began to move. I was impressed in that moment with everyone’s trust and acquiescence in the steelband’s collective will—people conserved their energy, not needing to know exactly when the move was going to happen, yet mobilized instantly when it did.

We rolled our pans across the street and onto the track, where we took our place in line behind other bands waiting to perform. The track is a paved road about fifty feet wide that leads from the street almost to the stage, lined on both sides during the carnival season by a wall of stalls where vendors sell drinks and food, and filled with a crowd that swarms around the bands as they make final run-throughs of their arrangements. Some steelband aficionados stay here the whole day, preferring to hear pan in a setting where they can stand close to the band, come and go freely, and avoid buying a ticket for the stands. At the front of our band two attractive young women held long poles with a banner suspended between them, bearing the name of the band and our sponsor, Fertin, a fertilizer company. The banner also included the name of the calypso we had arranged and the calypsonian who sang it (“Somebody,” by Baron); our arranger (Clive Bradley); our captain (Barry Nanton); and our tuner (Wallace Austin). Black and yellow jerseys that section leaders passed out to all the players also advertised our band and our sponsor. “Somebody” was written in big letters on the front, and the song’s theme of looking for a partner in carnival was illustrated by a picture
of a costumed man and woman wining (dancing) together (fig. 1.1). Some players put their jerseys on immediately, while others hung them from a belt or a pan rack, awaiting the ritually appropriate moment.

Pandemonium’s pans were now arranged in approximately the configuration we planned to use on stage (fig. 1.2). In the middle was the float, a

Fig. 1.1. The author wearing his 1989 Pandemonium steelband jersey (eighteen years after playing in it).
raised trailer that carried the "engine room" (drum set, congas, irons, and other percussion), lined on its sides with gleaming chromed tenor pans that stood out above the roofs of the surrounding racks. The bass pans (sets of six or nine full-size oil drums each on its own wheeled rack) were positioned to the front and rear (west and east), which would become the right and left flanks of the band when we rolled onto the stage. The "frontline" pans—dozens of tenors, plus double tenors and double seconds—were positioned on the north and south sides of the band so the melody would come across clearly to the audience, the strongest players stationed on the judges' side. "Background" pans—including guitar pans and several other types that mainly strummed harmonies in steady rhythm—were closer to the middle of the band. In all we were one hundred players strong, pared down from a slightly larger rehearsing group to conform to the competition limit.

While we waited we rehearsed our ten-minute arrangement, first at a slow tempo, then at a fast tempo, and then just a bit slower, at the precise tempo we would take on stage. Moving up the track every twenty minutes or so, as one band replaced another on stage, we finally came close enough
to the judging area that we had to stop playing. A cloud of dust hung in the air ahead of us where the steelbands had to cross a stretch of the dirt horse-racing track to reach the stage, and we could only faintly see and hear the band performing in front of us. The last few players now pulled their jerseys over their heads, and everyone waited behind his or her pan, resting and getting ready for the big moment. Finally, the band in front of us stopped playing, and even before the crowd’s applause had died, their racks were rolling off the far side of the stage. Officials standing at the near side waved us forward.

As my rack approached the ramp, we gained speed to help us climb the slope, then trotted up onto the stage. It was like coming out of the tunnel in a football stadium, entering suddenly into a vast arena surrounded by crowds and noise. Loudspeakers on either side blared Baron’s recorded version of “Somebody,” and the crowds milled about, especially in the North Stand where the risers were left bare to accommodate boisterous socializing, or “liming,” as Trinidadians call it. We hustled to get our racks in position, keeping an eye on the red traffic light at the far end of the stage. Section leaders shouted and waved at the pan pushers, maneuvering the band into as tight a formation as possible. As the traffic light changed from red to yellow, nonmusicians who had come on stage to push the racks (and then stayed to strut in front of the audience) were coaxed and pushed off by officials. The recorded music stopped playing, and I could hear the excited buzz of the crowd. Now everyone had sticks in hand, some fidgeting silently, others jumping, clapping hands and clapping their neighbors on the back, as they waited for the signal to start. The traffic light changed to green and someone rapped loudly on the side of a pan to get our attention. Then, at the sound of a stroke on the iron we bowed in unison. Another stroke brought us back up. Finally the players turned to their pans, and their bodies rocked with the rhythm as a single iron sounded out the starting count (see fig. 1.3).

POW! The explosive sound of a hundred people striking their pans at once almost lifted me off my feet. Even though we had practiced this countless times in the panyard, it felt different here, and it took me a moment to get a grip and settle into my playing. The more experienced players on either side of me appeared unfazed, and they applied themselves ecstatically to the introduction’s luscious melody and chords, sweat beading up already on smiling faces. Dozens of heads bobbed in perfect unison, and the waist of the girl in front of me swung back and forth like a pendulum, propelled by (or propelling) the band’s pulse, imperturbable in contrast with the agitated and irregular movements of her sticks in the pan. The introduction ended with a stuttering unison break, and when the rhythm resumed and we swung into the melody of the verse, the crowd’s cheer penetrated my body and lightened my arms.
Bradley had given a dark, intense mood to the minor mode verse, and this made the chorus ("I want somebody to love up . . .") sound even happier when it came. When we had rolled the last note of the chorus, though, my friend Dexter next to me stood bolt upright, staring at me open-mouthed and wide-eyed. As I looked at him wondering what was wrong, he dove back into his pan to play the scintillating chromatic turnaround, while I, caught flat-footed, struggled to get my place again. Crap! I kicked myself mentally for missing Dexter’s cue. I had learned my notes, but here on stage I was discovering a whole new dimension of drama that was crucial to Panorama performance. After variations on the verse and chorus that featured dramatic crescendos and counterpoint between the tenors and basses, the band settled into a groove, grounded by a bass line that Bradley had made to fit the words, “Somebody to love up!” Players and audience members sang the words along with the basses, as one exciting lick after another peeled out from the tenors over the steady vamp. This was the first “jam” of the arrangement, and it felt like we had arrived at a place where we could stay as long as we wanted, floating on the cycling sound waves of the intertwining bass, strum, and percussion. Then suddenly, SMACK! went the snare drum, and the bottom of the band dropped out, while the tenors went skittering up a chromatic scale. When the basses finally returned with “LOVE UP,” I heard a delighted moan above the roar of the crowd, Oh Gaaaaaaaww!

So began my first experience playing in Panorama, and though I have performed on the Savannah stage a half-dozen times since, I never again felt
quite the same excitement. For many steelband musicians, however, the thrill of playing in Panorama is a perpetually renewing and invigorating experience, no matter how they may complain about the competition’s inequities and distortions. They come back not just to perform, moreover, but also for the sense of community and belonging they find in the panyard. One of the moments when the bonds of community touched me most warmly was playing football in the yard after carnival. For people who live in the same neighborhoods and come together for two months of intensive music making every year, these bonds are much more intense.

Bellyaching after Panorama is also an important part of the cycle of events. After Panorama, I heard disgruntled assessments of the judging and complaints about competition generally that resonated with some of my own impressions. The complaint that Panorama music was no longer good for dancing, in particular, reminded me of the music I had experienced listening to the single pan band from Belmont, or even moments of rehearsal with Pandemonium when a slower tempo and the informal panyard environment nourished a more relaxed sense of groove and well-being. I became interested in the way Panorama performances, like the pan-around-the-neck competition, tended to privilege complexity and speed over soulfulness, staged presentation over festive participation. Though this problematic aspect of competition was the furthest thing from my mind while I played on the Panorama stage, it was impressed upon me in a particularly memorable way when we performed in another context.

The Panorama finals took place on a Saturday night, and Pandemonium planned to play on the road the following Monday morning for Jouvert, the opening of carnival celebrations. After Pandemonium placed a disappointing sixth in the final scoring, though, few members showed up at the Sunday afternoon rehearsal. For the few of us who came, Clive Bradley taught simple verse and chorus arrangements of two calypsoes, as well as a calypso-style arrangement of the progressive rock song “A Whiter Shade of Pale” by Procol Harum. The next morning I played mud mas6 with my landlord’s friends and his coworkers, and I was covered in dried mud from head to toe by the time I joined Pandemonium, who were already pushing their pan racks slowly up Frederick Street. They were not playing “A Whiter Shade of Pale,” though, or any of the other new songs because no one could remember them well enough. Instead, they played our Panorama arrangement, which felt uncomfortably out of place here on the road. Its intricate texture,

6Jouvert Monday morning, the opening of carnival, is traditionally a time when people play dirty mas', smearing themselves with mud, paint, or oil in a ritual of transgression that contrasts with the pretty mas' (large bands of elaborate coordinated costumes) that dominates the streets later in the day, and especially on Tuesday.
modulations, and drawn-out variations did not move the crowd in the same way as the short catchy phrases, cyclical form, and exciting breaks of “Conga Line”—which now blared in its original recorded version from the massive speakers of DJ trucks, along with other hit songs of the season. Some spectators stopped to listen as we passed, but few followed us, preferring to jump up behind the more danceable and gut-wrenchingly loud music of the DJ trucks. When one of these trucks passed, we had to put down our sticks and wait until we could be heard again, a distinctly more humble position than we had enjoyed just a few hours before on the Savannah stage.

What had happened to the steelband, I wondered, to make it slip from favor as music for carnival dancing? How could steelband musicians be content with learning just one tune during the carnival season, a tune that people did not even want to listen or dance to once Panorama was finished? In subsequent conversations and interviews I heard many Trinidadians echo and add to these concerns, lamenting that the spirit of pan was succumbing to the politics of carnival; that bands were too concerned with Panorama to maintain a dance repertoire; that merchants and DJ trucks played recorded music too loud for the steelbands to be heard on the streets; that favoritism skewed Panorama judging; that judges with formal music training imposed inappropriate criteria; and that the government was subsidizing the steelbands too much or too little. All of these perspectives contributed to the impression of pan as a sort of embattled, stagnant, or even declining art form—a sad epilogue, it seemed, to the glorious story of the steelband.

AN INSTRUMENT OF SPIRIT

As a scholar, I struggled to understand how this rhetoric of nostalgia and decline related to the obvious passion so many Trinidadians maintained for pan and Panorama. I was inspired in my task not only by my own experience playing, but also by the ever-blooming enthusiasm of panmen and panwomen, who sacrifice family life and carnival season diversions to be in the panyard rehearsing every night for up to two months. Even when people appeared disillusioned with politics after Panorama was over, they returned the next year with fresh enthusiasm. In various presentations and publications, therefore, I worked to reconcile the daunting political constraints confronting the steelband with this optimistic and joyful spirit—by highlighting the agency of individual musicians (Dudley 2001; 2002b), by illustrating how steelband music reflects and speaks to political issues but also transcends them in important ways (Dudley 2002a), and by exploring the dynamic balance between constraint and creativity in competition (Dudley 2003).
INTRODUCTION 15

My understanding of pan’s renewing force was helped forward by the work of Trinidadian playwright and scholar Rawle Gibbons, who has researched the extensive overlap between the Orisha religious community and the steelband community at the time of the pan’s inception (Gibbons n.d.). Gibbons identifies early panmen who were also Orisha men and who brought to the steelband their drumming techniques, their song repertoire, and their understanding of music as a vehicle for the manifestation of divine power. This influence of the Orisha religion is not stressed in most accounts of the steelband (apart from occasional citations of Orisha drumming as one of several influences, as by Blake, above, or in Stuempfle 1995: 39), in part because many Trinidadians still regard Shango practitioners with disdain or even fear. Nevertheless, Gibbons’s assertion that “the pan is regarded by African-Trinidadians in particular as an instrument of ‘spirit’” (n.d.: 2) helps to explain the peculiar reverence and zeal that so many Trinidadians show for pan, even those who have had no direct exposure to the Orisha religion. From this perspective, the common Trinidadian saying that “pan is a jumbie” (a spirit that possesses people) can be understood as more than just a colorful metaphor. It is also, on some level of awareness, an indicator of the steel pan’s cultural roots and spiritual power.

The element of Gibbons’s argument that is most germane to this book is the connection he draws between the Orisha faith and the steelband’s spirit of resistance. Many narratives of the steelband portray the panmen’s defiant persistence as an analogue to Trinidad and Tobago’s struggle for independence (Stuempfle 1995: 235), and Gibbons suggests that this persistence has taken spiritual sustenance from the Orisha religion. He notes that “the [Orisha] yards were a resource for the emerging steelband which shared their spirit of defiance” (n.d.: 14). The fearless and aggressive attitude of the steelbandsmen was, in this perspective, analogous to the behavior of Orisha devotees who are possessed by, or who “manifest” the Orisha deities, with the encouragement of drumming, singing, and dancing. “Oscar Pyle witnessed ‘manifestation on the street,’ ” writes Gibbons, “while Prince Batson asserts that ‘Tokyo used mounted drums’ (African drum) among their pans and these would send people into a fighting frenzy’” (n.d.: 13). The analogy between spirit manifestation and resistance points to the deep connection between music and politics in Trinidad. Whether in relation to slavery, colonial domination, nationalism, or class and ethnic tensions, the tendency to reflect, resist, or transcend political circumstances is fundamental to the spirit of carnival music in general and pan in particular.

1 Or “pan is meh [my] jumbie.” A jumbie is a spirit or ghost, connected with mischief and malevolence, associated in some people’s minds with African spiritual practices like Orisha worship.
2 Oscar Pyle was the leader of the Casablanca steelband and Prince Batson was a founding member of the Trinidad All Stars steelband.


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An important question, however, both for Trinidadians and for students of culture generally, is whether this independent and defiant spirit can be sustained now that pan has been adopted and promoted as national culture. Gibbons celebrates the steel pan’s role in forging “an identity for Trinidad that is not class or ethnic bound but has become almost national in acceptance,” and he suggests that Trinidadians today experience the spiritual dimension of pan as a “consciousness of the divine within and around our lives” that transcends institutional religion (n.d.: 17), given that steelbands include Hindus, Muslims, Orisha people, and Christians of various denominations. On the other hand, one could argue that the participation of Trinidadians from diverse class, ethnic, and religious backgrounds has diluted the steelband’s cultural base, and that the cosmopolitan values of cultural nationalists have replaced the worldview from which the steelband first sprang. Has the steelband been co-opted, therefore, or is it still a force for resistance to elitist values and control? And as the steel pan assumes a less oppositional role in Trinidadian culture, through its institutionalization in schools and in other ways, what positive spiritual force does it exert?

NATIONALISM AND MODERNIST REFORMISM

Questions about the steelband’s spiritual health, and especially the erasure of its social roots, link Trinidad’s unique cultural history to a broader pattern of postcolonial nationalism that has been termed “modernist reformism” (Turino 2000). Modernist reform is a process by which middle-class intellectuals seek to modernize lower-class performance traditions and to put them on display in ways that conform more closely to cosmopolitan conventions, such as stage presentation. This ideology has an especially strong appeal to Caribbean nationalists because of the newness and hybridity of their societies, a condition which they are never allowed to forget. Trinidadian writer and Nobel laureate V. S. Naipaul, for example, famously wrote that “history is built around achievement and creation, and nothing was created in the West Indies” (1992: 29). And although nationalists decry Naipaul’s intolerance (some might say self-hatred), less cruel echoes of his attitude are found even in the writings and speeches of Trinidadian patriots who, in their efforts to lift their culture up, implicitly put it down.

Labor leader, writer, and pan-Africanist C. L. R. James, for example, measured Caribbean art forms by the standards of what he saw as a more mature European civilization, questioning whether there was “any medium so native to the Caribbean, so rooted in the tight association . . . between national surroundings, historical development and artistic tradition . . . from which the artist can draw that strength which makes him a supreme practi-
tioner” (1977: 184). James had a genuine enthusiasm for the possibilities of adapting European high art disciplines like modern dance to include local forms, and in this regard he particularly commends the work of Trinidadian choreographer Beryl McBurnie (see chap. 4). But this kind of enthusiasm tends to have a transformative effect on the very traditions it promotes. As Thomas Turino writes, “Because . . . reformers consciously engage with indigenous lifeways, and because they typically operate from a middle-class, modernist position themselves, their programs often have a more direct transformational effect than colonialist positions that disparage or simply ignore indigenous arts” (2000: 107).

The sort of cultural intervention that James advocated is part of the work of building a nation-state. In theory, this means a state in which people are bound not just by common geography and government but also by a common history, language, folklore, religion, and so on. A commonly cited precedent for this strategy is the work of Johann Gottfried Herder and other eighteenth-century European “romantic nationalists” who sought to articulate national culture through the collection and promulgation of stories, songs, and dances of the common people (W. Wilson 1973). This folkloric orientation generated an idealized view of the “folk” as a people and a culture untainted by education and modernization. For example, in his 1866 book, An Introduction to the Study of National Music, the English scholar Carl Engel wrote,

In civilized countries . . . we find, as might be expected, the characteristic peculiarities of the National music most strictly preserved among the less educated classes,—much as we find the peculiar manners, customs, and prejudices of a nation more strictly adhered to by the common people than by the higher classes, whose education is more in accordance with that of the educated classes of other civilized nations.

While idealizing the folk in this manner, romantic nationalists have generally reserved for themselves the right to decide how folk culture is to be promoted and disseminated, recognizing that “genuine peasants or tribesmen, however proficient at folk-dancing, do not generally make good nationalists” (Gellner 1994: 58). This tension between the elite and the folk reflects not just class conflict, but the fact that no state is ever culturally homogenous. Unlike folk dancers, that is, nationalists must manage diversity strategically, constructing cultural symbols that are inclusive enough, on the one hand, to compel a broad range of people, and exclusive enough, on the other hand, to distinguish their nation from other nations. At the same time, these cultural symbols must conform to cosmopolitan conventions of

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national culture (e.g., an anthem, a flag, a soccer team, a national dance troupe) if the nation is to be taken seriously by the rest of the world.

This balancing act, between local distinctiveness and international respectability is described by Turino as the "twin paradoxes of nationalism":

A basic paradox of nationalism is that nation-states are dependent on cosmopolitanism [i.e., internationally shared values and institutions], but are simultaneously threatened by it: unless nation-states maintain their unique identity, they will disappear as distinct, and thus operative, units on the international scene. . . . A second paradox of nationalism is that nation-states celebrate and are dependent on local distinctiveness, but they are simultaneously threatened by it. . . . Nationalists' need to celebrate local distinctiveness carries its own dangers since culturally distinct groups within the state's territory could potentially claim a separate national status by the orthodox logic of nationalism itself. (2000: 15-16)

In twentieth-century nationalist movements, these paradoxes are exacerbated by colonialism. Because the boundaries of most postcolonial nations were determined by struggles and treaties between European states and had little if anything to do with cultural homogeneity, the task of articulating a national culture that simultaneously accommodates and restraints the diversity of an India, a Nigeria, or a Brazil is immensely challenging. Although Trinidad's society is relatively small and relatively new, its cultural diversity is hardly less impressive. The two largest ethnic groups in Trinidad are Africans and East Indians (the latter brought as indentured laborers by the British in the mid-nineteenth century, to replace the slave labor of the former), and there are significant numbers of people who trace their ancestry to China, the Middle East, and Portugal as well. Moreover, the island has known two colonial masters, Spain and England, and was strongly influenced by the culture of French plantation owners who immigrated to the island with many patois-speaking slaves in the late eighteenth century.

In addition to this internal diversity, Trinidadians contend, as do all decolonizing people, with a fundamental tension between the need to proclaim national autonomy and the need to justify this claim to their former masters—to justify themselves, that is, in terms of those same European Enlightenment values their colonial rulers used to justify their subjugation (Chatterjee 1986). The very idea of the nation-state as the normal and desirable condition for people to live in was exported from Europe to the rest of the world during the colonial enterprise of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the same time, this and other values of the "enlightened" West (including individual autonomy, the privileging of reason over emotion, social justice, and representative government) have consistently been advo-
cated by drawing a contrast with a “backward” East, or the non-European world generally (Said 1979). Even as they affirm their autonomy, therefore, people emerging from colonial rule have had to deny their backwardness, reconciling their own distinctive cultural values and histories with the irreversible technological, economic, and political developments of Europe and the modern world. In Trinidad, the steelband movement’s concern with “progress” reflects this dilemma, as pride in pan’s lower-class roots and African heritage is inextricably linked with ambition to refine the instrument and master new repertoires.

The imperative of progress exists in dynamic tension, however, with the imperatives of distinction and authenticity. This tension is especially evident in the arts, which often serve as a bulwark against total Westernization, even as European models of representative government, law, and capitalist production are adopted wholesale. Postcolonial nationalists in many countries have actively challenged the superiority of European art, literature, and music, and have endowed local cultural expressions with a new value and respectability, discouraging globalization in the cultural realm even as they embrace it in the economic and political realms. In Trinidad, for example, criticisms of steelbands that played “foreign” music at carnival in the 1960s illustrate this aggressively protective attitude (chap. 5).

Even in the realm of expressive culture, however, nationalists promote changes they think are necessary to fulfill new symbolic functions, a project of reform that recasts indigenous culture in relation to cosmopolitan values. Examples of such reform abound in the literature of ethnomusicology and provide useful comparisons by which to evaluate the changing role of the steelband in Trinidad. In his description of folkloric dance companies that were created in communis: Bulgaria beginning in the 1950s, ethnomusicologist Tim Rice explains how the stage, in particular, disrupts traditional processes and values:

The basic form of Bulgarian traditional dance is the circle, closed or broken. While a wonderful form for creating group solidarity and interaction, it is a poor form for stage presentation, since the audience continually views the

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*Partha Chatterjee observes that many postcolonial people respond to the dilemma of heritage versus progress by assuming the attitude “that the superiority of the West lies in the materiality of its culture, exemplified by its science, technology and love of progress. But the East is superior in the spiritual aspect of culture” (1986: 59). One of the most compelling ways to make such spiritual values tangible, moreover, is through expressive culture—literature, art, and music. And most students of nationalism would concur with John Hutchinson’s view that “the paradigmatic figure of the national community is the artist” (1987: 15). The tendency to foreground expressive culture is obviously not unique to postcolonial nationalist movements, but the contrast between “modernization” and “tradition” is felt with an even greater intensity in postcolonial societies than in Europe (Chatterjee 1986: chap. 1).
dancers’ back sides. The Bulgarian choreographic solution broke the circle into lines and reconstituted them into squares, matrices, phalanxes, and other geometric shapes, continuously changing to amuse a passive audience. Individual simultaneous improvisation in the line, a hallmark of village dance, was eliminated in favor of choreographed variations performed sequentially in unison by the entire company. (1994: 178–79)

Such disregard for folk aesthetics and values goes hand in hand with disregard for the folk themselves. Zoila Mendoza demonstrates, for example, that the very effort to preserve or “rescue” folk traditions in Peru has tended to marginalize the folk themselves, whose actual practices may appear corrupted or diminished when measured against intellectual constructions of “pure” folk traditions (2000: 54–55). This erasure of traditional performers may occur even in more socially elite performance genres, as Matthew Allen demonstrates in his study of South Indian bharata natiyam (1997). Beginning in the early twentieth century, this dance form was largely wrested away from hereditary temple musicians by members of the Brahmin caste, who adapted bharata natiyam to the concert hall, downplaying the sensuality of temple performances in favor of a “more ancient” Hindu spirituality that was congruent with European orientalist views. Each of these examples demonstrates how modernist reformers, in their zeal to promote traditional performance genres as symbols of the nation, marginalize the communities in which those performance genres originally developed, and for which they had other meanings.

Notwithstanding this well-documented ethical problem, however, modernist reform is also a creative process in which artists, regardless of their class background, strive to create performances that are aesthetically meaningful. A central concern of this book, therefore, is to understand modernist reform in musical as well as ethical terms. By this I mean paying attention to the creative thinking of musicians, to specific musical sounds and structures, and to the broader community’s participation in musical performances. This is important for two basic reasons. First, though music making is conditioned by ethical and political considerations, it is also guided by an exuberant logic of its own. Second, musical experience conditions political thinking in ways that are beyond the control of politicians and intellectuals. A focus on musical thinking and musical experience thus highlights

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10 Many other scholars have made the same observation. Turino writes, for example, “The apparently benevolent cry for preservation is part of the same message that portrays indigenous lifeways as disappearing, and indigenous social groups and occasions as invisible or irrelevant” (2000: 154). And Kate Ramsay argues that “rhetoric of ethnographic salvage almost always implies the ‘disappearance’ of the folk referent—an extinction that is presented as the rationale for ethnographic representation, when in fact it often seems more like its condition” (1997: 352).
both the artistic and political agency of musicians. Moreover, to the extent that audiences participate in performances, this agency is shared by broader communities. A study of politics and performance therefore requires particular attention to the extent and nature of communal participation.

**PARTICIPIATORY MUSIC**

A fundamental task of modernist reform is the reframing of communal performances for presentation on the stage. Performances that were once part of participatory community celebrations and rituals, in which the line between participants and observers might be quite indistinct, are reconfigured as staged spectacles presented to a relatively passive audience. This shift has occurred in various ways and degrees in twentieth-century Trinidad. Carnaval song leaders, or chantwells, were reinvented as stage performers in “calypso tents” in the 1930s, for example (Rohlehr 1990: 11, 40; Dudley 2004: 24–25), and steelbands that once played on the road now concentrate their efforts on the staged Panorama competition. Even in these stage venues, however, the participatory ethos of street carnival persists in important ways, competing with the more European-style concert hall etiquette. Panorama musicians, for example, respond as much to the crowd’s enthuisiasms as the judges’ criteria, and this has resulted in a style of music and performance that could not have been predicted by Panorama’s organizers.

The competing aesthetics of the street and the concert hall that merge in Panorama can be characterized as participatory and presentational modes of performance, respectively (Turino 2000: 47–57). Though participatory performance takes many forms, the presentational mode of performance has become increasingly standardized through the effects of colonial rule, cultural exchange, media, and education. to the point where today it often represents a broadly cosmopolitan worldview. This worldview, embraced to some degree by the educated middle and upper classes of every country in the world, favors uniformity over individuality, variety over repetition, hierarchy over homogeneity, and planning over spontaneity. “Within middle-class ethics, the lack of control, organization, pre planning, variety, and lack of distinction—between sounds as well as between artists and audiences—make indigenous participatory style objectionable” (Turino 2000: 138). Turino’s characterization of presentational performance values as antagonistic to community-based traditions parallels the concerns of some Trinidadian intellectuals. Anthropologist John Stewart, for example, writes that “under the patronage and control of the middle-class Creole leadership, carnival has evolved into a grand spectator event” (1986: 309). More than a simple observation about evolution, Stewart’s inference is that carnival has
been reduced to a spectator event and, furthermore, that the middle class is responsible.

Despite the truth of this observation, it is also important to recognize how projects of modernist reform, at least in the case of the steelband, reflect the interests of more than just one social class or constituency. Steelbands participate in elite-sponsored promotions of the national culture, but they are animated by the musicians’ creative impulses and are constrained by the festive crowd’s expectations, both of which are sometimes antithetical to the elite agenda. Though many Trinidadians are concerned about the constraints Panorama has imposed on the steelbands, it is important to recognize that those constraints are shaped not only by elite cultural activists but by musicians and their communities (chaps. 8 and 9). Panorama’s contested meanings and its unpredictability complicate the notion that modernist reform, and nationalism generally, are driven strictly by middle-class intellectuals. Popular input into constructions of the “national music” must also be taken into account, and this input is predicated on participation.

My own understanding of the participatory dynamics in musical performance has been informed especially by the scholarship on black music,¹¹ which has been much more concerned with the social and processual dimensions of music than is traditional music theory. In part because prejudices against black music have been so obviously linked to prejudices against black people, black music scholarship has tended to link the analysis of music to a positive moral vision of black or African culture. This vision, which stresses communal responsibility as both an incentive and a constraint for music making, is summed up in the following passage from Samuel Floyd’s *Power of Black Music.*

The coexistence of... apparently contradictory processes—discouragement of exceptional achievement, on the one hand, and the veneration of it, on the other—was possible because of the prevalence of what [Basil] Davidson has described as a sense of “controlled freedom” in which “an inner tension and creativeness... emerged in artistic triumphs that were morally inspired.”... This controlled freedom took place within a moral order in which daily interdependence was the normal state of affairs. It was, in Davidson’s words, a “robustly collective” society. Based on collective responsibility, it was a society in which exceptional individual achievement was expected to serve the community. This was its moral imperative. (1995: 33–34)¹²

¹¹Though the term “black music” conflates race and culture in a way that is problematic for some (see, e.g., Hall 1998), it has nevertheless acquired currency and meaning through its frequent use, especially in the discourse of African American scholars. It is related in important ways to the political movements of black nationalism and black pride.

¹²Representations of African and African American music have of course been “colored” by their as-
Paul Berliner fleshes out the musical implications of this moral imperative in his description of Shona music, which includes not only virtuosic instrumental performance on the mbira, but also singing, hand tapping, and dancing. Berliner details the variety of vocal styles that participants can choose from, ranging from simple to complex, and relates these choices to an ethic of participation: “Active participation in the music is characteristic of the bira [a music and dance event centered on spirit possession], and reflects the communal nature of the music, in which highly talented or professional musicians can express themselves without restraint within the same context as beginners” (1978: 191).

The reconciliation of exceptional achievement with universal participation is also theorized by Olly Wilson, to whom I am indebted for many of the musical terms and analytical distinctions I use in this book. Wilson notes, for example, that many African and African American musical ensembles can be described as having fixed and variable rhythmic groups (1974, 1992; see Dudley 1996) that correspond roughly to accompanying and soloing roles. The fixed rhythmic group is formed by the interlocking of several contrasting and repeating parts (in a textural relationship that musicologists call “polyrhythm”), as exemplified by the drums, bells, and rattles in an Ewe ensemble; or the clave, percussion, piano, and bass of a salsa band; or the iron, congas, and background pans of a steelband. These interlocking parts model the interdependence of individuals in a community and provide a consistent and compelling rhythmic character (what is referred to in colloquial terms as “groove”) that guides dance, song, and improvisation. Individuals with exceptional abilities, such as instrumental soloists, dancers, and song leaders, give form and energy to a performance by playing variable parts that relate to the fixed rhythmic framework. Often this occurs through the formal device of call and response, in which an improvising soloist alternates with a repeated chorus, exercising leadership and virtuosity while responding (literally) to the community. An African predilection for timbral variety (particularly buzzing and rattling sounds) also encourages the dis-
...inction of individual voices within the ensemble. At the same time this heterogeneous sound ideal blurs the boundary between speech and song, instruments and voice, and ultimately, perhaps, between musical and nonmusical experience. These predilections—rhythmic contrast, fixed and variable groups, cyclical call-and-response form, heterogeneous timbre—which Wilson refers to collectively as "African conceptual approaches to music making," exemplify the aesthetic of controlled freedom that Floyd cites, and explain how social relations are both reflected and constituted through music making.

By expanding the conception of music to include not just formal structures but also processes, black music scholarship has helped to open up a dimension of music theory that is useful for the study of all kinds of music. Turino's theoretical distinction between participatory and presentational modes of performance, for example (2000: 47–50), draws heavily on African examples and bears the clear imprint of ideas that were earlier articulated by Olly Wilson. Earlier still, Charles Keil took inspiration from LeRoi Jones's 1963 book, Blues People, to challenge Leonard Meyer's influential writings on music theory, pointing out the limitations of studying the "embodied meaning" of music that inheres in the syntax of written scores. Keil advocated instead a focus on the "engendered feeling" that inheres in the process of making music, shifting attention from composition to performance ([1966] 1994). Keil later applied this paradigm, which was inspired by African American jazz, to various genres of what he calls "people's music," such as the polka (1992, 1993, 1995). Finally, Christopher Small (1998) brings a helpful focus to this whole line of thought by proposing that, since most of us experience music as an activity rather than a reified object, we should refer to it by the term "musicking" rather than music. Small demonstrates the value of this distinction by analyzing European art music as performance rather than written score.

My attention to musicking focuses both on creative innovation and on the way performance facilitates and responds to participation. Because I am especially interested in the ways steelband musicians adapt Afro-Trinidadian performance traditions to new contexts, I may sometimes seem to conflate black music with participatory music as I oppose them both to Eurocentric values. It should therefore be remembered that African music is not necessarily participatory and participatory music is not necessarily African. Nonetheless, many participatory performance conventions of Trinidad carnival have been profoundly shaped by African and Afro-Trinidadian musical practices, some of which are invested with racial symbolism, but most of which are simply taken for granted. My aim is not so much to convince readers of the steel pan's Africanness (a genealogical link that should be obvious) as to articulate some of the unspoken conventions.
that guide steelband performance, the better to understand how performance responds to and shapes ideas about culture.

A NEW NARRATIVE OF STEELBAND HISTORY

The attention given in this book to performance and musical thinking adds a new dimension to steelband scholarship, much of which has been concerned with the collective social and political struggle of the steelband’s early development. Stephen Stuempfe points out that this struggle, culminating in the steelband’s dramatic rise in cultural status, has become a “master narrative” that dominates “most oral and written discussions of the movement” (1995: 3). Folklorist J. D. Elder writes, for example: “We have traced the history of ‘pan’ all through the vicissitudes of change, the growth and adaptation of Negro music in a new land, integrating with the music of other peoples among whom it was cast, and yet maintaining its basic character. This is a stirring story of a great cultural adventure” (1969: 20). Vicissitude, change, growth, adaptation, integration, authenticity—as well as race, class, politics, and nationalism—are placed at the heart of the steelband’s story by other writers as well (e.g., Aho 1987; Blake 1995; Goddard 1991; E. Hill 1997: 43–54; Stuempfe 1995; and J. Thomas 1990). These writers have thus paid a great deal of attention to one of the elements in this book’s title, “behind the bridge”; yet little has been written about “music,” an omission that dismays some Trinidadians. Journalist Kim Johnson complains, for example, that the steelband “fell to the social scientists by default, as if beating pan was some quaint folk practice, an aspect of ethnicity or national identity or pluralism—anything but a serious, modern art form” (1996: 4). Though I would avoid framing the steelband as “serious art” (a term that tends to devalue such things as festivity and collective participation), this book does foreground the experience of music and the creative impulses that generate performance, introducing issues of festivity, affect, and artistic ambition into the story of the steelband.

Another purpose of this book, closely related to the foregrounding of musical thinking and experience, is to suggest interpretative frameworks for the post-independence history of the steelband, a task that has received relatively little scholarly attention. Writers tend to construct the steelband’s master narrative in reference to Trinidad’s pre-independence history, when the most dramatic transformations in the steelband’s social and musical status occurred. Little has been written about the Panorama competition, which began in 1963 and which has come to dominate the repertoire and the energies of most steelbands. The abundant popular and journalistic discourse on contemporary steelbands is often characterized by nostalgia for

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the time when steelbands had a more varied entertainment role, and by
From the creative stagnation or commercialization of Panorama (see
Thomass 1986). Some studies have observed and catalogued emerging new
issues, such as the participation of women, steelbands in the schools, or cor-
porate sponsorship (e.g., Stempfle 1995; Taradath 1991). Nonetheless,
scholars and other commentators have yet to find a compelling new nar-
ative that accounts for the extraordinary creative energy of the Panorama
competition.

One explanation for this lag in scholarship might be that, since
Panorama’s battles tend to be fought on musical ground, their analysis and
interpretation require somewhat specialized tools. The master narrative of
the steelband’s earlier transformation is commonly recounted in terms of
political demands and pitched street battles (e.g., Goddard 1991; Stempfle
1995: 70–91), but Panorama’s arguments are much harder to analyze without
resort to a language of musical form, rhythm, texture, and harmony. This
musical argument has always been a crucial part of the steelband move-
ment, but it gets obscured in portrayals of the panman’s determined and
sometimes violent social struggle (see Aho 1987; Blake 1995: 86–95). Novelist
Earl Lovelace, for example, writing about the importance of Jouvert (the
“opening” of carnival in the dark hours of Monday morning) as a com-
memoration of emancipation, says:

Steelband was the Emancipation–Jouyay movement’s new force. It had
arrived at the beginning of a new epoch. The colonialist movement was on
its last legs. Self-government and independence were around the corner. The
Jouyay characters that had maintained their expressions of rebellion and re-
stance for 120 years were now largely taken for granted, the social condi-
tions out of which they had grown, ignored. The steelband provided a new
focus and challenge, not only because of its music but also the violence that
accompanied it. Where the violence of the Jouyay characters had become
formalized into ritual, the steelband presented a violence that was naked,
that could not be ignored, that recalled the first fierce Jouyay revelers
coming onto the streets just after Emancipation. (1998: 55)

Most steelband musicians with whom I have talked, although they iden-
tify with the social struggle of the panman, remember the early days of the
steelband movement as a time of exciting musical discoveries and innovations. They also see themselves, therefore, as “pannists”—creative mu-
cicians in the same category with guitarists, violinists, or pianists. This artistic

12 This term is perhaps most frequently applied to steel pan musicians who aspire to perform as
solosists in small ensembles. It has the advantage of gender neutrality, and its usage has in-
creased with the significant participation of women in steelbands since the 1980s.

Dudley, Shannon. Music from Behind the Bridge: Steelband Aesthetics and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago.
http://site.ebrary.com/lib/utoronto/Doc?id=10211812&ppg=41
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self-identification is particularly strong among Panorama arrangers, who compose complex multipart music for a hundred players, not unlike the composer of a symphony. Thus Panorama, in part because it has so exalted the status of the arranger, challenges writers to give the pannist equal billing with the panman. Such a focus on artistic self-perception not only honors the musicians’ views but also sheds light on the way that individual innovations and performances reshape collective notions of style and taste. Beginning with the creation of a musical instrument from junk metal, steelband musicians have taken pan in unpredictable directions at every step of the way, and the steel pan has always been, in the final analysis, what musicians make of it.

Attention to individual agency has become part of the common wisdom of contemporary ethnomusicologists (Rice 1987). This is due in part to a social sciences trend toward conceiving culture as a system of conventions that can be grasped only through their repeated reproduction in practice and that are subject to change and variation in every reproduction (Ortner 1984). As ethnomusicologists have embraced this social science paradigm, though, they have continued to mistrust the historical musicology paradigm that credits “great men” as the agents of such musical change (Shelemy 1987: 489). Thus, while ethnomusicologists have made important contributions to the understanding of many musical systems and to the ongoing reinterpretations and transformations of these systems, they are less likely than historical musicologists or even writers on popular music to consider the idiosyncratic ways in which individual performers or composers make such reinterpretations—the personal inspiration or genius, that is, that sparks collective musical change.

Of course, musical innovation cannot be viewed uncritically as the product of great men or great women; indeed, there are good reasons to mistrust this perspective. One must guard against the tendency in some musicological discourse, for example, to separate individual style from its collective social and performative context, or to glorify the composer over the performers and audience. But there are also good reasons to lower one’s guard in appropriate cases. Brian Nettl has noted, for example, that the tendency of ethnomusicologists to overlook individual genius and innovation reinforces a qualitative distinction between European art music and non-Western or folk music, and also reinforces “the long-held assumption that music in non-Western and folk cultures is stable and unchanging until polluted by the West” (1983: 278). To this list of pitfalls I would add the tendency to view music as being overdetermined by social forces, and thus to take for granted that important musical changes in the history of a particular culture were simply waiting to happen. The case of Panorama, where a few top arrangers make many of the musical decisions (reminiscent, indeed, of a symphony...
orchestra’s hierarchy), demands that we also consider what else might have happened had different individuals been involved, and how the musicians of today may help to define the terms of tomorrow’s cultural debates.

In addition to crediting the agency of individual musicians, my focus on their musical thinking brings into sharper focus the socially and historically constructed constraints within which musicians operate. Panmen’s enthusiasm for “the classics” of European art music, for example, points not only to their need for validation, but also their lack of opportunities for formal musical training. Young people who wanted to learn more about music, but could not afford piano or violin lessons, seized upon the steelband as an opportunity to expand their musical knowledge and tools. In the late 1950s, steelbands began to arrange these classics for festive carnival performance, a practice that became referred to as “the Bomb.” Public disagreements about this practice highlighted the differences between the musical thinking of steelband musicians and the political thinking of middle-class nationalists who were oppressed by the symbolism of European art music (chap. 5).

More recently, steelband arrangers have challenged Panorama’s conventions of musical form, which are shaped both by audience preferences and nationalist constraints, and the way arrangers make this challenge shows us where the priorities of intellectuals and Panorama audiences coincide or diverge, and the specific kinds of constraints they place on music (chap. 10). Such links between musical strategies and social history demonstrate the impossibility of fully understanding one without the other.

This book’s music-centered narrative therefore embraces the sociological narrative of the steelband and goes beyond it, complementing valuable scholarship that has already been done. It also underscores the artistry and dignity that is so often denied in images of the steelband that are purveyed in North American popular culture, advertising, and tourism promotion. Most important, my narrative of the steelband makes room for the whimsy and playful spirit of music making that politics can never completely deny. Though accounting for the social constraints and motivations to which musicians respond, I also seek to treat music, particularly in a festive context, as a distinctive mode of human consciousness and behavior—to keep sight not only of the relationship between politics and music, that is, but also of the differences between politicking and musicking.