Angela Smith


This morning I read a story about Summly, an Internet news summary service created by a British teenager, Nick D’Aloisio. The app takes long news articles and summarizes them in 400 words. How could this be done? Wouldn’t the result be chunky, much like the work of Internet translators? No, the prose is well written and clear. Judging from examples, what the app does is to pick out topic sentences from the longer article and go with that. This is exactly what *Steel Drums and Steelbands* feels like. Written by a professional writer, it is a clear, compact, nicely organized yet comprehensive history of pan (steelband). It is aimed at high school students, especially people who may know little about the topic.

The book is an easy and enjoyable read. It begins with the history of Trinidad, the arrival of African slaves, and the development of Carnival. It then covers the evolution of pan from drums, the tamboo bamboo, and biscuit tin bands to the tuned steel orchestras. Finally, there are chapters on the spread of “steel drums” abroad. Part I (the first fourteen chapters) is about pan in Trinidad. Part II (the last six chapters) covers steelband outside of Trinidad, mostly in the United States. Part II is useful as it focuses on the integration of steelband into American culture. It does not cover the extremely wide use of pan in the scores of Trinidad-style carnivals spread across the North American continent and throughout the world.

There is a plethora of appendixes. The first two consist of brief biographies of “pan pioneers” and “pan innovators.” The third is a useful chronological guide to each of the chapters. The fourth consists of questions teachers might ask students. The fifth is a discography and Internet guide. A sixth offers a breakdown of the instruments in a typical steel orchestra. There is also a bibliography, an index, and a list of experts contacted by Smith while she was writing the book. Finally, there is an excellent section of photographs, most of them taken by Smith. (One great photo shows Eleanor Roosevelt with Kim Loy Wong, Trinidadian steelband pioneer in New York City after World War II.)

Unfortunately, there are a few problematic aspects to the book. One is the lack of notes. Quotes are sprinkled throughout the books and Smith has conducted many interviews, but the provenience of the references is not annotated. Appendix 5 consists of a brief discography and Internet links and there are more links in the bibliography, which seems to substitute for annotations. Taken together the bibliography (including the Internet sites) and the phone and email interviews strongly suggest that Smith based much of the book on
individual reminiscences and contemporary accounts of the steelband by participants. There is some attempt to judge and weigh these accounts, to separate the well-trodden and myth-laden history of pan with a more objective or considered view, but not enough. Also, there is little discussion about the steel orchestra's development in a larger social, cultural, and economic context. In other words, this is a book written by a fan, not a historian, anthropologist, folklorist, or other type of scholar.

Because this book is a popular rather than scholarly account of the history of pan, nuanced phrasing and factual errors jump out here and there. It is not possible to list them all but here are a few samples. The use of “steel drum” might rankle some Trinbagonians, who prefer the word “pan.” “Steel drum” is the phrase commonly used outside of Trinidad, including second-generation islanders, and its use suggests that the topic is being viewed from afar. On page 60, Smith refers to “Tobago, rumored to be the island where Robinson Crusoe lived.” Smith knows that Crusoe is a fictional character, I am sure, but many other places also claim to be the setting for Defoe’s novel. Later in the same paragraph Smith refers to Tobago in the 1800s as a “country,” not a colony. Another error is the quote of lyrics to “Rum and Coca Cola” in an epigraph (p. 41), presumably written by Rupert Grant, a.k.a. Lord Invader. Only the chorus (which is garbled and should read, “Go down Point Cumana …”) is Invader’s lyric; the rest was written by the most important plagiarizer of the rest of the lyrics, Morey Amsterdam (who lost his case to Invader, in a New York court). Invader received a large cash settlement, although Amsterdam and his confederates retained copyright of the lyrics. That is, Invader wrote nearly all the lyrics to the song and Amsterdam did indeed copy Invader’s lyrics in other verses, but this particular verse, ironically, is Amsterdam’s, not Invader’s!

And there is more. On page xv and again on page 46, Smith asserts that “Calypso and pan were both borne [sic.] of the African slave culture.” This is an oversimplification. Calypso and pan are not reformulations of “slave culture,” but new creations involving the efforts of formerly enslaved Trinidadians, once indentured Africans in Trinidad, Afro-Caribbean immigrants from nearby islands, and others.

This book will likely become the quick reference of choice on pan. But whenever it conveys basic facts about pan history, inaccuracies pop-up. Should the novice get a quick “take” about the steelband from this book and then turn to more scholarly works for a deeper understanding? I began this review with a metaphor about an Internet algorithm. In the last few years I’ve read too many student papers that also look like Internet algorithms. So it is that an Internet-based folklore is established. Easily accessible “facts” will be picked up by casual readers and I’m afraid by scholars as well, and these errors will