



*The birdsong Foundation a Registered Charitable Body*  
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Our Response to the Editorial Published in the Trinidad Guardian “**The predicament facing the national instrument**”

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**To The Editor:**

We at birdsong acknowledge with the deepest gratitude the widespread outpourings of support for our cause that have been aired in both the conventional and social media in response to our recent eviction from the premises that we have occupied for the last 28 years. We are particularly thankful to the editors in the conventional media houses who have seen it fit to give prominence to the underlying issues in the absence of a viable public policy framework to support the efforts of the cultural community and in particular the long standing problems of security of tenure for steelbands.

Even in recording our gratitude and appreciation, we must take strenuous exception to the inaccuracies vented in the **Guardian editorial of Saturday September 03, 2016**. Of particular concern is the position taken by the newspaper's editor that, *“in the face of ultimately being displaced or possibly having to purchase the existing panyard or some other property, the leadership of the band is said to have raised \$120,000”* - a sum which, the editor dismissively describes as being “quite insignificant”. Apart from being grossly inaccurate, these assertions convey the clear impression that the birdsong organisation has been deliberately lazy and incompetent in its efforts to deal with the land tenure challenge which has been responsible for the demise of several steelbands in our country's history. In order to correct this inaccuracy, we take this opportunity to present the following facts about the situation in which birdsong now finds itself.

1. Contrary to the assertions of the Guardian's editor, birdsong's major challenge is not the availability of resources to acquire a new site but the many externally imposed delays that have affected each stage of the land acquisition. The result is that today, after making a \$120,000 down-payment 6 years ago on January 12, 2010 and securing approval for loan financing, we are unable to conclude the transaction and take possession of the property due to the failure of the relevant state agencies to appoint a Registrar of Friendly Societies who, according to the law, is the only office holder empowered to dispose of the assets of a defunct friendly society.
2. In the meantime, we have completed conceptual designs, obtained outline planning permission from the Town & Country Planning Division to develop the property, secured mortgage financing and prepaid more than one year's instalments even though the approved mortgage has not yet been able to be executed.
3. birdsong is a socially responsible, self-sustaining, community-based, not-for-profit organisation. Self-sufficiency is at the core of our value system and, as such, it is not a feature of our DNA to solely depend on seeking, negotiating or begging for handouts, special favours or sponsorship arrangements from fairy godparents in the political or commercial arenas. It is on the basis of this philosophy, that we have dutifully avoided the adoption of the sponsorship model that has become a standard feature of the resource mobilisation strategy of the steelband movement. Instead, as a deliberate policy choice, we have been developing and testing a business model that is both relevant to the needs of our community and supportive of our objective of pursuing excellence in the fields of music performance and education. We are essentially a self-sponsored cultural entity.
4. The ***birdsong model*** involves 2 incorporated commercial entities operating as social enterprises, a music education programme and a performing arm. Thus far, this model has served both our organisation and our community well. Our social enterprises *employ 60 persons* on a full time basis drawn from our membership and the surrounding community that supports us. The music education programme, which is free to the youth membership employs 15 experienced music teachers on a part time basis.
5. Our business activities finance our core activities and our special projects have received support from a range of local and international

agencies including the UNDP, the IDB, the JB Fernandez Trust, the Rockefeller Foundation and United Way.

6. Our business entities are all fully compliant with all relevant regulatory requirements. We maintain annually audited accounts and are up to date on all statutory payments, including income tax and VAT, national insurance, workmen's compensation and public liability insurance. A defining feature of our business operations is that our directors receive no remuneration and all profits from our productive enterprises go toward the maintenance and development of our music education and performance operations.
7. The decision to seek mortgage financing for our proposed land acquisition is a matter of deliberate strategy which reflects, among other things, the strength of our balance sheet and, above all, the confidence that the financial sector reposes in our business model, viability prospects and management systems and processes.
8. Efforts to find a sustainable solution to the insecurity of tenure pre-date the landlord's legal initiatives to regain possession. Indeed, our records show that we have been engaging successive Ministers of Culture on this issue from as far back as April 1986 when the Hon. Muriel Donawa-Mc Davidson was the relevant line minister.
9. It is precisely because of the apathy, indifference and tokenism that has characterized past political and bureaucratic responses to our efforts, that we took the decision in the immediate aftermath of the landlord's initiation of legal action to seek to establish our social enterprises and to acquire a suitable property on the open market, with the full confidence that our limited means at the time was not a constraint on us achieving any targets that we set for ourselves.
10. Several offers to purchase the land were flatly rejected by the landlord. Subsequent attempts to purchase land focused on the acquisition of a property which is owned by a defunct friendly society. When we made our first offer to purchase this property, the value, based on the opinion of professional valuers, was of the order of \$300,000. However, due to a combination of systemic inefficiencies and no small measure of bureaucratic ineptitude, it took a full 5 years before we were able to make a down- payment in 2010 by which time the market value had quadrupled to \$1.2 million.

We at birdsong remain undaunted by the events of the past weeks. Rather, we are determined to emerge from this crisis unruffled, more committed and energised. At birdsong our credo is that:

*We are not afraid to fly, to dream big dreams  
to explore beyond the vistas of our current horizons.*

*Some may find us uncompromising.  
Many say that we're too hostile to the established order, to those  
who refuse to recognise what is useless and obsolete.*

*For we at birdsong have set ourselves the monumental task of  
re-imagining, transforming and liberating the Steelband*

Sincerely yours,

**birdsong**