

A slick celebration of Renegades

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At one point, Norman Christie, bpTT's Regional President, couldn't get more than a sentence out about "our band" before the audience exploded into lusty applause and catcalls of appreciation.

He was at the podium offering welcoming remarks at the first official screening of *To be a Renegade*, a documentary his company funded to record the successes of the steelband Renegades, which it began sponsoring in 1970.



A member of the Renegades Youth Steel Orchestra which won its fourth Junior Panorama title this year.

This was not just the showing of a documentary it was advertised to be; it was a celebration of champions in front of a home crowd. The band turns 70 in 2018 and was last documented comprehensively in Kim Johnson's 2002 historical book about the band.

Many of the elements needed for an effective and compelling documentary record of Renegades as a band in 2017 are present in the film.

There are colourful pastiches of life in Belmont and Laventille, eloquent and passionate fans and players and a band with a rich and complex history.

When Cyril Ramjitsingh, a long term fan, strides up steep Belmont hillside stairs to show off an abandoned bit of the band's geography, his importance is underlined by an enthusiastic roar from the Renegades in attendance.

There's appropriate veneration of the contribution of Jit Samaroo and delightful lines from some of the interview subjects.

One elder, recalling his youth with the band, remembered his terror at being found out as a player and the looming threat of his parents finding out that he was playing with men considered to be ruffians of the day.

"I was a badjohn in the road," he recalled, "not in meh house."

For all that though, *To be a Renegade* skips lightly over the band's considerable history, literally skimming over newspaper headlines and zooming in portentiously on paragraphs with a rationale that isn't immediately apparent to the uninformed observer.

The band's leadership is very vocal about the potential of the band's youth orchestra, and with good reason. The Renegades Youth Steel Orchestra (RYSO) has won the last four Junior Steelband championships and the band's senior players seem impressed by the skills of the next generation of players. The young player's voices are focused in the film through the band's captain, Emmanuel Joseph, an earnest and focused young man who is pictured laughing while working with the band, in his school uniform, in his Sea Scouts uniform, with and without his glasses.

The film gives time to the senior band's fans, band members, and the leadership in hefty measure but apart from Joseph, the players and supporters of the RYSO are lively and attractive bit players, not active participants in this narrative.

Who are these children when they aren't in the panyard? What are their ambitions for their playing?

Joseph's frequent costume changes suggest the depth of character these young people bring to their pan game, but it's all only hinted at.

These questions seem relevant for a band that's so hopeful about their part in the future of Renegades and for a sponsor impressed enough with them to establish a university bursary for its players.

The reasons for the lavish remembrances of legendary arranger Jit Samaroo are also absent, as is the band's troubled relationship with its arrangers after Samaroo stepped down.

To truly appreciate *To be a Renegade*, you need to know a lot more about the band than is revealed onscreen, to speak fluent Trinidadian in order to understand some of the interviews (subtitles seem a sensible addition for wider distribution) and to be comfortable with the producer's perspective for the documentary.

The interviews are also heavily weighted in favour of the band's leadership and seem to explore how to manage a renegade rather than how to actually be one.

To be a Renegade is a crisp, well-photographed and engaging story of one Panorama's worth of preparation by a sponsored band, scrubbed clean of the untidiness that makes panyards so colourful and lightly dusted with strategic brand logo sightings.

Once you go in understanding that despite an admirable corporate absence from the footage this is bptt's documentary of a band it's clearly very happy to be associated with.

It's not a definitive chronicle of the band and its history, but it's easy to be swept away with the intensity of its most passionate participants and the giddy sense of joy that permeates every frame.

For more information about screenings of *To Be A Renegade*, visit tffilmfestival.com