

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mandingo Brass Founders Celebrated as Carnival Village Opens With Tribute to Pinney Family Legacy

The 73rd Carnival festivities begin with Carnival Village dedication to Willis, Vance, and Steve Pinney, recognizing the brothers' profound influence on St. Thomas music and culture, highlighted by their creation of memorable sounds through Mandingo Brass

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The Pinney brothers pose for a picture with Governor Albert Bryan Jr. during Carnival Village opening. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM.

Carnival festivities kicked into high gear on Monday night with the official opening of Carnival Village, with this year dedicated to a family of three brothers who have had an

outsized influence on music and culture on St. Thomas.

“When it comes to bold moves and brilliant ideas, Willis Pinney didn't just play the game, he rewrote the rules,” said Kyza Callwood in his introduction of the Pinney brothers. The eldest of the three, Willis was the founder of Mandingo Brass, “a band so lively and unforgettable they could probably get a statue to dance.”

Meanwhile, according to Callwood, “if Calypso had a university, Vance Pinney would be the dean and the entire board of trustees.” A master of the congo drums as well as a skilled arranger and songwriter, “Vance was the quiet storm behind many of Mandingo's biggest sounds,” the evening's host declared. After leaving the band founded by his older brother, Vance went on to mentor young calypsonians, and he also judged calypso competitions across the region.

Steve Pinney, the youngest, “grew up with music in his blood and Carnival in his soul,” Callwood declared. He too joined Mandingo Brass for a stint, moving from his original instrument – the trumpet – into percussion and background vocals.

“Willis, Vance and Steve didn't just create music,” stated Callwood. “They created memories. They lifted carnival higher, louder and prouder, and tonight we honor that everlasting rhythm.”

The legacy of the Pinney brothers is reflected in the naming of this year's Carnival Village – Willis, Vance and Steve's Musical Parlor.

Each introduced by their eldest daughter, the three brothers took the stage one after the other to accept their accolades. Willis Pinney noted the long, proud history of “firsts” established by Mandingo Brass – among them being the first band to play J'Ouvert morning, the first local band to have a Road March in 1978, the first Brass O'Rama champion, the first band to print Carnival t-shirts, the first band from the Virgin Islands to attend Caribana in Toronto, to play on the steps of the Capitol in Washington DC, and to produce a junior calypsonian. That calypsonian was Lady Wings – Wilma Pinney, the first daughter of Willis.

Vance Pinney, meanwhile, first thanked his mother, who he said inspired him with her perfect pitch as she was always able to hear when the notes coming out of his saxophone were flat. He also extolled the virtue of having a large family full of genuine people who nurtured, supported, and criticized him when he needed it. He called on village organizers to ensure that the sounds of Mandingo Brass were woven through each activity held at the venue.

“This is more than just an honor,” said Steve Pinney, when he took to the stage. “It's a celebration of love, friendship, and culture and music.” He noted that in the Virgin Islands, “music has always been part of the community...it connects us.” He urged residents to take inspiration from the lives and careers of honorees past and in the future. “Let any name given to this Carnival Village remind us that every note, every voice and every rhythm, no matter how small, help change the music and culture we all shape and love,” said the youngest of the sibling honorees.

After a rousing round of applause for the family's 89-year-old matriarch, who was on hand to see her sons being honored in this way, dignitaries took to the stage to offer their

accolades to the three brothers, each speaking to the tremendous impact the sound of Mandingo Brass has had on the territory. "Their music has been the soundtrack to our celebrations, their energy lifting our spirits and reminding us of who we are as people," said Senate President Milton Potter, as he urged the listening public to "let their example inspire us to nurture our traditions, support our artists, and celebrate the richness that makes the Virgin Islands such a special place."

Governor Albert Bryan Jr. offered his thanks to the Pinney brothers for their contributions to the Virgin Islands, and tasked the public with nurturing and growing the rich culture of the territory. "When you enjoy Carnival, when you enjoy the music, remember your responsibility to keep that heritage alive," the governor said immediately before Carnival Village was officially declared open.