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The Smooth operator

I'll always love All Stars

By MARCIA NOEL

YOU COULD SAY he ran away to join the church except that when arranger Leon "Smooth" Edwards walked out of Trinidad All Stars' panyard for the last time, he had no idea of the spiritual call upon his life.

It was not as if Smooth had been particularly religious.

He had no time for God because All Stars was his god.

He had no time for his marriage because All Stars was his "wife".

He had led the band to three Panorama wins (1980, '81 and '86) and carved a formidable reputation for them — at that time — as the only steelband to have regularly made the first three in six consecutive Panoramas (1980-1986). (Renegades has been the only band to have been in the top three for seven consecutive years — 1989-1995).

The day he left, a part of nearly every All Stars pan player died.

How could Smooth divorce his "wife"?

"My priorities were mixed up. I was practically worshipping All Stars ... [The band] was first, second, third, even fourth.

My wife and God were lower down the line ... so God took it away."

Still, the devastation he felt at the split took a long time to get over.

The turning point in Smooth's life and the band came just after the Panorama preliminaries and a few days before the zonal finals.

All Stars had placed first in prelims with Duke's "Pan in Yuh Rukungtungkung" and everybody was on a high.

Smooth had a tradition of changing sections of the tune, sometimes extensively, after each stage of the competition.

Players looked forward to the changes which always enhanced the music.

But Smooth failed to turn up at the yard for days and the band went to the zonal final with the same tune they had gone to prelims with.

They ran third.

Great things were still expected. But Smooth, who had reappeared by this time, made only token alterations.

Players began to murmur. If they were aware of the battle between the "core" and the leadership, few could have predicted the outcome.

All Stars ran fifth in the semi-finals and seventh in the finals.

The "core" rode out and formed another band, Flabeje, and All Stars



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Before God took the band away, an incident occurred during the Panorama season of 1988 that some say precipitated Smooth's decision.

It was a move that would lead to five key members—the treasurer, the secretary, the musical director, the main percussionist and a former captain, walking out of the band.

They, along with Smooth, were known as "the core" and they were the arranger's right-hand men. Their influence in the band was so entrenched, that in following him, All Stars was left with a hole in its middle.

Smooth likens it to the removal of a foundation stone.

Smooth prefers to remain tight-lipped about the details of the watershed except to say that as a general involved in a musical war, he suddenly found himself the target of bullets that should have been aimed at their foes instead:

"I always look at Panorama as a war. I always looked at the other bands as the enemy, and if I was supposed to be leading our team to this battle and my marshal is throwing bullets at me, I had no choice but to get out of the way."

He says he is still an All Stars man — "I'll always love All Stars" — and that he has no intention of decrying their name.

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The next year, 1989, All Stars was out of the Panorama finals for the first time since the early '70s.

It marked the beginning of a period in the wilderness.

"Probably one of the reasons why the band is taking such a long time to recover is they [need to] get somebody with that kind of love, that kind of heart. We were the only band from 1980-'86 to come in the first three (in Panorama) and to maintain that standard there had to be more to it than just practising."

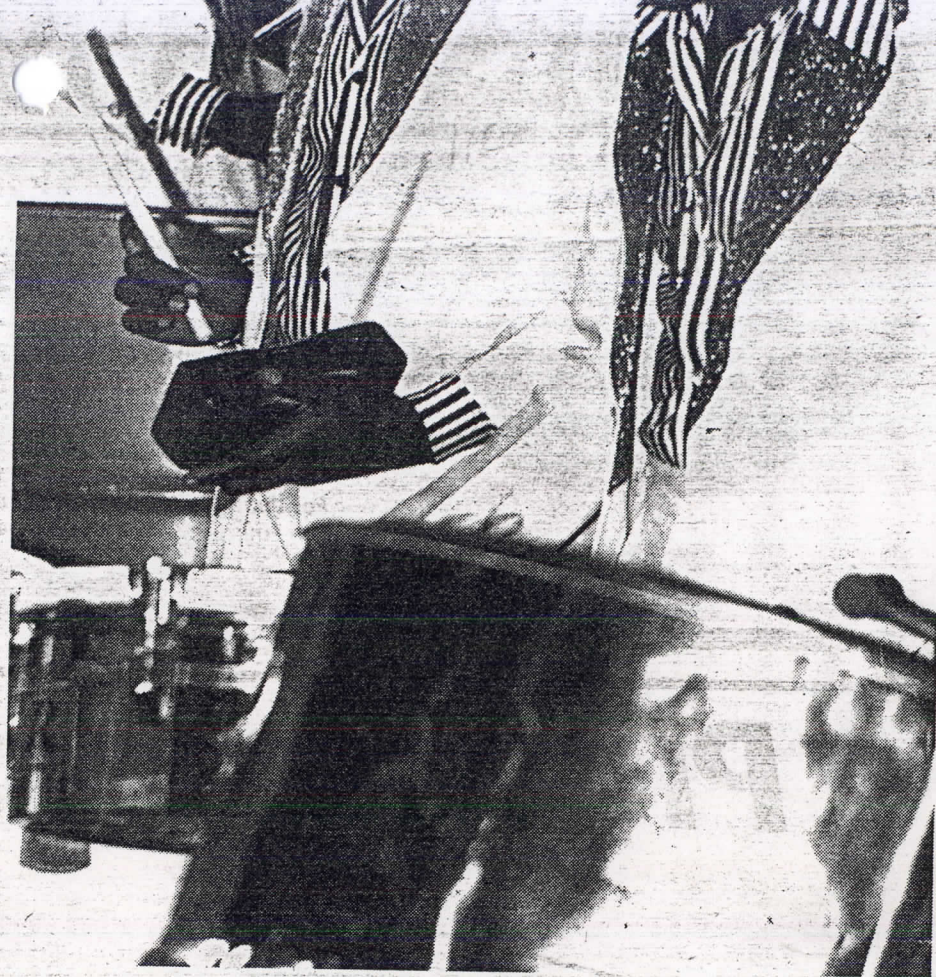
In 1989 when Flabeje failed to gain the recognition it wanted at the pace Smooth desired, and when personal problems began to manifest themselves in Smooth's life, he and his family took a decision to emigrate to America.

They had lived in Florida in the early 80s, with Smooth returning to Trinidad every year for Panorama. Going back was an easy decision: the arranger no longer had his music to hold on to.

Weeks later his wife left for "The Big Apple" and Smooth followed not long after.

Two months later he gave his life to God.

He had turned on the television one day and tuned into a gospel station. The word of God "convicted" him so much, he knew it was the only way forward.



LEON "SMOOTH" EDWARDS (centre) in the 80s goes through the paces as arranger for All Stars.

He was supposed to have returned to Trinidad soon after to arrange for another band but he cancelled the arrangement.

It was time to head down a different road.

"It was a time that helped me to repent and forgive those who I thought of wrongly and start living my life the way I was supposed to."

Smooth now plays his double seconds pan in The Emmanuel Covenant church in his hometown in Maryland.

But he is not Leon "Smooth" Edwards, arranger and panman.

He is just another musician who accompanies the band and ad libs only

sometimes "according to the Spirit".

He makes a point of stressing this new role.

Though he works at the post office where he has been a clerk for nearly three years (in Trinidad he had worked at the Ministry of Culture teaching music to pan players), he would prefer to play music full-time and "give [his] gift back to God."

Still, he is thankful that God has enabled him to provide for his family.

And he is grateful for the about-turn in his life.

At last he has got his priorities right and his wife no longer has to compete with another "woman".