

ML1040

Godwin Bowen – unsung hero No fast-food music

HE HAS been with the Pamberi Steel Orchestra since 1982 and has helped give the band the status it currently enjoys as one of the most travelled groups in the land. He is Godwin Bowen, a man you probably would not recognise even if he sat next to you in a taxi.

Bowen, an unassuming but highly respected musician, is quietly going about the business of trying to improve the image and viability of the steelband with which he is associated.

For him, it is a tough task, as he feels the people in Trinidad and Tobago are not yet giving pan the level of regard that foreigners do. He sees this as probably responsible for a lack of initiative on the part of steelbands generally, since they feel that their work may not be appreciated at home.

It is his pet grouch, this thing of poorly executed and produced music. "I have a major problem with this aspect, really," he says with a rueful look. "Here we are with all of this potential and the music makers are clearly not working hard enough to produce better quality."

"We have finished products with singers wailing out of key and musicians playing the minimum riffs, just to finish a record."

"How do we, with this kind of effort, expect the big (record) labels to take us seriously?"

"This big concern we have with pirates is because we are not selling enough in the first place. It's not that pirates are not a problem for someone who has put out his money but we have been failing to get new markets and what will sell here is of no consequence. So there is a diversion to the pirate issue, which takes up more time than the work involved in putting out a good record."

Pamberi, under Bowen, has just launched its second compact disc in Japan. The album features mostly original music and Bowen personally supervised the mix-down of the final product.

"We apparently don't want to accept that our engineering and general production must come up to the international standard."

"Even though we have given the world all kinds of new music and hybrids of that music, we must conform to certain standards and not sit back and say that this pan music is so good that they bound to listen to it."

"We must attempt to standardise things like equalisation of our recordings, which will give us the chance to have our music easily mixed with other musics and sell equally in the discotheques, parties and from the record shelves."

"But until arrangers talk to each other, we may never get to that level. The only guy that I get to speak with is Jit Samaroo, who would pay some attention to other people's work and come to discuss it. Many of the other arrangers behave like they have something that you do not have."

"What we do not have is even an agreed set of fees or a schedule from which we can work out the prices to charge people. There are those who are undercutting others, probably hoping to hog the market and then they have to produce this kind of quick fast-food music."

Bowen makes comparisons with arrangers in other countries where he has worked with Pamberi (France, Japan and the US), where colleagues in the studios come in and discuss the work, asking about peculiarities of the pan music and make suggestions for improvements to the product.

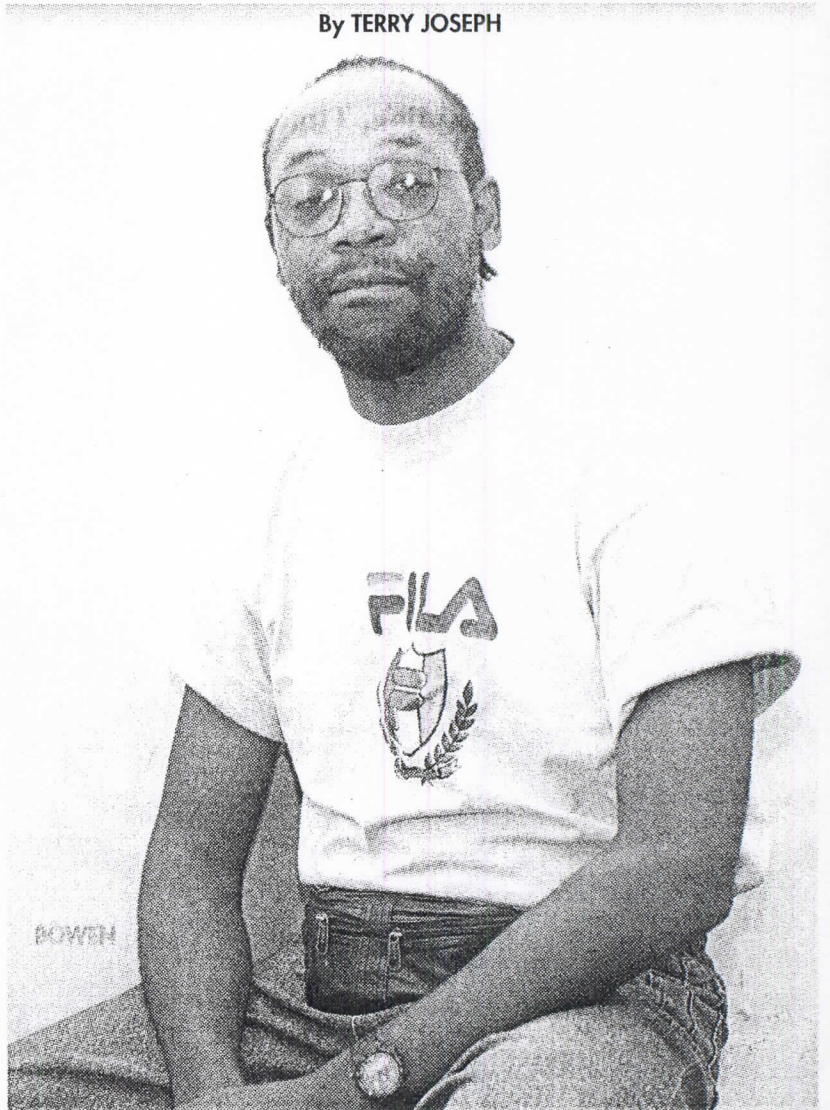
He is also concerned about the sloth (or lack of confidence) of composers, who are not producing enough original work for orchestras like the steelband.

By his own admission, he has been blessed with the confidence of Pamberi. Since the band began in 1982, it has been presenting his original work at the annual Panorama competitions.

Among the notable selections of that period were "Steel on Wheels" (1987), "Ten Minutes of Glory" in 1989 (which remains the official description of the Panorama finals), "Bu'n Down" (1991), "Raisin Dust" (1994), "Ah Talkin' Meh Mind" (1995) and this year's "Pilgrimage" with which the band placed ninth.

He has worked with a number of new voices too (and some that we had forgotten) over the years, including Kai Maloney and Denise Phillip and Johnny Douglas ("Raisin Dust"), because he believes the discovery or showcasing of different voices is also the function of a good producer. This year, of course, he went for Ella Andall.

By TERRY JOSEPH



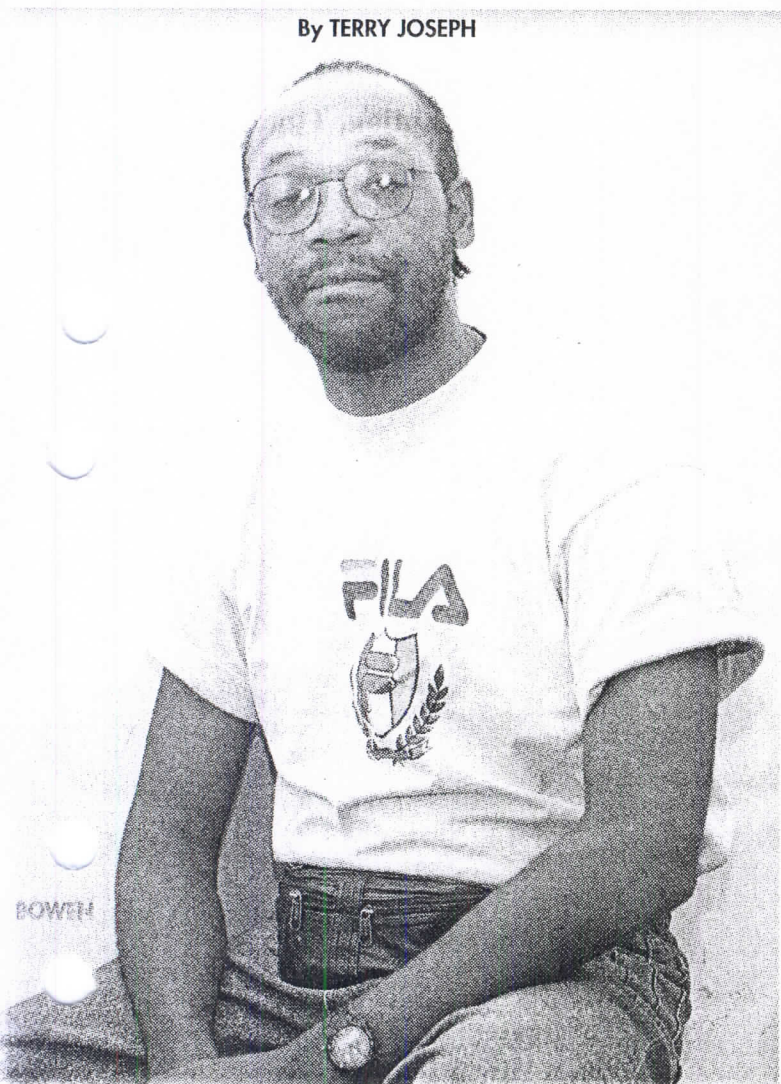
MAJOR EDOUARD WADE (left) supervises a practice session by two of his Japanese students, who seized the opportunity of their vacation to learn to play the tenor pan.

Photo: ANDREA DE SILVA

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Bowen – unsung hero of pan ML10/40 -food music for him

By TERRY JOSEPH



Because of his continuing association with Pamberi, Bowen has been able to convert his compositions into finished work by the band in appreciably shorter periods than has been suffered by itinerant arrangers working with other groups.

He has been known to perfect a tune within a week ("and if needs be, within three or four days"), using feedback from these players to whom he has become accustomed as well as his inherent musical talent.

"Point Fortin has always produced good musicians, for some reason that nobody has even investigated," he says, citing Raf Robertson, Allan Gervaise, SuperBlue, Stalin, Earl Rodney and Duke as evidence for his observation.

It is not the only phenomenon that Bowen wants investigated. His passion for pan also leads him to argue that to date we have taken the progress of the instrument for granted.

"Since its inception, no one seems to be developing systems using today's technology to at least guide the future development the instrument," he says.

"What we have done is attempt to have it conform to normal musical dictates, when it is not a normal instrument. We should also look at developing computer software that provides a base for continuing music development, to the point of writing scores from a ramajay on a tenor pan.

"I use what skills I have been able to develop but this thing needs a wide input from all people interested in seeing pan get somewhere."

Bowen's talents come not only from involvement in music at the Point Fortin Primary and Intermediate Schools, but also his skills in electronics, having been trained at the Point Fortin Tech School and then working at Dunlop as an electronics technician for many years.

Bowen is now pursuing a degree in music, although he has done several courses in writing, arranging, harmony construction and orchestration with American and European music schools.

Now a resident of Bon Air Gardens in Arouca, he remembers that time when his mother would not let him beat pan, although he played with Sparrow's Troubadors. And it was this same association that led him into the world of the steelband.

"I walked into the Pan Trinbago office one day to get the music for some piece and there was Nestor Sullivan. He simply introduced himself and said that the band had wanted something new and innovative in its music and they had decided that I should do the work," he says.

It is yet a work in progress for this man who started writing music 25 years ago; and he is still intent on opening a space for himself and his type of arrangements as he wishes to retain creative control of the process.

"My wish to have a large say in the way my music goes comes about because, to me, the future of pan is undecided and anyone with the right degree of influence could move it in this direction or that.

"Pan is unique and there are limitations but they must not be seen as negatives but inspiration to create a whole new scenario. We have to tailor the ensembles and orchestras to meet the challenges of today's music industry and not keep on claiming that it is ours and scaring everyone else away from pan.

"The work that I have been doing with Pan Assembly is one of the ways that we can get through the maze. I am even thinking of putting my own band on the road, which will involve the mixture of pan, upright piano and synthesisers. I am willing to take that chance.

"People like Yanni and Yan Tmita (two Japanese pannists) are doing wonderful things in the world of contemporary music and they are becoming internationally famous, because of their initiatives with the steelpan.

"We must not be content with the way things are. Panorama has a lot more to offer than the NBA, yet they are able to pay their basketball players millions of dollars per year.

"I feel we must stop hobbling around with the music and the instrument and start taking pan to the hoop.

"Perhaps we can make a start by having the Police and Regiment Bands recognise that they cannot just have three or four tenor pans in their bands and consider that they are incorporating the instrument.

"Many of the piccolo and clarinet and glockenspiel parts of regular classical and military music can be easily replaced with the frontline of the normal steel orchestra; but somebody has to take the leap forward," he says.

Looks like Bowen is getting ready to jump.



MAJOR EDOUARD WADE (left) supervises a practice session by two of his Japanese students, who seized the opportunity of their vacation to learn to play the tenor pan.

Photo: ANDREA DE SILVA