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Shades of Steel for Festicaribe '96

By JAN WESTMAAS

SHADES IN STEEL steel orchestra will visit Cartagena, Colombia from March 22-26 to participate in the fifteenth annual Festival de Musica del Caribe (Caribbean Music Festival).

A small social engagement over Christmas. Shades in Steel orchestra of Marabella play at the Bayshore residence of Alvaro Forbes James, Colombian ambassador to Trinidad and Tobago. Just so, this compact and versatile outfit has been flung headlong into the big time with an invitation to perform at the aforementioned festival.

Lucho Tarra, a Colombian journalist, stood transfixed as Andy Bissessar Jr, runner up in the soloist category at the primary school steelband competition last year, instantly turned his tenor from jazz to classical at the behest of an enthused ambassador.

For Shades this is a big one indeed. Since 1978 they've stuck together. Unsponsored, but pursuing their pan with worthy flair and gusto, they reached the finals of the Pan Around the Neck competition for the first time in 1993.

Band captain Andy Bissessar senior, bespectacled and bushy-haired, recalls their attendance at Panorama preliminaries: "Generally we've had a good reception from the north crowd, barring the odd comment about 'this Indian panside from South again.' In fact, every year at a particular point on the route, we get really good support."

But Panorama is not their main or only focus. They put as much energy into their stage performances, which has seen them appear regularly at private and public functions with a repertoire ranging from Latin to jazz, chutney and classical music. In November last year they performed in Cumana, Venezuela, to packed and very appreciative audiences at the Project Journey Sucre mission promoted by Athletics Central.

And now from Cumana to Cartagena. For Shades, a small step distance wise — Cartagena is just about 400 miles from the Colombian border. But it's one giant leap as far as international exposure goes. They'll be performing alongside musicians from 24 countries of the region and elsewhere.

Festicaribe '96, as the show is billed, promises to be a delight — jazz, merengue, salsa, bachata, vallenata, cumbia, reggae, zouk, cadence, bomba, plena, punta, calypso, chutney soca, son; the rhythms of the Caribbean basin in all their glory, be they Anglo, Franco, Afro, Indo, Latino; a virtu potpourri of music converging on the Plaza Monumental de Cartagena, playing to aficionado