

'The Vivian Richards of pan'

BY PETER RAY BLOOD

ACCORDING to steelband aficionados, his involvement in this year's Panorama competition was an historic event. Antiguan Victor "Babu" Samuel became the first foreigner to arrange a selection for a steelband participating in the Panorama competition. The band with which Babu made his historic mark was Tunpuna Pan Symphony.

Babu is no newcomer in the realm of pan. A musician since the age of 13, he is considered "the Vivian Richards of pan" in his native Antigua. Over the past few years, Babu has assisted his band — Halcyon — to reach the top in Antigua and be now considered one of the most versatile steel orchestras in the region.

Relating how his interest in playing pan in Trinidad was first motivated, Babu credits world renowned pannist Len "Boogsie" Sharpe as the person who inspired him. "I first met Boogsie in 1978 and he expressed amazement over my proficiency on pan and the drums. Boogsie told me, 'Boy, I never know that Antigua had people who could beat pan so', and vowed that he would do everything in his power to get me to Trinidad."

Babu eventually made it to the land of the steelband in 1981 and played with the now defunct Jewel 22, then managed by former Pan Trinbago president Arnim Smith. Since that year, Babu has returned to these shores almost every year, becoming totally committed to pan in Trinidad in 1986.

Since then, his involvement has included drilling the members of Curepe Scherzando for the Panorama competition for the past two years; playing with Phase II Pan Groove; and, drumming with Trintopek Starlift.

"This year, I decided to go one step further," explained Babu, "and through the kind assistance of Patrick Hamilton, I linked up with Pan Symphony." Asked the selection he chose for the Tunpuna band, Babu replied without hesitation: "Boogsie's *Fire Down Below* of course."

An extremely shy person normally, Babu assumes another persona on stage and explodes when playing the music he loves best — jazz. "As he did with pan, it was also Boogsie who turned me on to jazz music," disclosed the soft-spoken Babu.

"I always liked jazz and the classics, with Mozart, Von Suppe and Tchaikovsky being my favourite composers. But with jazz, there was complete freedom and, while Boogsie kept telling me how great



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jazz was, it wasn't until 1983 that I fully appreciated what he was trying to tell me five years before."

Back home, Babu plays jazz with Antigua's top jazz musicians, including world renowned guitarist Roland Prince, Happy Lewis and the Targets Band. He works the hotel circuit during the busy tourist season, but still finds time to keep Halcyon at the top of Antigua's small steelband movement. Babu said: "Like Boogsie and Phase II, I write my own compositions for Halcyon."

Admitting that his involvement with Pan Symphony this year was merely his way of testing the waters, Babu vowed that he wouldn't turn his back on the small East Zone band. "I am satisfied with the level of response and co-operation I've received from the players, as I am satisfied with the remarks from the judges for the band's performance."

"It was a good lesson for me and, being the first outsider to arrange for a Trinidad and Tobago steelband, it was like repaying the debt for Antigua for all that we've gained through the Trinidad and

Tobago arrangers and pannists who visited Antigua and shared their skills and knowledge with us.

"I intend to be back for many years to come and Pan Symphony has indicated wanting me to serve them in the future. My band is the champion band back home and my dream is to take Pan Symphony to a Panorama final."

The overwhelmed Babu was filled

with praise for the people who assisted him in Trinidad since he arrived in Trinidad last October. "I want to say a million thanks to Boogsie for my making dreams come true...my dream to arrange for a Trinidad steelband in Panorama. I've finally gotten an avenue to express my creativity and ability as a musician. With this experience, I am more complete as a total musician."