

'Foreigners running away with pan'

LAVENTILLE-BORN Robert Greenidge who has made his mark in the steelband world, recently achieved another milestone in his career when he played music in the White House for new President Bill Clinton's inauguration.

"I wish things could be better for panmen here," Greenidge said in an interview with the *Sunday Guardian*.

"Unfortunately, the panman here is limited to just Carnival and the pan festival. So everyone has to have a job, because pan can't be a financial success. This is why I left here," he said; "I wanted to further myself and expose the pan."

Soon, Greenidge will be going a step further and will team up with Len "Boogsie" Sharpe and Ken "Professor" Philmore "to get things done together. It's the only way we can keep ahead," he emphasised.

There is some headway being made now, Greenidge noted, but he called for "a total effort, with everybody lending a helping hand; private companies, Government and individuals."

WITCO has been supporting Desperadoes since 1965, he explained, but the budget can't extend to giving players a salary. "But we have to reach to that point if we want people to stick with the steelband."

As it is now, he explained, the only time the players make money is when they make a successful tour abroad.

He expressed regret that steelbands are not contracted for fetes anymore, as this cuts off another source of income. This merely encourages the migration of talented musicians, he said.

Greenidge himself went to the United States in 1971 and attended the Third Street Music School in New York. He now resides in Los Angeles, California.

He grew up in Success Village, Laventille, opposite the Savoy Steelband. His family was deeply involved in pan, and he learnt to play from his uncle, Carl Greenidge.

He joined Desperadoes in 1965, and now returns every Carnival to assist the band. "Other people (foreigners) are taking this thing (pan) and running away with it," he said. "So we have to get together and make it happen."

Greenidge recalled his childhood days attending school, then playing pan on evenings and repeating the process every day.

"Almost all my spare time was spent with pan," he said, though he also enjoyed cricket and football.

As a professional musician, Greenidge has travelled worldwide to promote the pan instrument. Every

summer, he said, he goes on tour, sometimes combining with guitarist Jimmy Buffett when they play a fusion.

Greenidge hopes to begin teaching, he said, adding humorously, "It's kind of difficult to stay home and travel at the same time."

Greenidge has completed three albums, all under the MCA record label, and all of which are "very successful." They feature a mix of calypso, reggae and pop. "I call it Greenidge music," he smiled. "They are played on radio," he said proudly, as well as on the airlines, such as American Airlines and United Airlines.

As a teenager, Greenidge was coached by Martin Albino, brother of Myrle Albino de Coteau, who lived two houses away. "I was taught notes and chords down here, so when I had to learn formal theory it was not difficult. I was told that I had perfect pitch. I could hear a song and say what note or key it is. Maybe I inherited it from my family who were all musicians," he said modestly.

Greenidge confessed that moving from Laventille to the "City of Angels" gave him a "good feeling" and enabled him to get his act together. After migrating, he stayed with Michael Cumbermack, whom he also taught to play pan.

"I never had a single negative experience as a black man," he said, adding that most of his music is played to white people.

He has been married to an American woman, Susan, for 19 years. They have two children: Charlene, 18, and Robert Junior, 16, both of whom are into mainstream American youth culture as opposed to pan.

He added that all colleges in the US have steelbands on their curriculum. In fact, he will be touring five universities in March, playing his compositions and some of Boogsie's, with different steelbands.

"It's very hard to know that Japan is now standardising the pan, and we who gave birth to the instrument are not contributing to that. It will be even worse when the world begins to buy pans marked 'Made in Japan,'" he said.

But all is not lost, he said. We should ensure that kids here learn to play pan and read music at an early age, he suggested. Once we continue to have shows like Pan Ramajay, then he's convinced that many great musical talents will continue to emerge.

"This would be a good thing to the world," he said, "and we will be able to sit back in our old age and know that it's still continuing."



ROBERT GREENIDGE: "It's very hard to know that Japan is now standardising the pan, and we who gave birth to the instrument are not contributing to that. It will be even worse when the world begins to buy pans marked 'Made in Japan.'" **Photo by Marlon Rouse.**