

Return of a panman

TO THE STRAINS of "Gaudamus Igitur," the once popular theme for radio broadcasts of the Government Broadcasting Unit (GBU), I sat in an office at the Mas Camp Pub interviewing a living legend in pan — Junior Pouchet. On a shelf above our heads, a television monitor with its sound turned down, was transmitting the performance of Pamperi — a video of the last steelbands music festival.

Facing Pouchet, with Radio Trinidad's Phill Simmons sitting at the other side of table, I recalled those nights as a child, when my father would take me to Silver Stars panyard on Tragarete Road (by Cyril's parlour) to listen to the band in practice. As well as the beautiful melodies this pan arranger came up with for a band with a most distinctive sound. His work with the Newtown band earned Silver Stars the distinction of being one of the best recording steel orchestras ever. It is virtually impossible to find one of Silver Stars' albums on sale today, so popular was the band's recorded music. Sitting here listening to Pouchet sent a rush of nostalgic flashes fleeting through my mind.

Pouchet was also in the forefront, along with Russell Charter, when Silver Stars created history for the steelband movement in 1963 by becoming the only steelband to ever win a Band of the Year title. The band's presentation was "Gulliver's Travels," even today, it is still heralded as being an epic of a Carnival presentation.

Pouchet was the captain of Silver Stars between 1956 and 1974. Migrating to the United States, he eventually obtained employment at Disney World at the head of a seven-member pan ensemble.

OVER THE YEARS, there has been a hue and cry emerging from within the pan world that the Trinidad and Tobago public has failed to give pan the support and respect it deserves. Perhaps, this is so due to the abundance of prolific pannists to be found on almost every corner in "the land of the steelband." Pouchet is cognisant to these claims, but thinks that "it's a simple case of ineffective marketing" on behalf of the pan musician, and a shortage of faith in his true potential.



Peter Ray Blood

"Trinidad and Tobago has a real gold mine of great panmen," says Pouchet, "with great arrangers and tuners as well. It's only when the

panmen go to the outside shores that they are appreciated in their own right. The thing is, we take panmen per se. Here we call them panmen; outside they are referred to as artistes. There's a big difference. I hate to say it, but a lot of talent is just not appreciated here."

Pouchet ranks people like Len Boogie Sharpe, Clive Bradley, Jit Samaroo and Beverly Griffith among the great musicians of the world. He said: "These names, plus a lot of others, have shown their great expertise in arranging for Panorama. On the other hand, we don't seem to appreciate them for their true talents."

"I personally feel that each one of these men is in a position to project themselves in music, in any capacity they wish to, whether it's festival, ballads or Panorama. Let's look at it this way. We have something in Trinidad and Tobago, which is Panorama, that has served to sharpen these guys' skills. We get the best guys working against each other and that's great. But, if you look at the great musical artistes of the world; they're not judged in one dimension."

"The point is this. The top artistes are not in any competition. The great symphonies don't compete against each other. They just put out their music, and make a living out of it. We've got to get out of the Panorama syndrome, where we cut off an arm and a leg to win a few thousand dollars, and feel good for a few days. Panorama is all over after Ash Wednesday in any case."

"And, when you really look at it, you're talking about the difference between a half point or a point. Somebody might win tonight, somebody might win tomorrow night. It could be the mood the judges are in on a particular night, even the tempo at which a tune is played. It doesn't mean anything. It doesn't diminish the arranger's musicality. Who are we to determine who is the best arranger any way?"

"We've got to recognise that the output these fellas make is our contribution to the world, in the area of music, as a nation. We must not keep back these fellas. We cannot give them inferiority complexes."

While he thinks that steel orchestras mastering the classics may serve as a positive dimension for instilling musical discipline in pannists, Pouchet doesn't see this type of music as being the ideal thing to sell pan abroad. On this topic he said: "When bands have to go on tour outside, they feel that they must learn 25 classics before they can impress people. The people out there don't want to hear this. They could hear this from any symphony orchestra, and that's the real thing anyhow. What they want to hear is roots. They want to know what pan is all about... what this music is all about... what Trinidad and Tobago is all about."

Asked whether the new Silver Stars will be participating in Panorama 1988, Pouchet disclosed: "Well, Panorama is a high point in pan, in Trinidad and Tobago. Unfortunately, I don't think that we'll be able to present the kind of sound I'll like to present next Panorama. But, we'll like at this stage to show a different dimension to the public of this nation."

"Most bands concentrating on Panorama only have one tune to show for weeks of



Junior Pouchet

hard work, going behind the Panorama title. We would like to provide an alternative. We want to bring pan back to the people. We don't want, when people come to Silver Stars yard, they hear one Panorama tune every night. When people come, especially the tourists, they must be able to hear a band concert. We must be able to jam at least 10 tunes for them and make them feel good. People complain when they come to Trinidad to hear pan, they go to the panyards, only to hear one tune — the Panorama tune. Trinidad and Tobago is the mecca of pan and when people come here, they come here to hear a certain festivity of music."

"We want to show that pan is not a dead issue after Panorama. We intend participating at all the venues on Carnival day, including the Carnival Monday night competitions. If we can help to show the other bands that this is the way to go, we think that this is our contribution."

Among the pannists of the "new" Silver Stars there are many of the old faces, a few showing signs of a silver lining, but nonetheless playing their instruments with the same verve they did back in the '60s. Pouchet admitted that it was nostalgic having some of the "old guys" back, but expressed the wish to have more young people involved this time around. "We are very serious," said Pouchet. "We are not just reliving old times here. We would like to contribute towards making pan a well marketed, viable force."

About the stage side which played at the launching, Pouchet explained: "Quite surprisingly, the band that played tonight comprised a number of players from other bands. A lot of them are what you call, in

pan, crack shots. Since coming back, we went to Invaders' and Starlift's yards and told the guys that we're not back to enter Panorama. We're just back to jam on Tragarete Road; to give the people good pan; and to make them happy."

Pouchet revealed that back in 1951, "Silver Stars was located on Picton Street, jamming in the backyard of where Archbishop Anthony Pantin used to live." The band is now back at one of its previous locations, on Tragarete Road and, when asked about the relationship between neighbours and the band, Pouchet replied: "No problems at all. We thought that after these years of living in peace and quiet, somebody would complain. But surprisingly, the people have identified with the band. The people around feel that they have a band that they could call their own. We've had tremendous support from our neighbours."

There was quite a mouthful Pouchet had to say about the direction in which he perceived pan to be heading. "Most people here look at pan as a hobby. I remember, as a college student, my parents tried to stop me from playing pan. They thought that there was no future in it. As a pastime, yes; but, they thought that I was approaching the age to 'start to get serious in life'. We've had that mentality for a while."

"However, when you go abroad people respect you for your artistry. That's why Robert Greenidge, Othello Molineaux and Rudy Two Left Smith are revered the way they are. These guys are considered among the best musicians in the world today. Greenidge moves among the best circles in the musical world; and, jazz musicians from Japan to Los Angeles know Molineaux. These guys are fully professional musicians. Today I work at Disney World and make a living playing pan there. I could not have made a living playing pan here. In Trinidad and Tobago, pan is supposed to be a seasonal thing, a weekend thing."

"The best musicians in the world cannot play pan; they just can't get things like the phrasing right. Anybody who leaves here to play pan outside is automatically recognised as an artiste in his own right. Because we have thousands of good pan musicians here, we take it for granted. We have too much good talent lying around."

"In pan, being determined and positive is a great thing. I've heard Arnim Smith and other steelband spokesmen say that the Trinidad public is letting down the steelband, by not hiring them and so on. But I think one of the major drawbacks of the steelband is the steelbandmen themselves. They are not making themselves viable; to be in a position where the Trinidad public will help them across the bridge."

Silver Stars winning the '63 Band of the Year title was not just a major achievement for the band, but it was a highpoint for the nation's steelband movement as well. Pouchet believes that a lot of the drive which led to this achievement was instilled in him from childhood. "As a young boy in pan, I realised you don't have to follow the system; you have to project. This is what I have always done musically. I broke the rules, not following any set pattern."

"Gulliver's Travels was a nice presentation, and we won. However, when you look at things today, which steelband has the ghost of a chance at winning a Band of the Year title?"

"I still like to think positive; that some steelband will do it again. And they can. But, the panman has to think positive, and believe in himself. I was just a sort of renegade in mas and pan. In pan, or anything for that matter, you don't wait for people to help you into a certain area. If you think that Panorama is the end of everything for pan in Carnival, that's all you may ever win."