

No wheelchair for pan pioneer Spree

By JOHN CUPID

SUCH is the mettle of the man. When the nurse informed that the one thing Winston Spree will not want is a wheelchair and that he is learning to kick around his foot now paralysed by a stroke and will be able soon to move about without the use of a walking stick, you somehow sensed the quality of the man.

In addition he is suffering from diabetes requiring injections of insulin daily. And, worst of all, his need for a special diet apart, he does not know from where his next meal is coming.

Yet this man has been in the vanguard of those who have given Trinidad and Tobago the distinction and honour of making the greatest contribution to the world of music in this century — The Steelband.

He survived the economics of Trinidad — an island colony — during World War II. He survived post-war conditions. He survived the barrack yards and slums of Port-of-Spain.

DEVASTATING

It is impossible to simulate the devastating forces which were experienced. If as a little boy you saw Fish-eye and the others leaning at the gateway just watching, waiting or walking down the straight and narrow dark path between the rows of one room homes, to Hell Yard, you are flabbergasted by the power of the cultural expressions which were created.

Hell Yard on the left bank of the Dry River where one day a barber in a final act of desperation threw himself over and died. His two sons were sent to the orphanage from where one became a musician and the other a tailor. The mother was in and out of the St. Ann's Mental Hospital for years afterwards.

No one was able to foresee what would have come from the Dry River, the pan-beating and the survival living. Not even Fish-eye with those peculiar eyes which gave him his nickname could have seen beyond the pavement and Charlotte Street.

But Spree Simon and the pan pioneers pressed on and on regardless. (Regardless is more inventive than regardless).

Only once in a century could one experience being in the crowd that Carnival day when clear metallic notes of a ping-pong hushed all noises with:

I am a warrior
Out in the field
When I get over yonder
In the happy paradise.
The whole grand stand



in Marine Square exploded. The sound could be heard right up to the hills beyond the Savannah and echoed through every street on both sides of the River.

It was as if everybody was waiting for this moment. Red Army, Casablanca, Bar 20, All Stars, Syncopaters, Hill 60, Invaders and Tripoli all came into the act with Tokyo.

And the steelband clashed. Although more often it was the followers attacking each other, not the panmen whose instruments were too precious to be exposed to danger.

NEW SOUNDS

Soon they were into the area where Angels feared — the classics. All Stars led the way with the theme from The Robe, and Minuet in G; into ballads — My Love Loves Me. Everybody, east side or west side was with it.

The pan tuners created new sounds. They increased the range. The ping-pong of eight notes became the tenor of 32. They experimented with electronics and pan. What astonishing success!

The area of intense activity — less than one square mile — is hedged

on the north by tall spires of St. Martin Gonzales Church; on the west by Rosary Church; the south by the Cathedral and high up on the east by the Lady of Fatima.

Forming a kind of crucible in which experiences of African, European and, yes, Indian acted and reacted.

In the middle of all this is a large Muslim mosque on the bend of the River, two blocks from Hell Yard.

The circumstances produced a kind of people able to withstand a high degree of historical depression and suffer a minimum of casualties.

OUTER CASING

However, there are many places in other parts of the world where in similar conditions more spirits, bodies and soul were killed than survived and nothing of importance was created.

The people of the ghettos of Watts, California rioted in the Sixties. Yet in 1970 the only new thing was a factory manufacturing the outer casing of bombs for Viet Nam. Hardly original.

In South Chicago, in Halifax, in London there is nothing yet. In Kingston, where rooms are burglar-proofed within burglar-proofed homes, new sounds are coming. But like Harlem Jazz the instruments are as conventional as the piano and the drums.

New Orleans is about preservation, not innovation.

It is only in Trinidad that such a fundamental revolution has been achieved through the steelband.

There is an opportunity now dramatised by the condition of Spree Simon for creating a living monument to the Spirit of Pan and Pan People — a specially designed museum where through talks and demonstration Spree can continue to make further contributions to the development of the Steelband.