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WAYNE BROWN face to face

HE has been playing pan for 20 years, has never held an 8-to-4 job, and apart from a little football at school, has never been absorbed by anything but pan; so it is not surprising that at 33 Len "Boogsie" Sharpe is considered by many to be the greatest pan player in the world. Moreover, there were those who thought "Pan Rising" to be a composition of genius.

At home, though, in his Dundonald Hill villa, the subject of all this fame lies sprawled in shorts in his living room sofa, confessing to being still tired from the recent Festival finals, and saying that what he really wanted to do was sleep.

I found him to be a modest, affable man, quite free of the hubris of those whom fame comes undeservedly, entirely sunk into the world of music and aware of his role as its servant. That absorption seemed blessed; one felt oneself in the presence of seriousness, dedication and animation, and quite removed from the world of elections year Trinidad, a world of anxieties and power plays, of intrigues, treacheries and vindictiveness and the almighty hustle. From all these Sharpe was safe, inside of his music, and one felt safe with him.

He is a shy man, and when the interview was over he smiled with relief. "You think you got something good?"

I told him: not as good as the music.

Q: Would you tell me first something about your early years?

A: Well, I was born at Benares Street, St James, 1953. My mother's name is Grace Sharpe and my father, Randolph Sharpe. I am the fourth of three boys and two girls. My brothers and them used to play pan with bands like Symphonettes and Crossfire, and I started from the age of 4, playing with those bands.

Q: What did your parents do for a living?

A: My mother used to do ironing for people, and my father worked with St Anna Mental Hospital as a male nurse.

Q: How do you remember those early years in St James?

A: Well, I remember going to school as a young fella, Woodbrook Presbyterian School, and I used to break a lot of biche and go and play pan, and when I come home I'd get licks. Because both of them (parents) were strict when it come to lessons concerned, and it take them some years to realise, well, this boy just like the music and thing.

Q: In the late fifties, early sixties, was St James as multiracial as it is today?

A: Since I growing up, you know, it was always like that. Because a lot of my friends are Indians. Like, where I grew up, who I play with, the fellas next door to me were Indians, and we grew up together.

Q: Apart from school and pan, what did you do for recreation?

A: I liked to play a lot of soccer. Go by the beach too, Invaders Bay? They used to call it Slipway. We used to go down there and bathe. We had a nice thing going, because we had a little football side among ourselves.

Q: Were you close to your brothers?

A: No. Everybody had their own line, because my brothers are plenty older than me. Like, I'll be 33 this month, and my brother must be 45.

Q: Silver primary school you went to Progressive, Henry Street. Did you enjoy school?

A: Well, I never really like school and thing. I knew I had to go to school to learn, right? But I used to enjoy it at Progressive because of the football and thing. I used to play for Progressive, with fellas like Sammy Llewelyn and Espinosa. I was a forward, inside right. In those days it had two teachers I really admired, like for sports and thing. One Mr Andrews and Mr Paul Clarke. They really worked the fellas then, to come up to a certain standard.

Q: Were you ever involved in things like choir or theatre?

A: No. What I'd like to get involved in is, like, writing music for a choir, or even for a play.

Q: You always wanted to be a musician?

A: Yes, a professional musician; and to play all different music. In those small days too I used to play mouth organ; I don't play it again.

Q: In the early sixties, when you were 11, 12, rock and roll was big. Was that music part of your scene?

A: Yes, well, I liked the Beatles. But I used to like those theme songs in the movies, like "The Sons of Katie Elder." I had a little small band at that time with some boys from round by me. Errol and Kenneth Harewood, "Zool" Junior Jackman, couple of other guys. Small band, just one of each. And I remember we played that theme.

Q: What's the very first thing you can remember?

A: Pan in my backyard. A band playing. Because a cousin of mine by name of Rupert Nathaniel, alias Shadow, he was the leader of Symphonettes, and Symphonettes used to play pan. And then it was one big old house, with a partition barring off his family from my family. [illegible]

Q: So it's possible that your love of pan might have come from hearing pan almost continually as an infant and a very small child?

A: Yes. Because it was pan in the yard right through. Like, I had some little friends, they would come across, and we would gether up some milk tins and make up some pans and thing, and play home.

Q: As a teenager, were your parents strict, or were you doing by then pretty much what you wanted to do?

A: No, they let me do what I wanted to do by them. Like, from 1967, I went to play pan in Woodbrook. I have some brothers by my father, Wilfred and Selwyn, plus a sister named Joan, and Wilfred and Selwyn was playing with Starlift; so I went and joined Starlift in 1967. So my mother used to let me go where I want.

Q: You left school around then too. Why? To go to work?

A: No, well, I never worked in my life, eh! I never do an 8-to-4 job. But at that time Starlift was going away, on a long tour, and I had to make a choice. So I say, well, I going, you know? So they (parents) said, well, all right, you know what you doing. So I went with them. We went to Costa Rica, then we came back, we went to New York, Canada— Grape & Wine (festival).

Q: At that time Pan Am was the big band, is that right?

A: Well, Pan Am was the big band in terms of classical music, but Starlift was a top band in terms of 'mas and dance music, calypso music, nice arrangements and so. The leader in those days was Splay; David Waddle, a fat customs officer; and then it turned to Mikey Phillips.

Q: What was that first tour like?

A: Well, it was a nice feeling! The first time you going on a big plane. And you going so far, playing for a big audience, 5,000 people and all this kinds things; it felt great. At that point I figured I was going to make a living out of music, so I continued, and I developed myself into the player I am today.

Q: You weren't composing as a teenager, were you?

A: Yes, as a teenager I used to compose too. Yeah, man.

Q: You ever learned to write music?

A: No. I tried, but it never registered. I play by hearing and feeling.

Just before I left Starlift, I'd arranged some songs. I remember, they had a fete in Perseverance Hall in Maraval. That time Silver Stars was a top band too, and Fonclaire Dance Band was hot too at the scene. And they wanted some new songs, but Ray Holman didn't have the time. So they asked me to do a couple songs, and it so happened that those songs were that pulled out the band in the fete. Because it's something I really love doing: composing and arranging. Not to say that there's much money in it.

Q: How do you set about composing?

A: Well, whatever I looking for, I try to picture that scene and come up with something like, for "Pan Rising," I tell myself I have to come with something different. So I sit down, I think, I take the pan, I just pick, pick, pick, until I say, ah-ha, I like this. Take that piece, put it there. Pick again, till I figure that that piece could relate to that, and I put it there (aside) again. Composing come like you building a house, then. You start with the foundation and you build.

Q: And the foundation would be the melody, and the structure would be relating it to the different sections of the band?

A: Yes, man.

Q: Let's go back. You left Starlift in '72?

A: Yes. Some time in the middle of Phase II. I, Selwyn Tarradath, Noel Seon, Andy Phillips, Rawle Mitchell and Barry Howard. Really and truly, we start off in Starlift panyard. How we used to do it (was), we used to practise with Starlift, and when they finish practising, all the boys from the music spin, because Selwyn had a car, and when we figure everybody gone home we come back and practise.

Q: Prior to that there'd been the 1970 upheaval. You'd have been 17 or 18. How did you react to that at the time?

A: Well, I mean, I used to go and march too, you know. Go to the meetings and thing. Looking for a difference, then. But still, we had our heads on still, we wanted to deal with our music, you know? We had a lot of hope for Granger and them at the time. But they didn't come right. Then, I'm eh eh want to get into that, you know, that's a political thing, I think there. But, like, we were still kids and we moved with the times; everybody wearing their little dashiki, little Tahiti and beard and thing. [illegible]

LEN "Boogsie" Sharpe gets into his music as he performs in the recently held Pan/Jazz Festival at the Hilton Hotel.

'I ain't reach the heights yet'

AT RIGHT: Len "Boogsie" Sharpe is just a couple months old and yet to experience the mystery of pan. But he grew, "Boogsie" at age 14 (above), was already experimenting with the tenor bass and tenor pans.

Q: Why did you all split from Starlift?

A: We just believed we had something that we want to express. So we come down by Selwyn and was practising in his yard, and opposite his yard had a vacant lot, all bush and thing, and we just clear out a little spot and move in the pans and that is where the panyard is presently. Just a small side, at first. [illegible]

Q: You've never had a sponsor?

A: No. We ask for assistance. But the thing is, the things we want, I don't think a sponsor would deal with that kind of money. Like, electronics, proper equipment, we would need a sponsor, somewhere you could rent out to bands to have concerts. Not like the Yuva Pierre Complex; I don't believe that's a place to have a concert. We need a real concert hall, a place that could hold five to six thousand people.

Q: Where did the name of the band come from?

A: Well, it came in the sense that, all right, we was in Starlift, that was one phase, and we say, like, we going on to a different phase, so that was Phase II. In those early days it was a small band, eh, one man to a pan. Then, in the days of Blockorama, so we'll go out and play a lot of Blockorama, let people know we were there. But we weren't just looking to have another steelband, as how it boil down to mean we were looking to travel and create, as a top act. We were looking so far as to amplify the pans. But why that didn't come to pass was finance. So we said that in the meantime we'd have a band, like, to go Panorama and thing, and then a lot of guys come around and want to get involved, so we developed the band into a bigger band...

Q: Of the composers and arrangers who were around at the time, would you say you learned from them, or did you really develop along your own line?

A: Well, I developed my own thing. But while playing in Starlift under Ray Holman I get to learn some tricks. But I had already known how to arrange and compose before I went to Starlift. Because I can remember at Woodbrook Presbyterian, a little small side I had then, we went there and played, and got like a two dollars, and we went and buy a bottle of wine, for, like, 25 cents in a bottle like a Guinness bottle, and went home and drink (laughing), and I still have been 10, 11.

Q: It strikes me that even though Phase II is one of the top bands, it doesn't have a clear image like Desperados or Renegades or Casa Casella. For one thing it doesn't seem to have an identification with a community.

A: Well, that's true. When you mention Woodbrook you mean Invaders or Starlift. And we are a young band, and you find most of our players are not from Woodbrook. But unfortunately you find it hard to bring all the results to Woodbrook they have no choice, right? They have to come to us. But we have guys from all about, even as far as Arouca, San Fernando and all.

Q: In those years, the seventies, you were also making a name for yourself as probably the best pan player in the country. How did you do that?

A: By hard practice. Is'29 years I playing pan. And I practice, I play with different people. Not just steelbands, but, like, jazz groups. Because like in every trade there's tricks. I still believe I have plenty more again to do. But I like to be creative; don't like to repeat. With some bands they play the same thing every year, same kind of arrangement and thing. I don't like that. Every year I want to try a different idea. Because playing the same thing over and over, there's no improvement for you. The people might like it, but you're doing danger to yourself. You're not moving nowhere. Because pan is like any of the other arts, like you writing; you don't write the same story all the time, you look for a different angle, a different feel. It's creating. Like me: I can't stop experimenting. There's no limit.

Q: There's a feeling that Pan Am was a peak, and after that pan went downhill until it was picked back up by Catelli. Do you agree?

A: I don't think so. Pan Am was a height, and up to today I still don't think I hear any band that has the tone Pan Am had. But Catelli now, they come with something different and like they just come and catch the people, and they run it back on them for a couple years. The styling, is how they play. They play a lot of rolls. But they had guys like Bertie Marshall, he tuned for Despers, and he was doing just as good. In fact, he improved (on Pan Am). If Tony Williams was still around tuning, it might have been a higher height again. But Bertie Marshall, to me, and Ellie Manette, they have good quality pans.

Q: So when you're talking about the art of pan, the first thing you're talking about is the quality of the tuning?

A: Yeah. You must have good instruments, you know?

Q: Particularly around 1970, there was a strong feeling that pan should not be playing classical music, but should be sticking to calypso and what they called "re music." Did you believe that, or did you feel the whole world of music was your territory?

A: I believe that the whole world of music is ours to experiment in. Classical music is a good music to play. It's a challenge, it helps your control. And you can't play one thing all the time. Music is a universal thing, and I figure steelbands should treat it that way. Even try Indian music and thing.

Q: When you composed "Pan Rising," it didn't have words, did it?

A: No. I do the music first, the melody. And then whoever is writing it, like Gregory Ballantine, the guy who wrote it this year, I call him and I say, come with something. So I play it on the piano, he listen, and he call me next day and say, I have a theme. I say, 'what?' He say, 'pan rising.' I say, all right, you go ahead and work.

Q: Your choice of Denyse Plummer to sing "Pan Rising" led to some controversy. Did you anticipate that at all?

A: Not at all! The guy before was Caesar, and we had a small wrangle, so I figure, look, I want to try something different. Try a woman this time. And Denyse Plummer was singing at Chaconia, and I see her perform, and I say, but this girl could sing! So I approach her and she said yes and that was it. But the scene down South — I not that kind of fella, you know? I not a racial fella, I not interested in that. But that was the joke. When I reach South for the semi-final, and just so, a person come out of the audience and say, 'Boogsie, hear nuh, you's a fella we like, you know, but you see that girl you give that song to sing too? She shouldn't sing that.' I say, "Why?" The fella say, nah man, doh put no white girl to sing that. I say, "Hear nuh man, it ent no matter no white girl or anything like that; the girl is a white girl, she born here, she is one of our people. If all you mind so small to think of that, that's all you business. I don't care 'bout all you, right? All I interested in is for the girl to do a good job with my song." I still wasn't looking out for all that kind of thing. And dis hurt me so much, to say look how we people mind small. Because to think about race in this part of the world, that is foolishness. It is supposed to live in love and harmony. This is a cosmopolitan country, right? So I don't check for race at all. I like my people, and I does say so. Matter of fact, next year she singing my song again.

Q: Have you written it already?

A: Yeah, I have it in my head.

Q: In the past year or two you have emerged to stand head and shoulders over other pan players in this country. Have you run into any jealousy on account of that sudden fame?

A: No, no bad vibes. Because I know I'm now all the players in this country. Bands must know the ability I have. Because I don't just play tenor pan or second pan alone, I could play any instrument. I could go in any of those bands and play their instrument. Better than them! I not boasting, eh, don't take that as a boast; but I developed myself. Like, it have things I used to do, like, close my eye and I could feel my way around the pans in a six-bass and still play it. So I developed myself by practice. The other thing is, all I do is play pan. A lot of the other fellas have 8-to-4 jobs as well. So it's easy for me to make the time, then, that they can't make to practise. Me now, I like pan, I think pan.

Q: In all this we've been skipping the personal side of you. You're married again?

A: Yes, and I have two kids. I have two kids with my wife, and two kids with another girl from St James. The ones with my wife is five and six, and with the other girl, one is seven and the boy is 10. I see them all the time because I have to pick them up from school every day. The boy, he is going to school at Tranquility, and the girl, Adana, she goes to Mucurapo Girls R.C., and the smaller ones, they going to Blanchmain's Private School in Maraval. I like my kids and thing, I like children on the whole. I like to play with them, watch them do their mischief. My son, he like football and thing, and the two little girls, they like you see I have a piano here, I do a little thing on the piano, just for myself; and they come and they want to play piano too. And want to teach me! They say, look, Daddy, nah, is not so, is so! You know? So I leave it up to them to pick up; but sooner or later I want to send them to music school.

Q: Returning to your compositions and arrangements: it seems to me that your melodies are more on top of the music than is the case with other bands. Is that correct?

A: Well, that melody is important; I figure the melody must be heard. Like here, sometimes, you might have an arrangement going on in the tenor section, I like to hear the melody coming through, in the double section, or even the bass playing the melody. So that people could understand where you're at, then. Like, you hear some bands playing, pling pling pling, arrangement, arrangement, and you don't hear nothing guiding you to let people know, well, look, this is where he is. All my tunes, I always have the melody flowing. If the arrangement on the top, the melody on the bottom. It's a guideline, so people could understand where you at. The only time you wouldn't do that is when you break up the melody to make an arrangement. You say well, look, that's the melody going there, it's just break up to make arrangements.

Q: Do you ever stop to think about, like, fame?

A: No. Because I'm a shy person. People praise you up and thing, which is good, but I mean at the same time, we don't take on that. Because I figure, the heights I would like to reach, I ain't reach it yet. To be a real star, that mean you have real money too! I don't have money. I scrunting just like everybody else, you know? So, I don't let fame go to my head. I like to know, well, look, I do work, and enjoy my work, and I enjoy more than studying about me. I rather look at you. You feel good about what I did? Well, good.

Q: What would you like for the future?

A: (Pause) Stop playing music, yes? I'd like to have a comfortable raise so I could give the children whatever they want. But what I'd like to see for the industry is a good recording for pan. I figure the Government should get involved and bring down proper engineers to see about recording pan, and teach it. I mean, people might say, well, what people ain't know nothing about pan." They mightn't know nottin' about pan, but they know about recording, and they know music. And they could record and could run with something. Because it's not easy to record pan.

Q: What were Marsalis' recommendations?

A: Well, he said we had something great here, meaning pan, and we better hold on to it before we lose it, before someone come and take it from us. And it true, because I read in the paper it have a Chinese steelband in China, and these people are serious people. Next thing you know, your China China-producing pan. Then, standardising pan too, that is important. The problem is that it's the tuners and them who selfish. I mean, we have to give a little and take a little. Another thing pan in school. We supposed to have pan in school in the curriculum, man. Look, in England there's pan in school and they turning pan men to tune. And if we don't watch it they go start sending down pan players for us! It's a sad thing.

Q: Boogsie, what's the proudest moment of your career so far?

A: That would have to be in Japan earlier this year. Playing in front of 15,000 people. People coming for your autograph, and all this kind of thing. I felt good for our country. It made you feel like a real artiste, then.

Q: Do you find it sad, the feeling that your work is more appreciated outside of Trinidad than it is at home?

A: Yeah, well, that's how we people go. But yet self, I still love them. Yeah.

Q: Len "Boogsie" Sharpe, thank you.