

By DALTON NARINE

(Editor's note: The following article is reprinted with permission from PAN Magazine).

STANDING on the curb outside the dance hall adjacent to the insane asylum in St Ann's, Eliebank Crichtlow adjusted a Rastafari-coloured tam adorning his dreadlocks and shouted above the mid-night din to a coterie of "pan music" buffs! "Blade, blade, I'm warning everybody, and both 'sides' sharp."

It was a few weeks before Christmas 1985, but the renowned lead player of Phase II Pan Groove Steelband wasn't "under the waters," as were many of the folks celebrating the launching of "Rat Race," a 1986 Carnival presentation.

A Whole Month

During the 1985 national steelband competition (officially called Panorama after the instrument "pan") Crichtlow didn't hype Phase II's "Musical Wine" as heady material for victory in the world's biggest steelband championships (New York, Boston and London also host similar events).

Now, a whole month before the start of rehearsals, two months until the World Series of Pan on February 8, he was affecting the swagger of a conqueror, albeit with more gall than blade.

1986 would become the glory year of Phase II, controversy notwithstanding.

Denyse Plummer, a local lounge entertainer, would seize the airwaves with a falsetto rendition of "Pan Rising," a calypso composed by Len "Boogsie" Sharpe, the band's arranger.

And Panorama judges would finally recognise Boogsie, a 32-year-old maverick who's been composing such a plethora of music for the steelband that New York opera composer David Del Tredecchi dubbed him the Mozart of the steelpan.

Del Tredecchi made this observation while an adjudicator at the classical pan festival in 1982.

In A Groove

Eliebank's music came across as monotonous message stuck in a groove and it was wearing thin on his friends.

Phase II's record doesn't include a single national Panorama title in the steelband's 15 years.

Yet the 100-member unit, in an avant-garde, bohemian way, has long been a cut above the 50-odd steelbands in Trinidad and Tobago.

Phase II is one of just two bands that perform their own calypso suites in the contest.

Admittedly, the decidedly unsponsored Phase II is defiant. Deified, too, by a growing sector of the nation's multiracial society.

But if, as warned, "Pan Rising" would be the blade, double-edged for richer spoils as it were, Boogsie's sweat would metaphorically pour as blood — from a sacrificial, self-inflicted wound.

Surely, such inverse voodooism would trigger a bloodletting among partisans. But, that's getting ahead of the story.

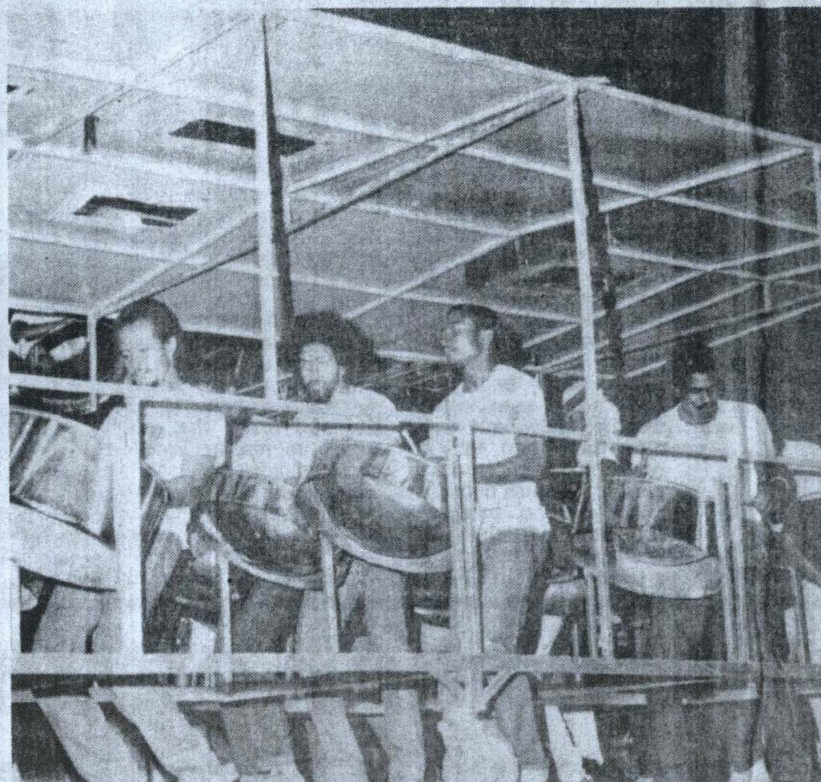
Leapfrog to 12:40 a.m., Saturday, February 8, at the Catelli Trinidad All Stars' panyard or rehearsal site on Duke Street in the heart of the city.

A Few Hours

Carnival is on. Just last night, finalists in the Carnival King and Queen contests were chosen from a cast of characters only a Trinidadian muse could sketch.

In a few hours, thousands of kids will cavort along the streets and fulfill their own fantasies.

And, on Monday and Tuesday, an



CATELLI ALL STARS ... a virtuoso performance.



ANDY NARELL (left) with Phase II Pan Groove ... they came close

The hammer and the blade

The real story behind All Stars - Phase II pan 'war'

entire nation will let loose in an orgiastic rite of dance and colour.

However, now is the time for Leon "Smooth" Edwards, All Stars' arranger, to call a break in a marathon rehearsal session. For this would be no ordinary night, er, morning.

"This isn't a typical vacation experience, for sure," says Joe Heller, a Miami tourist on a tour of the city's panyards, "but you can't find a more exciting night in all the Caribbean."

It's been five hours since the band opened "practice" at its clubhouse in "Hell Yard," so named not for the tempo of the music as for the pressured lifestyle of the families residing therein.

And, when the players returned 30 minutes later from airing out the cacophony ringing in their heads and ears, another five hours would ride the second wind into the rising sun.

Yet, everybody'd be alert at 3 a.m. Sunday, when Catelli, performing last in a field of 13 bands, would bludgeon a full house of some 20,000 with calypsonian David Rudder's "Hammer."

The Hard Work

It isn't without significance that the All Stars mantle sports three of the competition's 21 national titles, not to mention a host of classical music festival awards.

"The hard work pays off," Edwards is saying. "Listen, during the preliminaries and the North Zone finals and national semi-finals (all won by Phase II), we were bombarded by negative comments about our music this year."

Some fans had all but given up because we had too much ground to cover."

He always had saved his best effort for the finals, Edwards, simply to deter plagiarism by competitors. "Of course," he would make up the deficit.

Here's how the jamboree works. Choose a current calypso. Package the melody in ten minutes of creative arrangement.

A panel of five judges will award points for tone, arrangement and interpretation.

The Final Cut

By process of elimination some 30 bands will miss the final cut. Zonal winners will receive prize money but prestige and momentum lie ahead for victors in the preliminary and other rounds.

Edwards' band has historically shun such pointless excitement, allowing steely scales to hang in balance on final night when it counted.

Heck with the rainbow. Gold is what this 50-year-old organisation pans for. More than \$20,000 in the pot.

A University of Florida alumna, Edwards disagrees with published reports that All Stars is a divided lot — due, in part, to the band's classical music bent — and dissenters are picketing the panyard with enough clout that the police have been called to restore order.

"The antics of a few don't make it a problem for the rest of us. We've disciplined those members and they're not with us anymore."

"Now, we have a streamlined group of players willing to sacrifice their Carnival Friday night for the good of All Stars."

"In truth, camaraderie was lacking, so we decided to rehearse all night."

Until all the cocks in the city had stopped crowing, and the big clock in Holy Trinity's steeple struck six, "Hammer," a calypso paean to WITCO Desperadoes' late manager Rudolph Charles, was now malleable.

Open-Air Stage

Fast forward to the open-air stage. 1.15 a.m., Sunday, but the night is still young according to the biological clock.

Already ten bands have performed. Southern champs Fonclaire's execution of "Pan Here to Stay," a Kitchen number, had wafted heavenward. A

shining example of modulation and orchestration.

Amoco Renegades, stars in their own right by virtue of a first-place tie with Desperadoes a year ago, fell short with a flattering effort.

Desperadoes simply deceived, for, hey, the "Hammer" was literally theirs.

Could it be that the band's resolve was shunted off course by a more profound desire to pay tribute to its fallen legend?

By showcasing Charles's innovative Yin-yang pans, a 42-note, eight-drum ensemble whose sounds carried the flair of a chamber unit?

The new Yin-yang, Harmony and Marshall-tone pans belied their apparent gimmickry for they dutifully consolidated a wider variety of the regular family of background drums.

But what's this about introducing also a slide screen the size of the moon up close? And what's that beam cutting through the sudden darkness?

Why, it's sending an image of Rudolph Charles, of course, the man

with the hammer (a tuning tool as well as a weapon, according to Rudder's song.)

Five Previous Years

However, the music that followed, and should have mattered, was not as inventive.

No "Rebecca," this "Hammer." That was '83.

Five previous years Despers had cowed capacity crowds into thinking, ta-da, dynasty. Not this time, though.

As the song goes, the man with the hammer was gone, but now the soap opera theme focused on an internecine affair that was blunting the Despers badness.

"Our performance wasn't as spirited as we had hoped," said new manager and co-arranger Robert Greenidge, who, as a pianist with Jimmy Buffet, eschewed an opportunity to strut his stuff at the Super Bowl pregame party in New Orleans on this very night.

Phase II is warming up on the "drag," a paved runway that leads to a stage so vast the 70-man Tobago band had looked like Lilliputian performers.

In the foreground, a huge yellow flag with the phrase "Pan Rising" etched in burgundy, is making sweeping statements about the instrument's universal appeal.

Carrier is Denyse Plummer, the petite blond cabaret singer who had achieved undeserved notoriety virtually overnight at the Calypso semi-finals the previous weekend in South Trinidad.

What do you know, the cognoscenti there had rained reams of toilet paper on her act.

Cool Under Tension

Understand that Plummer is Trinidadian, but a placard screamed, "Go back to South Africa."

Her translation: "go back to your roots," and here she is leading an offbeat unit that attracted even Andy Narell, an American jazz pianist who teamed up with Renegades, too, earlier in the evening.

"You can't adequately describe how much I'm learning from this experience," Narell is saying as the band mounts the platform and an American television crew records his cool under tension.

It is an apprehensive moment for the ego, as if being here is akin to being at the Newport Jazz Festival.

And Phase II panists dramatise the occasion by lading out the music as jazz idioms laced with a steel pulse rhythm.

The effort pours from 300-odd silver-painted pans, supported on huge mobile metal racks.

Supporters and tourists alike crowding the lip of the stage party hard, but they don't get out of hand.

They come close, though, when Phase II pounds out a stylish passage where the tenors, or lead pans, imitate the chatter of so many East

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