

POUCHET - A PANMAN IN DISNEYLAND

THE FACTS ARE

By Raoul Pantin



AT 37, Edgar (Junior) Pouchet has given 20 years of his life to pan. But he's had to get out of Trinidad to live off his music. That's how come Junior, back home for Carnival, is now beating pan in Florida's Disneyland.

"I remember getting a pan from my parents on my 13th birthday" Junior was saying last week. "Well you know, in that era, when the average Trinidad family looked down on steelbandmen, getting a pan from your parents for your birthday was a hell of a gift."

Junior remembers, too, the Principal of St Mary's College "threatening to expel boys for beating pan. "But he can say with quiet pride: "Ten years later we went back to St Mary's to beat pan at a school concert."

Reorganising

The band was Silver Stars, a Newtown pan side that originated around 1950 and which Junior, pan beater and arranger that he was and is, captained from 1954. This year he's still with Silver Stars, reorganising the band for Carnival '74.

"Silver Stars is my life's work" Junior says. "I gave up everything else for it. And I can say now that I haven't regretted it but that's because I can beat pan professionally."

Junior was a Grade 11 clerk earning \$270 a month down on the docks when in 1968 somebody came around looking for a pan side to take up a contract in Bermuda. "I told the fella I'd try and see if I could raise some panmen after Carnival" Junior remembers. "But then I started thinking about it."

Stints

He had travelled, playing pan professionally, on short stints before. In 1964 Junior went on a six-week tour in the United States with what was then the National Steelband (panmen drawn for each band making up this side). Two years later, Junior went to Surinam on a two-week "coaching" trip to the E s s o Steelband in Paramaribo.

Then in 1967, Silver Stars and their captain went on a three-week tour of the Caribbean, touching places like Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Thinking more about that Bermuda offer, Junior decided to go. And in March 1968, as the pans went silent for Carnival, he signed a contract to beat pan in a nightclub in Bermuda. That was the beginning of Pouchet's exodus.

"Bermuda was my first effort at playing professional pan" Junior says. "It was there really that I got the taste of

being exposed to a lot of top artistes and it gave me a feeling about what steelband could be."

He spent two years in Bermuda, working that nightclub every night and coming home for Christmas and Carnival to be with his wife and family. But pan remained, as Junior put it, "something we did at Carnival and on weekends." Junior Pouchet wasn't satisfied with that.

So in March 1970 he went to New York and formed a new group, drawing on ex-Silver Stars members from Newtown who were resident in the States.

"We were active in the New York area" he says "for about eight months. Then I got a call from Los Angeles and I took the band out there and we got different contracts."

Silver Stars, USA, spent about a year playing in Los Angeles. And it was there that the band attracted attention from the Disneyland Corporation. The band did an audition for Disney and landed a contract to play at the Corporation's new (US\$400 million) complex in Orlando, Florida.

When he was fairly certain that he could live off

playing pan, Junior sent for his family. "They'd been to and fro zigzagging up and down" Junior says. "Where the band went, I went and the family was always way behind. You know, a musician's life is very transient. You'd like to call some place home but you have to keep moving."

Unique gift

In this country, Junior says, the panman gives everybody this unique gift that he has. But he gets little in return. "All we have is steelbands really going tooth and nail - to the High Court. That's where it's reached now. And for what? For a few dollars more. That Panorama prize (\$2,000 this year, up from \$1,500 last year) is all there is."

For Carnival, he says, "everybody gets a little cash in their pocket. But what happens for the other

11 months of the year? Nothing! The musicians who have been able to make contacts outside, they're the lucky ones."

It isn't only the fact that they can earn the money to be professional or fulltime musicians. Junior also likes the travelling. But Trinidad remains a

definite part of his world.

The fact is, Junior Pouchet's story is, of course, neither original nor new. But it's a continuing story - and it's still poignant enough to produce lines like those being sung by Stalin this year: "The steelband move up but the panman stay right dey."