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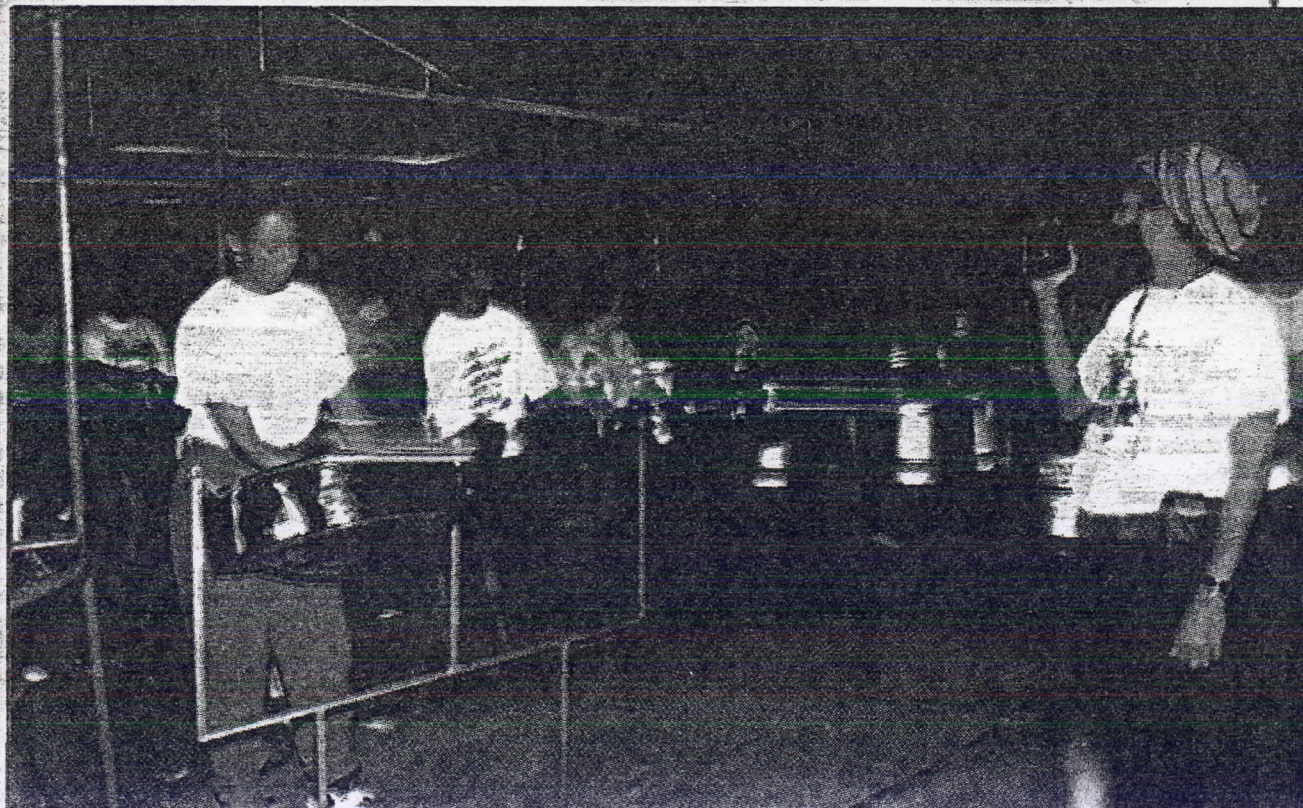
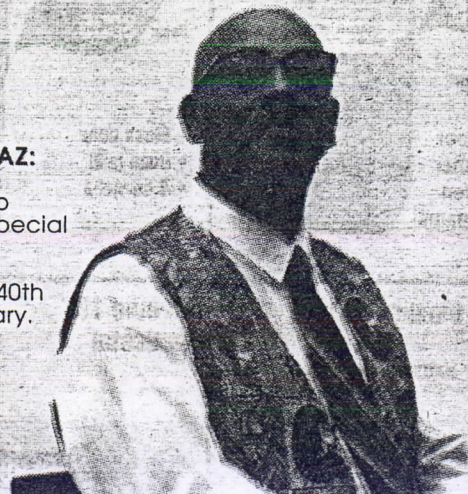
Starlift

Like a phoenix from the ashes

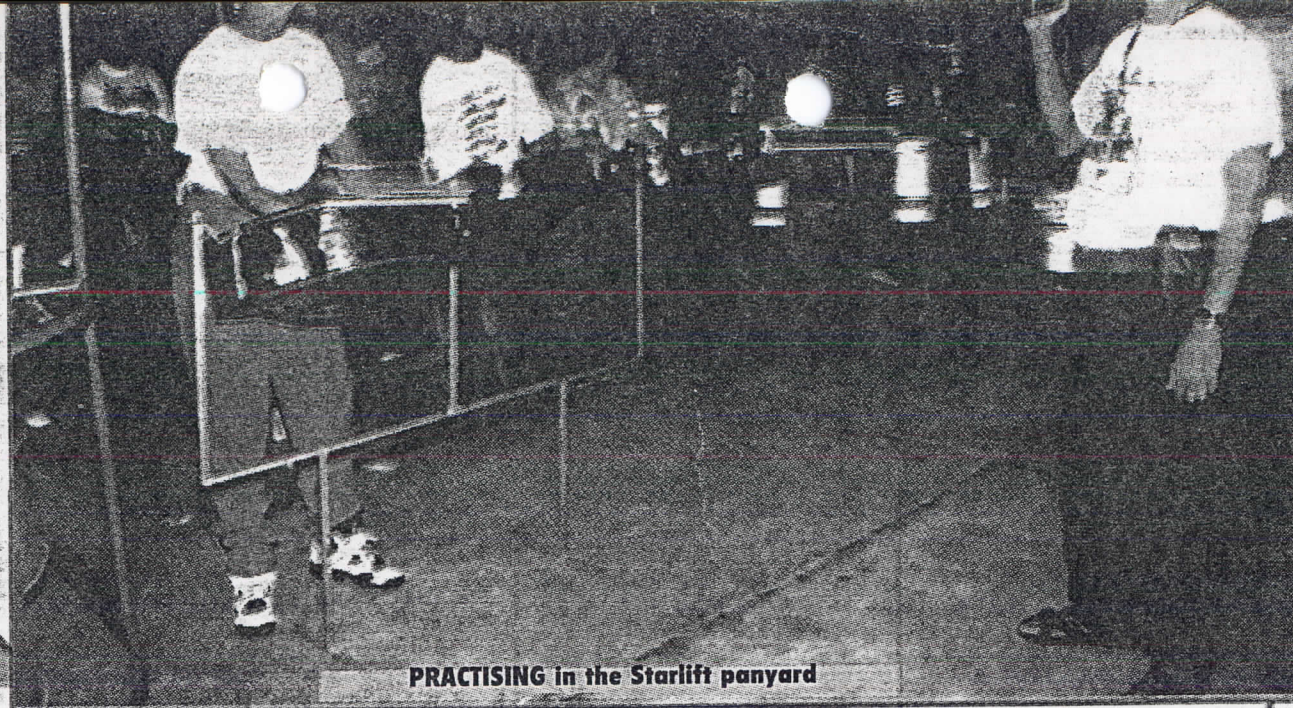
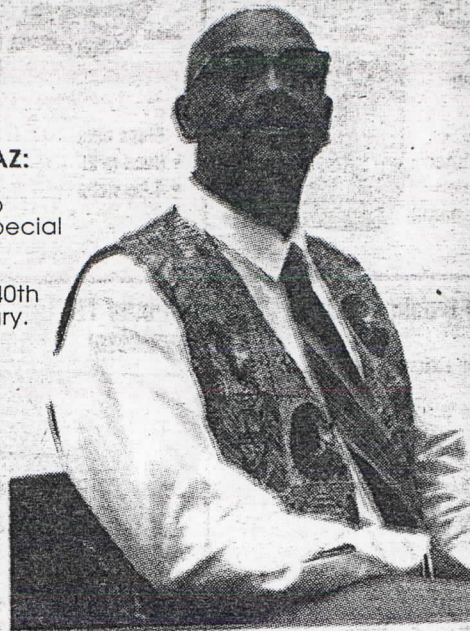


STARLIFT in action
at Panorama.

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PRACTISING in the Starlift panyard

By MARCIA NOEL



N FEBRUARY 17, 1963, when panmen knew nothing about chroming pans or using surgical rubber to make their sticks, 21 steelbands rolled into the Queen's Park Savannah in their makeshift racks to compete in the first national Panorama competition.

Then, the competition was known as the "Best Road March Steelband Competition", and ten bands would be selected for the finals on February 22.

The prizes were \$1,000, \$500 and \$250 for first, second and third places respectively, with a \$100 consolation prize for the other finalists. There were no semi-finals.

Today, five of those bands—Desperadoes, Renegades, Starlift, Invaders and Hatters from San Fernando (South had a separate competition)—still stand as symbols of musical excellence.

This is the story of Starlift.

Playing "A Fool and His Money" by the Mighty Sparrow, Starlift placed eighth in that inaugural Panorama.

In those days bands used small, unsophisticated racks housing only one or two sets of pans because the bicycle and wheelchair wheels which supported the racks could not take too much strain.

Six years passed before Starlift, playing Kitchener's "The Bull" in 1969, could snatch the coveted title from reigning champions Desperadoes.

Success came again only two years later in 1971 when Starlift tied for first place with Harmonites playing Sparrow's "Queen of the Bands".

Harmonites played Kitchener's "Play Mas".

Seven years later in 1978 Panorama was again theirs when Starlift wowed the crowd with "Du Du Yemi", another

of Sparrow's compositions. That was the last time the band won Panorama.

"After '78 the band had problems and we lost status because we were out of the finals for a while," explains leader and external affairs officer with Pan Trinidad, Keith Diaz.

"The last time we made the finals was in 1991 playing 'Fire' arranged by Clive Bradley. Since that we have been going through a lull."

Though Starlift has gone on the occasional tour and competed in numerous musical shoot-outs over the years, it has failed to rise above mediocrity.

Diaz is now serious about licking the band into winning shape.

He is targeting the youths.

"We're seeking to attract a lot of young players in the band, trying to give them a place in the steelband world. We want them to be able to play all of the instruments. This will give them an opportunity to become more accomplished musicians."

Which is why he encourages those who can make the grade to arrange some of the band's music. Eastlyn Hinds, Neville Whittle, Barry Manette (son of veteran pannist Birdie Manette) and 16-year-old Adrian also known as "Spider" are a handful of the future's greats.

Starlift is one of the few bands to encourage in-house arranging.

It also wants to storm the international market, perhaps securing contracts in Europe or Japan.

And it wants its music to be used as soundtracks among other proposals.

But they are unsponsored and it presents problems. Without big backers, cash cannot flow.

It has meant resorting to fund-raising ventures—barbecues, fetes and band launchings. On February 11 (the night

of the Panorama semi-finals), they are hosting a "big bram" with Massive Chandileer, Dj Davey of Scorpion and Starlift steel orchestra to raise funds for the band. They want everyone to leave the Savannah after the contest and "come on down".

Starlift's fundraising initiatives take place throughout the year but the band desperately wants to break the cycle.

They are looking to 1996, a special year for them, says Diaz, because it is their fortieth anniversary. They also have a new arranger in Emmanuel Ector, musical director of Massive Chandileer.

For Panorama he will be arranging Kitchener's "The Power of Music", a selection most of the players love.

And they are looking forward to the new \$100,000 road competition which Diaz says will be an added incentive for bands to come out.

Starlift, though, needs no incentive to take to the road on Carnival Monday. It is one of the few steelbands to have kept up the tradition. The advent of DJs and their "boom boxes" has meant a mass defection, and steelbands have been left pushing their own floats.

But not this steelband. It has always had many supporters, and this year the band that has won the Best Beating Band on the Road title countless times will be loading up and rolling out onto the streets over Carnival as usual—no matter where they place in Panorama.

They are hoping, though, that like the Phoenix, they might once again rise from the ashes and take their place on winners' row.

With the big guns arrayed in battle against them, at the moment it is but a dream.

The invincible Desperadoes, another of those steelbands to have participated in Panorama since its inception, will be featured on Monday