

EXPRESS

Features Section

Phillips making pan more beautiful



Jimi Phillips receives his award as the first winner of the Rudolph Charles Trophy at the National Steelband Festival from WITCO's Audley Walker.

JIMI Phillips made pan history at the National Steelband Festival held recently. He became the winner of the first Rudolph Charles Pan Innovation Award for his collapsible pan stand. DEB-BIE JACOB has the story of one man's struggle to perfect pan technology.

IN THE dead of winter, in far off Vancouver, Canada, one of Jimi Phillips' neighbours may have been able to hear an unfamiliar ping, ping, pang of a steel drum. The sound would have been coming from a shed rented by Phillips. It would have been a sweet vibration slightly muffled by the wind and slightly absorbed by the chilly room, because Phillips couldn't afford to rent a work-room with heat.

"Canada is really too cold to tune pan the way you want to tune it. So I made frequent trips to Trinidad," says Phillips.

For 15 lean, but happy years, he says, he followed his heart and his love: pan music, and he

never allowed himself to be confined by a steady job. "I was always kind of 'breaksin' from that regular job so I could devote myself to pan," says Phillips.

While he was pondering his inventions and experimenting on his steel drums, Phillips played music to support himself. Sometimes he played pan. He also worked as a professional drummer.

In 1982, Phillips returned to Trinidad and settled with his family in Chaguanas. "It's not an unusual place for a pan man to settle," he insists. "There is a feeling in Chaguanas. It is a place that is growing, expanding. I guess I like that feeling of expanding," he smiles.

Then came the Steelband Festival and Phillips entered two of his many inventions. The first entry was a precise measuring device for drawing notes while a pan is being made. "Right now, most pans are made by taking measurements from other pans. The pan tuner takes a measurement and turns

around to the pan he's making. He's always moving back and forth," Phillips explains shifting his body to demonstrate the confusion of those many movements.

Phillips' second invention was his collapsible stand. "The normal stands for pans are very awkward and difficult to move around," he says. "If a pan man has to travel in a taxi it is very difficult. The stand I invented can fold up into a little sack."

Phillips says he didn't know there was prize money involved when he entered his inventions in the Steelband competition. "I appreciate the money and I can really work more on my ideas and not have to think about money for awhile," he says. But he is adamant that the prize money should not overshadow the accomplishments of those working behind the scenes to better pan.

These days most of Phillips' thoughts and energies are flowing towards doing something for what he considers to be the most

neglected pan in the steelband: the bass pan.

He already has one invention for the bass pan. "I decided to cut down the size of the bass drum because it is too difficult to move around. I also put a microphone underneath the drum to amplify the sound."

"We have to try to make the steelband more compact with a big sound. We have to make the bass pans shorter for convenience. There are already a lot of people who eliminate the bass pan for a bass guitar. I'm kind of against that. I think the bass pan has a lot to offer," says Phillips.

Phillips says that he is already working on his idea for the next Steelband Festival. The idea he has in mind he says will involve engineers. His smile reflects how complicated and challenging his secret invention must be.

"I still have a lot of ideas. I see a lot of things hampering the steelband. Pan is what I do," he shrugs.