

AL 104C

*Living today*

# For the love of pan

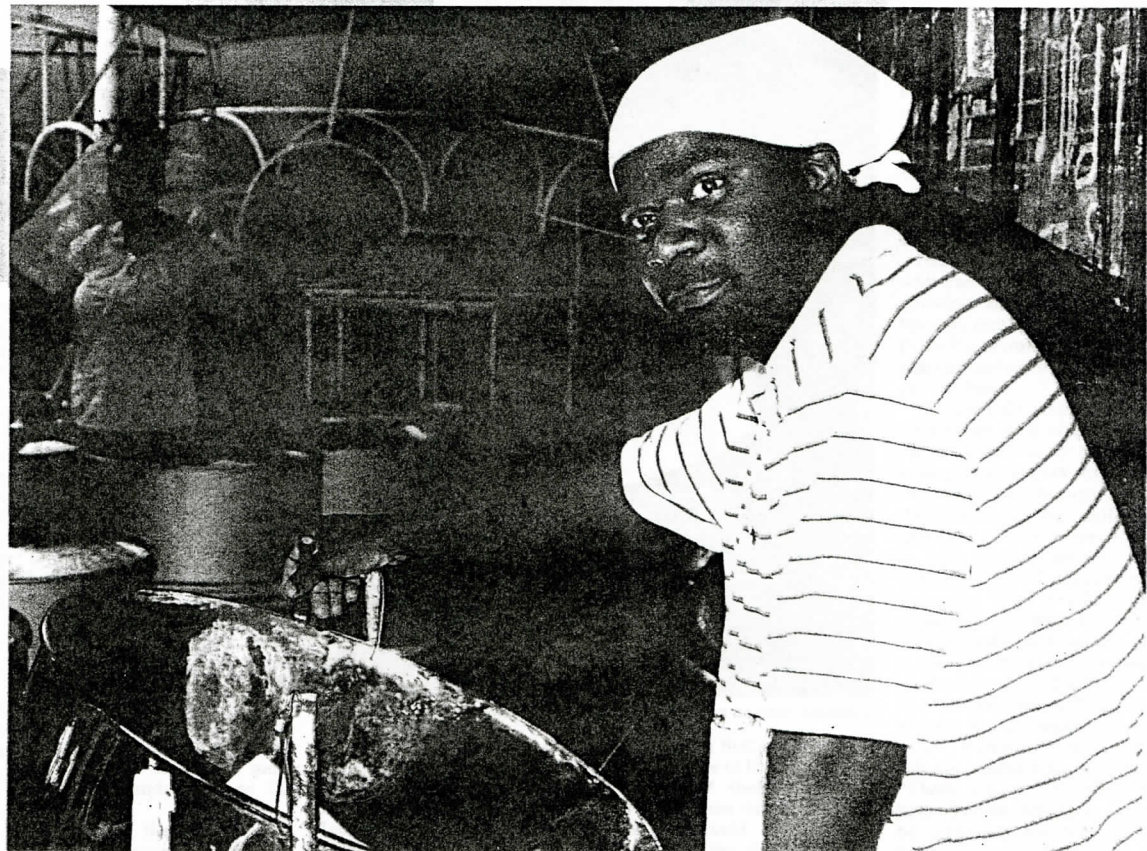
By JANELLE DE SOUZA

CARNIVAL 2007 opens with the biggest "Savannah Party" today, when the semi-final round of the National Steelband Panorama Competition is staged at the new "North Greens" of the Queen's Park Savannah in Port-of-Spain. It is one of the biggest competitions of the Carnival.

What is it like to live your life for the love of the pan? To spend night and day arranging and rearranging a tune, working at home, working in the panyard, giving your all for this music in your head? Two popular steelband arrangers — Leon "Smooth" Edwards and Arrdin Herbert — shared their thoughts with us.

Edwards is the arranger for Neal and Massy Trinidad All Stars Steel Orchestra. He joined the band in 1968 when the captain at the time, Hamilton Web Alexander, his neighbour, heard him playing songs he listened to on radio. Alexander thought what he heard was Panorama material and invited him to be a part of the band.

Rudy Wells was the band's arranger at the time. However, he lived abroad and only came to Trinidad to arrange the Panorama tune. "Alexander encouraged me and some other stage side members at the time to arrange other songs for the band's repertoire," recalled Edwards, "which mostly consisted of transcribing songs from records like putting the vocals on the tenor pan, the bass part on the bass, trumpet on the double seconds pan, and so on. My big-break came in 1976, and I arranged for All Stars every year until 1988. In 1989 I relocated with my family and went to Maryland, USA to live."



ARRANGER for Caribbean Airlines Invaders Steel Orchestra, Arrdin Herbert.

After relocating "the Lord found him" he said, and he lost the desire for arranging — that is until he had a dream in 1997. "I dreamt that if I didn't use it I'd lose it," he said, "and I realised I didn't want to lose it. About a week after, All Stars contacted me and asked me to arrange for them and I said, 'Sure I'll come down.' It was sort of providential that way." Since then, Smooth returns to Trinidad every year to arrange for All Stars.

Herbert, on the other hand, is both an arranger and composer. He started his pan-playing days in his teens in 1989 with Players Symphony Steel Orchestra from Belmont. It was part of a deal that allowed members of Trinity College Steel Orchestra, his alma mater, practice space for the Schools Panorama Competition.

He is currently the arranger for Caribbean Airlines Invaders Steel Orchestra, (formerly

BWIA Invaders), CASYM Steel Orchestra in New York, and New York Symphonic Steel Orchestra. He also arranged in the past for Trinity College Steel Orchestra, and Woodtrin Steel Orchestra (a combination of Trinity College and Woodbrook Secondary School).

"Choosing a song is probably one of the most difficult and important aspects of the Panorama competition," Herbert said when asked how

he chooses Panorama selections. "This is because a mediocre choice can be the deciding factor in whether a band just plays in their panyard or whether they make it to the big stage. What I tend to look for in a particular song rests heavily on the demographics of the players that I am working with. From experience, I have realised that younger players like challenges, and like songs that are

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# An artform in transition

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energy-driven and up-tempo. Let me hasten to add that not all younger players like up-tempo and challenging music; however, when you have a band that has an overwhelming majority of young players, the arranger should take that factor into consideration.

"From a purely musical perspective, I tend to look for a song that has interesting movement in the melody and harmony, and one that lends itself to the spirit of Carnival. It must have a jam to it! I also try to find a song that is relatively popular or known by an overwhelming majority of the audience, because audience response, or the voice of the people, is extremely important in any competition. While I mainly focus on the melody and harmony of the piece of music, I am also concerned about the lyrics of a song and the message it is trying to convey. I do not play or condone music that is morally reprehensible."

When asked how he chooses the Panorama songs for All Stars, Edwards laughed and said, "That's my little secret. A lot of bands would like to know what I do. But of course there must be some liking for the song. I also rely on feedback from others, because I try to please both the members of the band and the public. You see it's not about me, it's about the band - if the band doesn't like it they can't get anyone else to like it."

He pointed to last year's Panorama selection as an example. He wanted to go with De Fosto's "Tribute to Clive Bradley" because, in his opinion, Bradley contributed tremendously to the steelpan. However, others wanted to play "Soca Warriors," also by

DeFosto. "So in a way, the choice of song depends on the mood of the members. This year we're doing Defosto's 'Pan Lamentation'," he indicated.

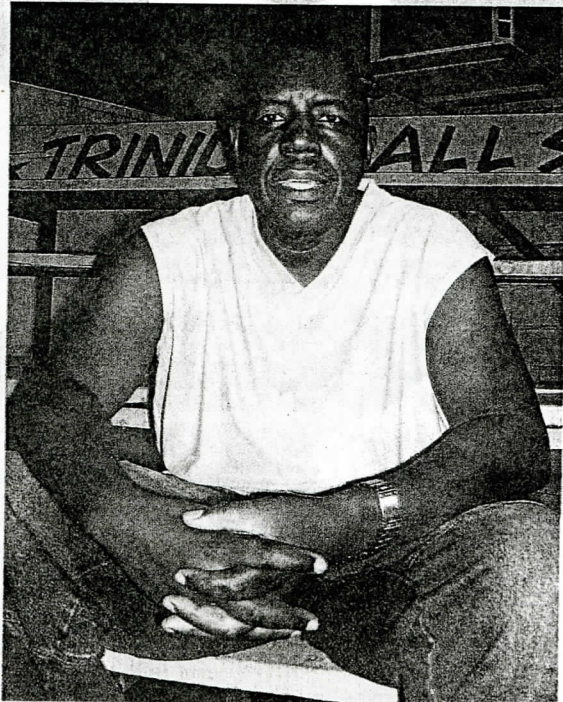
So, what about a soca song as a Panorama selection?

Edwards believes that soca is going in a different direction to calypso but he agrees that trends change. Calypso used to be sung in the minor key, he notes, but is now sung in the major key which carries a certain amount of bars, etc. Persons who belong to the older generation don't really relate to the trend the youths are on with regards to soca, he believes, but as the soca trend continues, the band will have to adjust.

"The art form is in transition from what we grew up on to what the youths are delighting in. However, I am a traditionalist in the sense that I believe the art form is a big package. Calypsonians do their thing, and arrangers do their thing. We try to keep the culture going as long as possible by encouraging the calypsonians, by doing their songs. So as long as there are good traditional calypsos out there, the more seasoned bands will go for them."

Of course, there is the challenge of arranging the song, but what about its execution? Edwards does not see this as a great challenge. "I am experienced at getting people to play what I've arranged. If it takes whole night I'll get them to play what I want them to play. Sometimes I may modify some notes according to the level of difficulty, but really, it's a matter of planning and sticking to the plan. You have to organise the sections and their practices to get the band at its best."

He said the ability of the players does not necessarily



LEON 'SMOOTH' EDWARDS. PHOTOS BY GARY CARDINEZ

dictate what the band will play. He added that while all players may not be in the class of Yohan Popwell, Clive Telemaque or Dane Gulston, members are committed and disciplined enough to have the whole band sound experienced. He also praised those patient enough to assist those who need help grasping and executing the music.

Herbert agrees that when a song is arranged it's final. He compares the band to an organisation or business in a particular industry. The management team determines on a particular vision and goal for the organisation, while it is up to the employees to carry out the plan. "The performers/players

are the ones that must take up the challenge to learn, rehearse, and perfect their individual parts and then function like a team," he said. "They must understand the different roles and functions of each section, and finally come together with one goal in mind: Executing to perfection."

"I have also realised the benefit of working with or having a 'Master Driller', efficient section leaders, and a captain or leader that have the same passion and hunger for perfection. I have had the opportunity to work with Nigel Williams for the past six years in the New York Panorama Competition, which I have won on four out of six occasions, and I have

seen the absolute and direct benefits of working with someone that is talented, visionary, and hardworking. It is also important that the individual understands what the arranger is trying to create, without imposing their own individual stylistic attributes or personal tastes. Of course, good advice is priceless, but bad advice is detrimental."

Herbert is not comfortable with Pan Trinbago's restriction allowing arrangers to arrange for only one band per category in the Panorama competition — one conventional and one single pan band.

"While I do understand that the primary goal of this controversial policy is to encourage younger arrangers (age and experience) to have an opportunity to develop their skills and talents, I do not believe that it is the right policy. Pan Trinbago should develop programmes that would allow arrangers to improve their skills. Arrangers must also take it upon themselves to improve on the very skills that they want to nurture and utilise as a means of professional survival." Edwards, however, is in full agreement with the policy. "There was a time when the better-known arrangers would be arranging for five or six bands a year and this was stifling the new arrangers. This way, Pan Trinbago is giving them an airway for the art form to develop."

He insists that young arrangers must demonstrate love for the art form, their band, and their culture. "You can't be in this for the wrong reasons," he counselled. "Aim high. Don't feel you can't beat someone who has been there for years. Just give it your best shot. You have to feel you can make a contribution to the band and the country."