

STEELBANDS MUSIC FESTIVAL POST MORTEM — I

Desperadoes — the badjohn of pan music

MK104D

Back on top after absence of 19 years

By VALENTINO SINGH

MUSICALLY it should take a lot to conquer Pat Bishop. But after the performances of Witco Desperadoes in the just concluded Steelbands Music Festival, the talented daughter of the soil, who has been honoured by the Government for her contribution to music, had to admit she was looking forward to a lasting relationship with the band.

"Despers is something special," she told the Sunday Guardian. "I got involved with them two weeks after the end of the World Cup football."

Miss Bishop said she was approached by the band's leader, Robbie Greenidge, and asked to help. "It was a big challenge and today I am happy to say that the efforts have been very rewarding."

Rival Bands

The boys from the hill, after an absence of 19 years, returned to the 1986 festival and played themselves to the top. Their allround performance gave them a total of 1,125 1/2 points, five and a half more than nearest rival Catelli Trinidad All Stars.

It was another historical moment for the band which in March commemorated the first anniversary of the death of the man considered to be "Despers" — Rudolph Charles.

But for the young members of the band, last weekend's performance and expectations were much higher than those of their predecessors.

Desperadoes came on the scene in the mid '40s as another organisation which

went out of its way to look for fights and violence. The name itself, derived from a movie, suggested "badjohnism" and it was in this area that the band made its presence felt.

Yet today the scores of youngsters from up the hill who have associated themselves with the group are spoken off in very disciplined terms — steelband is their thing and every effort must be made to keep it that way.

Ironically the last time Despers took part in the festival, in 1967, it won the Governor General's Trophy, emblem of supremacy.

Over the years the band, which has enjoyed sponsorship firstly by Coca Cola and now by Witco, has effectively left its mark on the steelband movement.

It has won the Panorama competition on six occasions — 1966, '70, '76, '77, '83 and '85, when it shared the title with Amoco Renegades.

Quite apart from this, its performances on the international scene have undoubtedly lifted this country's image abroad.

There are those who say it was when Rudolph Charles took over the leadership of the band in 1964 that positive strides were made, but pan historian George Goddard feels that while Charles did put a firm grip on the band, it was already on the way to fame when he took over.

Goddard explained that the Despers' climb started in 1958 when it was made to perform in a show, "The battle of Britain", at the Queen's Park Oval.

But even so the band had to wait until 1965 for its first victory, under "The Gener-

al". It won the Prime Minister's Trophy.

The following year was a glorious one for the Laventille band. It started by winning the Panorama competition and later performed for royalty, the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh. Despers also won the First National City Bank J'Ouvert Bomb competition and was the CDC's best playing steelband on both Carnival Monday and Tuesday. As if this was not enough, the band made its second overseas tour, to Dakar, Senegal, where it took part in the first Negro Festival of Arts.

One year earlier, Despers embarked on its first overseas tour after placing second in the Panorama competition to Pan Am North Stars, which was forced to default a prize trip to Calgary, Canada, because the trip was sponsored by a rival airline.

A number of other overseas trips followed and Despers has been able to spread the gospel of pan to places like Africa, America and Europe.

But there have been moments when the band felt the wrath of the public. In the 1983 Panorama, Despers was booed as it came on stage, but by the time it had completed its version of Nelson's "Party", the results of that competition and the mood of the people were different.

When it failed to be among the top three at this year's Panorama competition, the feeling was that the band had finally found out that without "The General" the pace was too hot. But the hair-raising performances of the 1986 Steelbands Music Festival have finally proven that Witco Desperadoes — with or without Rudolph Charles — is a true champion...a real badjohn when it comes to steelband music.

Conductor Pat Bishop Despers through its paces at the festival finals. The band emerged at the top with a scintillating performance.



Leaders of the three top steelbands in the land show off their trophies at the end of the 1986 Steelband Festival. Left to right are John Douglas of Catelli All Stars which placed second; Len Boogsie Sharpe of Phase II which was third and Robbie Greenidge of the champion Desperadoes.

