Profile of a winning team: 

Exodus reaches pan's promised land

By KIM JOHNSON

There have been shocked protests and even those most pleased seemed surprised at the victory, but Exodus has been a movement gathering momentum for over a decade.

"I'm really pissed off about the snide remarks," says Amin Mohammed, chairman of the band's management committee. "This band was in the East Zone four times and came second three times. In 1985, we won the national semi-finals and were in three points from the leaders in the finals," he said. In that year, Despers and Renegades, three points ahead, tied for first place. Tokyo were two points ahead and All Stars one point ahead.

The beginning was an exodus from the St John's Road Gay Flamingoes, a band which began in the late 1950s as the Harmonettes but changed its name when Morvant's Harmonites became better known. The Flamingoes had got into the finals several times in the 1970s when east bands, Scherzando and Birdsong, were flexing their muscles, but somehow the St John's Roadside felt stagnant.

After Carnival in 1981, after Flamingoes had failed to make the finals for the fifth time, some members sought to have the matter discussed. "It was at the second abortive meeting I walked out of Flamingoes pan tent, walked across the road and said, 'If anybody interested in talking seriously come join me.' There were 29 of us, ' recalls Mohammed about the incident that gave birth and name to the winning band.

John Gonzales donated a plot opposite the victory, but Exodus has been a moment even those most pleased seemed surprised at.

"I arranged for Third World from 1973 until 1978 when Charlie's Roots became a road band; in '83 I arranged 'Rebecca' for Invaders and 'Pan in A Minor' for Starlift in Tokyo were two points ahead and All Stars one point ahead.

The band's present arrangement evolved slowly. After Ray Holman left, Mohammed contacted his old friend and Nutones rival, Desmond Waithe. After 1988, however, Waithe felt unable to arrange a victory for Exodus: "Boogis was on the up and pan up and Panorama seemed to be more jazzy. Desmond is a traditionalist, he didn't feel he had the ability to win. "But he didn't want to leave the band, so he remained as Exodus's musical director and Pelham Goddard, leader of Charlie's Roots, was invited—at Ellis Chow Lin On's house according to Mohammed; at Atlantis disco according to

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difference between the semi-finals and the big night. The band was in Balisier House carpark, sweating until 3 a.m. the Thursday and Friday, and on the Saturday of the finals they planned to begin at 5.30 pm. At 6.30, Mohammed picked up Goddard and, driving to the band, entering Stanmore Avenue, said, "Boy, if they serious, they there by now." Goddard replied, "You hearing what I hearing?" They'd already practised for nearly two hours.

Throughout, Goddard's flexibility—"cool"—allowed him to listen to advice from players, from Waithe and Mohammed, and most importantly, from the judges who prepared detailed reports on the strong and weak points of each band's preliminary and semi-final performances.

"If Desmond in the band doing something, Pelham and I are outside listening, discussing, and vice versa," explains Mohammed. "We'd be hearing a harmony he didn't put in, a chord that's not there. Each man respects the other's opinion and this year, on several days—Pelham with a keyboard, Desmond with a cuatro and I with a tape of the band's last performance—we studied the music chord by chord."

In this trio, Mohammed has the least musical influence; his portfolio is management—Charles's fourth ingredient for success. The seven-man management committee has Mohammed as chairman, his brother Ainsworth as assistant manager, chief cook and bottleshower, musical director Waithe, and four players including the captain. "That way the non-playing members get feedback from the players," says nine-bass player Andy Husband.

Feedback, communication—this is more than part of a management structure, though, they emerge out of something wider. "It have a kind of love, everybody treated like brothers and sisters," is how one bass player put it. "If Exodus goes through, I don't think I'll play pan again: it's as if you married to someone and they leave you, you don't feel you'd marry again."

That's why Exodus hardly loses members to other bands; instead, people come to play for one season—like Rudder's "short rasta from Nu Tones" on the scratcher—and they remain. "They really stretched their arms out to us, and I really want to say thanks," says double second player Marcia Brown from London; "They really made us feel at home."

Togetherness, communication, loyalty; these values require a home, and it was only in 1986 that Exodus found its home in the natural hollow next to the St Augustine/Tunapuna bridge.

Minister Marilyn Gordon and Parliamentary Representative John Scott helped the band get permission to use the large overgrown hollow of Crown Land where people dumped their rubbish.

But even here was tradition, because here was where the original Flamingoes of the 1950s were buried, when a badjohn named Foots, who had contracted them to play for his club, destroyed their pans after they said they were too tired to continue playing. Foots threw all the ruined pans off the bridge that bounds Exodus.

Today this pan theatre is one of the grandest in Trinidad, and has been the venue of many a music concert—steelband, pop or calypso. An annual ladies' windball cricket league is held there. UWI's Creative Arts Centre has also held two plays in the yard. And the ten-a-side Pan Ramajay competition—an Exodus fund-raising initiative—has brought the best players from all over to St Augustine at the foot of St John's Road.

"We studied All Stars' festival strategy—they had their classical jewels the year between music festivals, so they were playing classics throughout. We considered a mini-classical festival but with everybody talking it over it suddenly emerged—we have Panorama, which is calypso, and Music Festival which is classical; and what was needed was to facilitate small groups to show the power you could get out of them. The large bands constrain the individual but in the small group he has more freedom of expression, more like jazz."

So if Exodus has busted a gaping hole in the Port of Spain Panorama monopoly for every band possibly to enter, don't think it was a fluke.