

PANS BRING DOWN THE POWER

KIM JOHNSON CHIPS IN AT ROUND THE NECK PRELIMINARY

MARAVAL'S BLANCA 47 is the traditional arm of the once great, now-struggling Casablanca, and at Friday night's Pan Round the Neck competition its "Going the Distance" had been arranged and rendered with the elegance of a long tradition.

A wiry old man in a washed-out OWTU T-shirt weaved in and out of the vibrations. A vagrant passed by blowing a whistle. A rusty, ancient veteran crept up behind the band to stare at it, smiling. Panorama '94 had begun.

Once the bands struck up, beginning with Blanca 47, it was like Jouvert, with the virile clanging of iron wafting along Independence Square in the cool breeze, and a crowd congealing miraculously out of the semi-dark around the band, conjured up purely by rhythm to lurch east to the stage. But the magic took time to build up intensity.

Belmont City Kids followed after a long, empty pause: a mere handful of players, including two little boys who laboured with tenors almost bigger than themselves, a micro-band made smaller by their inability to invoke a crowd.

Their sound was ragged, and without the banner you wouldn't have recognised Crazy's "OPP in the Party". The players too were ragged, like homeless street urchins, and still they evoked sympathy rather than derision, because, after all, it was ensembles like this which created the magic a half-century ago.

Another gap yawned before Diego's Creole Pan Groove materialised to shake up the place with Shadow's "Pay the Devil". The band generates and gives off a raw power as it drifts up the road, very different from Blanca's finesse, but Shadow's primitive jab molassie rhythm clanging under a hazy moon is the righteous thing to bring a thick crowd around the band, including one extremely muscular man who manages nevertheless to perform an exquisitely graceful and

funky wine.

As Creole Pan Groove slowly moves away with its crowd, the road becomes bright again but less so, as a few stragglers are drawn by the throbbing dudups as they slowly recede. A shapely woman stumbles along in stilettos, while another wines behind a cart she's pushing loaded with oranges, and a great, inhuman roar rises in the east by the stage where a PA system belches out the first band's tune.

Arima All Stars are playing De Fosto's "Play Mr Pannist" but they're playing too slow, like first rehearsal, and besides they haven't any mid-range strumming, just tenors and a ringing iron syncopation. Still, they've drawn a crowd, so when Scrunters Pan Groove appears right behind with its powerfully balanced rhythms, the St James band is immediately enveloped in a dense black, swirling mass.

Sundowners from south change the mood considerably with a sexy, laid-back "Don't ask me to Wuk for Carnival", slowly walking the Grandmaster's sensuous bass chords, slow slow rikatika-rikatika iron like long-time Vaders, causing you to gasp at the simple sweetness of the call-response melody and to cry out for Cobo Jack to fill the gaps with a long ramajay on his tenor.

An onlooker exclaims, "O Lord, they could play that to San Fernando without stopping!"

Laventille Pañ Strummers strolled up silent as if daunted by the lingering beat of the receding Sundowners, but soon they struck up with "Fire Coming Down", less stylish but solid enough, the youths moving nice, dancing the tenors like sailors ashore.

By now the swirling, eddying crowd is thick in the road and on the pavement, and even an unexciting Modernaires cannot dissipate it. There are macho men and old fogeys, rude gyls and hoity-toity daddies with their daughters on their shoulders and mummies dragging sleepy sons behind. There are aimless youth posses drinking stout and a group of bewildered Korean seamen. Force-ripe young girls stand in groups, older jamenttes banter and curse in loud voices, middle-aged men look on with sad, nostalgic eyes.

Much as their Shango forebears used to invoke the orisha, the steelbands, 35 of them, had invoked this dense and varied crowd to celebrate and affirm its power and potency, but to me that was already contained in a twilight moment long before, when most other bands hadn't arrived yet.

La Creole was practising in the Square under a tree and there didn't seem to be any melody, maybe the tenors hadn't arrived yet, just a repetitive clanging like some metallic ritual, and the shirt-and-tie clerks who briskly passed and hardly glanced in curiosity. But on the ground, almost invisible, a tiny, decrepit old vagrant woman was hunched over, gently tapping her feet.