

'Boogsie' takes enchanting 'stroll' in the Rain Forest

By WAYNE BOWMAN

AS Len "Boogsie" Sharpe stepped on to the court of the Jean Pierre Complex during last week's *World Steelband Music Festival* final, he did not have a clue what he was about

to play. All he knew was he was going to play whatever the spirit moved him to, whatever he was feeling in his soul — which is where all his music comes from.

What Sharpe did play on his pans was a phenomenal piece of

music which left everyone spellbound, even the judges and the pan-nists of the bands competing against Skiffle Bunch.

His seconds-only performance put the icing on a spectacular presentation by the south-ern band.

In the end, Skiffle Bunch was declared the World's Best Playing Steel Orchestra. Sharpe — who had arranged both selections, "Pan By Storm" and "In The Rain Forest", which he composed — was also declared the world's best arranger and composer for the pan.

Just as Skiffle Bunch's performance was unbelievable, so too was Sharpe's musical journey to the final night.

When Skiffle Bunch leader Junia Regrello and the band's advisers decided to have a piece exploring the rain forest composed for them to play at the festival, Regrello headed to the Internet for information. He then wrote a feature on the subject and delivered it to Pat Bishop and Sharpe.

"I went to see Pat and told her I still didn't know how to envision a rain forest," said Sharpe. She explained to me about the bleakness, with little pockets of light. She told me to imagine the butterflies and birds. At one point, I told her I didn't think I could compose a classical piece on the rain forest. She told me, 'Just go and do your best, I know you can do it.' I went off and began to create the piece in my mind."

"In The Rain Forest" was totally composed in Sharpe's heart, soul and head. He does not read or write music and has

no intention of learning to do so.

"I tried to learn on four occasions and it just didn't work out. It's as if the Lord is telling me He has given me everything I need for my music, and I don't need anything more."

Sharpe journeyed from St James to the Skiffle Bunch panyard on Coffee Street in San Fernando for five consecutive Sundays to compose and teach the piece to the band's principal players.

The ethno-classical piece was composed on the spot as Sharpe stood behind the pans and played. "As we drove down each Sunday, I would imagine I was in the rain forest and the music would just come out. The piece has different movements and each represents a season or part of a season in the rain forest.

"You might hear the music just jump out at you for a second. That was an animal running in front of me. You'll hear the rain pouring down, then just stopping suddenly.

All these things were in my imagination at first, before being transferred to the pan," Sharpe said.

Sharpe worked with some 15 players from the band, starting around 11.30 am and working until 5 pm, with half an hour for lunch. At the end of the five Sundays, Sharpe



PAN MOZART: ONE of pan's most talented sons, Len "Boogsie" Sharpe solos to help TCL Skiffle Bunch to the World Steelband Festival 2000 championship title, and keep national pride alive and soaring.
Photo by ANDRE ALEXANDER

let those trained players teach the music to the others in the band.

Of course, with a perfectionist like Sharpe, there was much fine-tuning and some major changes. The players, however, easily adapted. The possibility a foreign band could win the festival frightened many, including Sharpe, who returned from Miami on the night of the second preliminary round.

Upon hearing the Swiss band was ahead, he immediately went to work with the band to get them in gear for the rest of the competition.

"When I heard the foreigners were beating us, I got worried. If we had gotten beaten, nobody would come here to hear pan again, because they would say the best was outside. I told myself we had work

to do, and went to talk to Junia. I told him we had a good chance, and had to save our country.

"This was no longer about Skiffle Bunch or a south band. This was about Trinidad and Tobago. We got the young people in the band fired up and set out to win.

"Things got a bit rough for a while. The rehearsals ran very late and some parents grew concerned that their children were not able to get up for school in the mornings.

"Some of them threatened to pull their children out of the festival. Junia and I had to go around to each home and beg the parents to be patient.

"I have to thank those parents for bearing with us. I had a gut feeling we would pull it off. That young man, Ben Jackson, who con-

ducted is just great.

"We had a team working together to pull this off and I must thank them. Among them are Pat, Gillian Bishop, Lindy-Ann Bodden-Ritch and Nicole Borde."

Even with the taste of victory still fresh and being savoured, Sharpe believes there is still a long way to go.

"People here at home don't support the pan as they should. Look how those foreigners treat the pan. They see it as an important instrument and think of themselves as professionals.

"The pan still has far to go because the truth is not even a quarter of the world knows about the instrument. I thank the foreign bands for opening our eyes," Sharpe said.