

One of the leading pop jazz critics wrote a front page piece in the New York Times, Friday, September 3, 1999 on a West Indian Pan Maestro, Len Boogsie Sharpe. We are most pleased to reprint this article in full as a salute to the Steelband.

Pan Maestro Creates Fantastic Music on Brooklyn Sidewalk

Jon Pareles

Port of Spain in Trinidad to L.C. Jon to Miami, the exact sound of the steel-drum band rings across carnivals and tinetins. Formed anew every Carnival season, giant steel (or "pan") bands rehearse daily for months to perform a piece before enthusiastic crowds and tough competition gigs.

In Brooklyn the sound of steel drums grows more vibrant each week of the summer, as pan bands a hundred musings strong gather on sidewalks and in vacant lots, practising right to prevail in the annual competition that ushers in Brooklyn's giant Labour Day West Indian American Carnival.

Along with Trinidad's own Carnival in February, Brooklyn's is one of the two epicenters of pan music.

To increase their competitive chances, bands call on a handful of world-class arrangers whose job is to turn amateurs into virtuosos with rattle-dazzle versions of the year's top favourites. Year after year bands turn to Len (Boogsie) Sharpe.

Mr. Sharpe, 45, has been renowned in steel-drum music for 40 years, from his days as a prodigy who could barely hit the drum to his emergence as a composer, arranger and leader. He uses the most traditional methods to create lively, innovative arrangements for the instrument that has become the musical symbol of the West Indies. Since the late-1980's he has often competed with himself, working for multiple bands in a single Panorama competition.

"Boogsie is head and shoulders above everybody else," Bob Telson, the composer of Broadway's "Gospel at Noon," who often draws on world music.

This year Mr. Sharpe is the mastermind for the Pan Rebels band, named after a song he wrote in 1983. On Monday in Brooklyn, steel-drums peeled down Parkside Avenue as the Pan Rebels warmed up for one of their last rehearsals before tomorrow's competition. The tinsel-trimmed folding that holds many of the musicians and their drums being rolled out of the band's headquarters, a former garage across the street from Intermediate School 2, and nearly 100 drummers were taking their places.

The musicians, most of them with roots in Trinidad and Tobago, included a 8-year-old girl and men in their 60's; dapper teen-agers and working women in their 30's; painters, carpenters, salesmen, plumbers. Limbering up, they over their drums with rubber-tipped mallets and bits of wood, the melody filled the air with a random, shimmering clang. The sidewalk had become a panyard, a steel-band practice area. Around 9:30 p.m. Mr. Sharpe strolled into the ranks and tapped a syncopated beat on the side of one with a mallet.

Suddenly chaos gave way to harmony: Mr. Sharpe's arrangement of a calypso song called "In My House," 10 minutes of flashy variations, full of ping-ponging counterpoint and virtuosic key changes. It was the kind of showpiece — featuring with melodies, counter-melodies, stops and starts — that has made Mr. Sharpe's reputation.

And it sounded like liquid jubilation. People from the neighbourhood gathered on the sidewalk to listen; cars along the side crawled by with their windows open, reluctant to be away from the music. Caribbean food vendors opened stands, selling corn soup and roti and sorrel-scented beer; "I've been doing business since July, when the Pan Rebels and two other steel bands started nightly rehearsals on Parkside Avenue. While the steel drums carried the melodies, the brisk pop beat, tapped out on a drum kit and on old brake shoes, both drummers and listeners dancing.

The Pan Rebels were polishing "In My House," a tribute to steel drums by the songwriter Oba, for Panorama, which takes place tomorrow night behind the Brooklyn Museum of the East River Parkway. The Pan Rebels will be judged along with 13 other bands. About 24 hours after the Panorama judges announce their decisions, the Pan Rebels and the other steel bands will march in J'ouvert, the parade of satirical costumes that gets under way at 3 a.m. on Monday on the East River and makes its way down to Nostrand Avenue until mid-morning. J'ouvert (pronounced Joo-VAY) is a street revival of an old Trinidadian custom. With or without sleep, some of the steel bands go on to perform in the East River carnival parade, which draws more than a million spectators every year.

For all the bands Labour Day weekend is the culmination of months of practising, night after night, often until 2 a.m. The musicians are unpaid, but they willingly sustain tradition. "People lose jobs, wives, everything because of

their love for this," said Gary Rogers, one of the Pan Rebels' three co-ordinators.

When Trinidad was used as a refuelling stop for aircraft carriers during World War II, the islanders recycled empty oil barrels as drums. African drums were banned in Trinidad in 1884 by British colonial rulers, and for half a century carnival processions made music from bamboo tubes called bamboo bamboo, along with biscuit tins, bottles and scrap iron.

Steel drums brought a new precision and refinement to carnival music. Hammering various-sized dents in the tops of the barrels made it possible to play different notes on a steel drum, and in a few years Trinidadians devised an orchestral range of instruments, from the tenor pans that usually carry the melody down to bass pans with only a few deep notes on each drum.

Mr. Sharpe, 45, has made the drums his calling. "Pan is my life. It's all I know," he said. "I live music, sleep music, eat music. Sometimes, when I am playing, I just feel like my whole body and soul is inside of the pan."

Mr. Sharpe does not read or write music. Neither do most steel drummers. But in a feat of memory that Trinidadians take for granted, he conceives elaborate arrangements and teaches them to the drummers note by note, phrase by phrase. He does not sketch the music on a keyboard, as some steel-band arrangers do; he doesn't use recordings.

"I have the whole picture in my head," he said. The music exists only in Mr. Sharpe's imagination, and then in the sound of mallets on steel.

Mr. Sharpe was born in a panyard in Port of Spain, where his cousin led a steel band. He had perfect pitch and was immediately drawn to music. When he saw symphony orchestras on television, he wanted to become a conductor. But steel drums were closer at hand, and at the age of 3, he was tapping out melodies. "The pan was taller than me," he recalled; he stood on a cinder block.

Recognised as a prodigy, he started winning prizes when he was 5, and he put together a band to play his first compositions while he was a schoolboy. At 15 Mr. Sharpe dropped out to join the Starlift Band, the first steel band to play its own compositions instead of transcriptions. And at 20 he founded his own band, Phase II Pan Groove, which he still leads in Trinidad's original Panorama during the February carnival.

It was more than a decade before Phase II won first prize at Panorama in Trinidad. In 1987 Mr. Sharpe became the first arranger to win the competition with his own composition, "This Feeling Nice." By then, he was widely recognised as an innovator in steel-band music.

"He can do things that are very modern and still keep an old-time calypso feel in the harmonies and the phrasing of the melodies," said Mr. Telson, who has performed with Mr. Sharpe's bands in Trinidad and Brooklyn. "His chords are much richer than anyone else's, and his counterpoint is also deeper than anyone else's. He has so many counter-melodies happening that although the music is harmonically so rich, you can also focus on any one of three different lines at the same time. And it always swings."

By the late 1980s Mr. Sharpe was being commissioned to create arrangements for other bands as well as Phase II. His tunes, with lyrics added by various collaborators, became hits for the singer Denyse Plummer. Mr. Sharpe's peak as a prize winner came in 1988, when he supplied seven different bands with arrangements. Three of them won regional awards for the north, east and south zones; another arrangement was a winner for Tobago, and Phase II won the national prize.

More recently Pan Trinbago, which runs Panorama in Trinidad, decreed that no more than two bands in the main

competition can use the same arranger, and Mr. Sharpe said he has heard that the number may be cut to one.

"That is unfair," he said. "You can't tell a lawyer how many clients to have, and you can't tell a doctor how many patients to see. Why are they trying to deprive me of my livelihood?"

Outside carnival season Mr. Sharpe works in clubs, playing steel drum with leading calypso singers and jazz musicians, from the Mighty Sparrow and David Rudder to Wynton Marsalis, Randy Weston and Art Blakey. His current schedule includes an October 17 concert at Afrika House in Brooklyn, playing a tribute to the calypso composer Lord Kitchener with a small group. And he has just released a pop-jazz album, "Fresh Air," on his own label. He would be happy, he said, to compose soundtracks for movies and television.

Meanwhile steel-band jobs keep Mr. Sharpe in motion. His home is in Miami, where he leads a band for the carnival

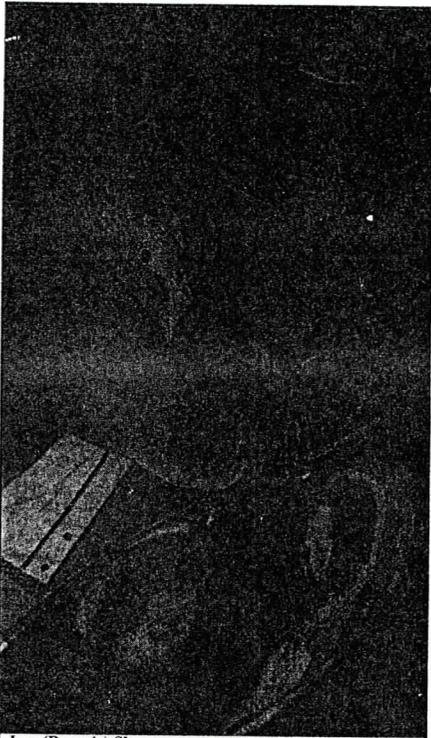
on Columbus Day weekend. Around the end of November he goes to stay with his mother in Trinidad, relaxing until the day after Christmas, when he begins serious work on carnival pieces for Trinidad's Panorama; an arrangement for a top Trinidadian band may be a two-month process that brings him \$5,000. In spring he arranges steelband music at Disneyland in California. And he spends July and August in the panyard's of Brooklyn, shaping his latest arrangement.

"I don't come with anything planned," he said. "I do it all on the spot." He added: "I have the melody in my head, I hear the chords that go with it, and I hear the bass that goes with it. I teach the tenor the melody, and teach the bass, and then I put all the inside music in. I'm adding a piece, a piece, a piece. I use a little jazz influence. And I always try to come up with a better part, so it can be more exciting."

After the Pan Rebels ran through "In My House," Mr. Sharpe got a new idea for the introduction. "I'm going to put a part together," he told a visitor. Standing at one of the double-tenor pans, he plinked out a new harmony line, four notes at a time. One drummer stood next to him, playing back each group of notes; three others gathered around to watch. Mr. Sharpe made sure the drummer at his side had both the notes and phrasing right, then moved on to the cello pans, another layer of harmony.

He hummed a tune for a drummer, and listened as she played it back to him until the rhythm was crisp. Eventually all eight sections of the band had been taught, and Mr. Sharpe tapped once again on the side of a shiny steel drum. The ranks of players leaned onto the brand-new music, all the parts meshed easily, and Mr. Sharpe gave his latest handiwork a calmly approving ear.

Holding drumsticks instead of a baton, dressed in a windbreaker instead of a tuxedo, he didn't look like a symphony conductor. But he had a full-size orchestra at his disposal, eager to realise his musical impulses as they occurred. "This is the thing I always wanted to be," he said.



Len (Boogsie) Sharpe arranges music for the steel-drum band the Pan Rebels in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn.