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newsviews

Today

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Robbie Greenidge is ready to blast off

By TERRY JOSEPH

YOU PROBABLY know him best as the man behind the music for the theme of the television series *Caribscope*, but at age 11, Robert Greenidge had to be placed on a box to reach the notes on the bass pans in the Savoy's panyard. Now he is standing tall, as pan virtuoso and as arranger for the Witco Desperadoes and the Solo Pan Knights.

It is from this new position that he is ready to bring the legendary Despers down the hill to perform his own composition "Blast Off", and by so doing, offer the band its best chance of winning yet another Panorama competition.

He is working just as feverishly on Len "Boogsie" Sharpe's "Mind Yuh Business" with the Solo Pan Knights, bringing them up to speed during long nights of practice, in the hope of scoring a double.

It's a long distance from the days of the box to reach the bass, back in his hometown of Success Village in Laventille and under the guidance of his uncle, Carl Greenidge, who was one of the early heroes of the Steelband Movement.

"Uncle Carl used to tune and arrange for several steelbands. Savoy's

with the band on the hill and was lucky to be around for their major sponsorship, which came from Coca Cola.

"As soon as I reach the band, there was confusion. For that Carnival (1964) the band was on these large floats and being pulled along by a tractor. Rudolph said that his band was to go on top of the stage and not at the side, but the authorities were insisting that the floats, pans and men were too heavy for the stage.

"The argument held up the Panorama for the longest while, but that was the kind of standards that Rudolph stood for and that became the standard for Despers.

"I had started with them as a tenor player, but soon, we had to learn all the pans and all the parts, then we would do a few songs for ourselves and gradually, I learnt to arrange little parts for any of the pans in the band."

In 1971, Robbie migrated to California. It was the year after one of the early Clive Bradley wins for Desperadoes, when the band did Kitchener's "Margie", so he was sorry to leave.

He had travelled with the band before to Nigeria and Montreal in 1967, but now he would link up with them if they were travelling inside of North America



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"Uncle Carl used to tune and arrange for several steelbands. Savoy's, which was in the yard of the Albino family, was one of the bands and he brought me in as a youngster who he felt would make good one day.

"It was the only instrument to which I had access, since my family could not buy a piano or anything else for that matter.

"My own ability to recall notes would lead them to show me things on the pans.

"I began to learn actual music right there on the pans, being taught by Martin Albino, who first convinced me that it was not necessary to learn on piano or wind instruments.

"My father (Renwick Sealy) was meanwhile known in Belmont as the uncle of City Kids, so whenever I spent time with him, I would go to their panyard and play some tunes with them".

It was not until age 15, therefore, that Robbie went to the Desperadoes panyard for the first time.

"Rudolph Charles had heard a little band, Volwyckers (it got its name, 'singing birds', from a Dutch priest on Mount St Benedict), that some friends and I had up in Tunapuna and he came and asked us to play with Desperadoes instead.

"Desperadoes was already a great band. Rudolph was working on several inventions to do with pan and there was always a sense of excitement and adventure in the panyard.

"Apart from Bertie Marshall's own progress, we had the first set of high tenors. We even had chrome pans before Bertie's band (Hylanders)."

Now 15, Robbie decided that he would stay

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around for their major sponsor, which was from Coca Cola.

"As soon as I reach the band, there was confusion. For Carnival (1964) the band was on these large floats and being pulled along by a tractor. Rudolph said that his band was to go on top of the stage and not at the side, but the authorities were insisting that the floats, pans and men were too heavy for the stage.

"The argument held up the Panorama for the longest while, but that was the kind of standards that Rudolph stood for and that became the standard for Despers.

"I had started with them as a tenor player, but soon, we had to learn all the pans and all the parts, then we would do a few songs for ourselves and gradually, I learnt to arrange little parts for any of the pans in the band."

In 1971, Robbie migrated to California. It was the year after one of the early Clive Bradley wins for Desperadoes, when the band did Kitchener's "Mergie", so he was sorry to leave.

He had travelled with the band before to Nigeria and Montreal in 1967, but now he would only link up with them if they were travelling inside of North America.

But that trip gave him the opportunity to get a proper grounding in music and orchestration.

"It was a way of furthering myself. I originally went on vacation, but went to the Third Street Music conservatory to get basic training in music. It is there I learnt to read and write music.

"I stayed in California until '77. During that time Rudolph Charles came up and I was then back in touch with my real *pardnah*.

"He arranged for me to do over dubs of all the Desperadoes records, although I was not there at the original recordings of discs like *Pan in Harmony* and others."

This probably was the best inducement for Robbie to come back home from 1978 and every year since.

"I was coming to help Rudolph with the band. Soon I was drillmaster and assisting in arrangements. This gave Rudolph a chance to sleep—a thing he never did too much of.

"In '81 Bradley went to another band and I did Kitchener's 'More Pan'. It was my first attempt. We got back Clive in '82 and he stayed until '84.

"In 1985 Bradley went to Tokyo and it was left to Beverley Griffith and myself to bring the thing off.

"I had been around for some of the best of Bradley, so I had learnt a lot. We won with 'Pan Night and Day' and Rudolph died in May of that same year.

"I was elected manager of the band after Rudolph's death, but I was still the arranger.

"Rudolph was after the art and I had to keep that going. Nobody's interested in that anymore, so it is largely for him that I keep that art thing going in an age of fast food pan.

"But that could not pay me all year, so I had to live abroad and find work which would allow me to come back home every year and spend some of that on the band and its members.

"I had played with Taj Majal since 1975 and



ROBBIE GREENIDGE

had enjoyed some good breaks with John Lennon and Ringo Starr, Earth Wind and Fire, Grover Washington, Ralph Mc Donald and Jimmy Buffett."

THERE was also work in movie and television soundtracks as with Eddie Murphy in *Distinguished Gentleman* and *48 Hours*, Steven Seagal's *Hard to Kill* and *Ghostbusters*, television's *Fantasy Island*, *The Love Boat*, and others.

"I joined Jimmy Buffett full time in 1982 and that is essentially my job from May to September every year.

"In 1986 I got Pat Bishop to come up the hill to do the heavy classics for the Festival.

"We had not been in the Festival for 19 years, so we were determined to come back in with a bang.

"We won the next three Festivals too under Pat and we have been friends ever since. She had done the only hattrick in Festival history."

But that was the Festivals. There had to be something more and Robbie arranged (so to speak) an avenue to introduce some of his own music to the Carnival.

He had done three albums, *Mad Music*,

Jubilee and *Heat*, all in the international mould, but now it was time to test the Carnival market with his own work.

In '91, his first pan song "Musical Volcano" was not easily received by the band, since they were accustomed to playing Kitchener and did not want to take a chance.

"Well, the short version of that story was that the band won all categories of the Panorama.

"In '92 we went with 'Pan is Mih Jumbie' and placed third, then there was 'Street Party' and 'Fire Coming Down', followed by 'Pan Parang' in '95.

"Now there's 'Blast Off' and I feel even better about this one because it was written only with Despers in mind.

"Gregory Ballantyne did some inspiring lyrics for the tune which was sung by Ronnie McIntosh and recorded by Beaver Henderson's Klub Carnival label.

"Rudolph would not have made his Rocket Pans in vain. 'Blast Off' will prove that," he concluded.

Tonight Robbie's work will be on show, as it were, with working journalists being hosted at the Desperadoes panyard from 9 p.m. and then at Solo Pan Knights from 10 p.m.

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