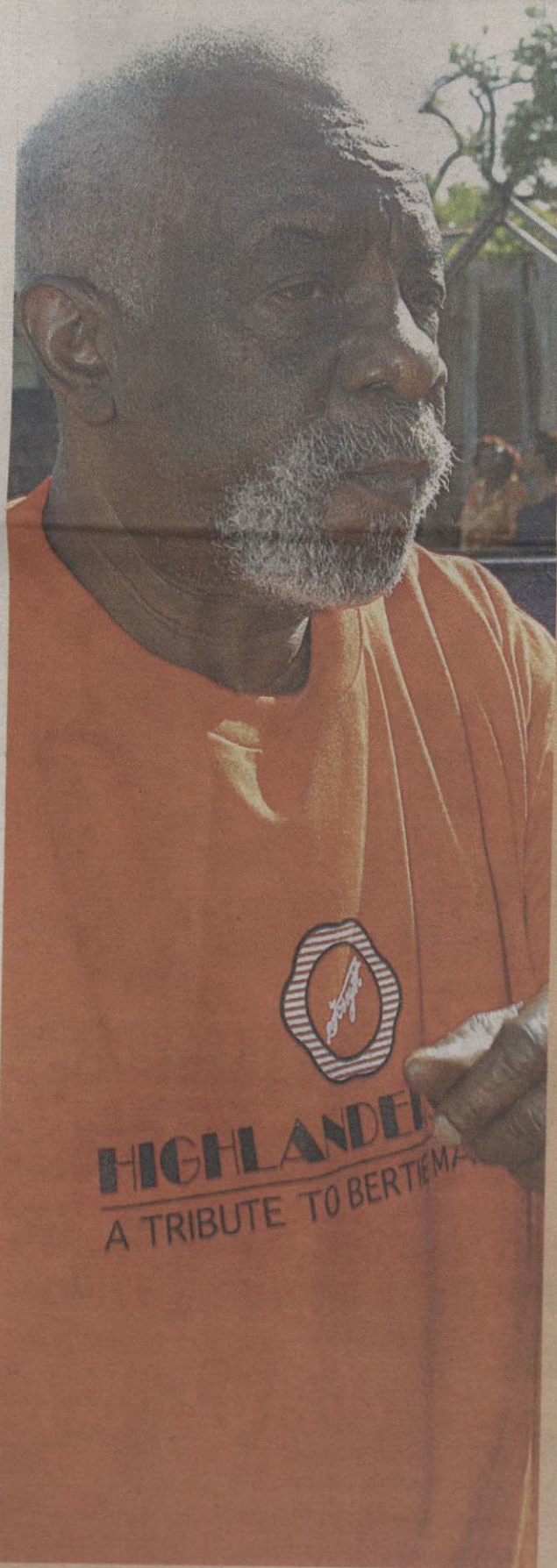


Eccentric tuner Bertie Marshall leaves an unfinished symphony

A ROMANCE FOR PAN



Bertie Marshall

DALTON NARINE

That Bertie Marshall was a hero and inventor to us young boys growing up around the corner from his home in Laventille should not surprise. We looked up to him. He was the only genius we knew. So conscientious was he that his persona demanded loyalty. And perfection.

Indeed, whether disparagingly, or in a self-deprecating way, he referred to himself as a little Hitler, even though he wasn't a pecuniary badjohn. Or never entertained grandiose ideas about destruction.

Marshall was small of stature but huge on discipline.

When we dressed up for Highlanders as Native Americans from the Black Feet Tribe, everyone could see how his work ethic shone through; and none of us in Success Village ever imagined that there was a better Carnival band on the road in the late '50s like this sweet band from Laventille.

One summer day in 1970 I reached Marshall from New York to enquire about his health and life, and he said he was experimenting with the Bertfone, an amplified double tenor that had the bifurcating effect of sustaining or dampening the notes, like an organ. In two-tuos I was homebound, only to find myself arriving in a dream at Marshall's house on Old St Joseph Road, the sound of his new pan warbling, each note the voice of a canary, or, as Len Boogsie Sharpe would so eloquently put it: "That (Bertfone) double tenor had a smooth, unique sound, more like a violin. A lot of fellas run from that pan but it was the sweetest pan to play, even to solo on. You mix a violin and a soprano sax together and, well, the tenor and double tenor had that kind of marriage."

Sharpe could talk because he was a frequent guest of Marshall's, both erudite nonconformists from the briar patch of the music culture, yet in synchronicity about the perceived direction of pan the instrument.

I felt as if I were in Picasso's head or Einstein's mind, watching a small revolution catch fire like pitch pine in a coal pot's chimney. It was not like I could gloat that I was present during the demonstration, but more so, I thought, what a gift to the nation that Marshall had fashioned!

And yet, the following year when I tried to purchase a pair of regular double tenors, one of his more famous inventions, he lashed out at a pannist from Laventille who had left to become a Trinidad All Stars frontline player, and had come back with a prodigal voice with what little



Dalton Narine plays Mozart's Divertimento - K136 on a Bertie Marshall double tenor in Highlanders as the band crosses the Savannah stage in 1971.

humility in the heart struggling to displace the absence of loyalty to Marshall himself and Highlanders in general.

It was Marshall's Solomonian decision that saved the day. "Play (the 1971 Bomb) Mozart's Divertimento—K136, on the road with the band and keep the double tenors as a gift."

Of course, I caught hell from All Stars the following Carnival when I showed up for rehearsals of their Bomb, the very culture that they'd put in place for J'Ouvert since 1958.

I tell that story because today at his funeral, my guess is that all the talk would be about how great Marshall was for Desperadoes, co-inventor with Rudolph Charles of the quadrophonic pans, and the classic tone of the tenors and double tenors that he'd imbued the band during its championship years.

Of course, Marshall's fealty had switched to Desperadoes, Highlanders having become defunct with the migration of key personnel to the States.

Indeed, when I interviewed him live on television at a Panorama finals in the mid-80s, my bringing up Highlanders in the discourse, and Charles and his cadre hanging so close by I felt their breath on my neck, such an embargo, on camera at that, warranting a backlash that still boomerangs in my ear whenever viewers who had seen the exchange approach me with empathy. To this day.

Was it that the Bertfone had suffered inexorably in a fire that burnt his house to the ground? Or, Highlanders had been deep-sixed and perhaps relegated out of

history despite pan lore to the contrary? Or, that Marshall, like me, had unceremoniously left one Laventille for the other, the real McCoy?

Yet our friendship stuck to the very end, our annual Carnival chit-chat happening in his apartment at the top of five landings in a building on Observatory Street, the dry river separating us from the back door to Renegades panyard. It mattered not when you'd arrive, classical music always streamed from the Arts Channel on his TV.

It was one such morning, bright and early, in 2003, that he and I almost "get away!"

A camera operator and I would drive him up the hill to the Despers panyard for an establishing shot that would serve as a portal for his work in a documentary I was producing. When eight o'clock arrived, he'd refused to budge from his sofa. He'd miss his favourite show, *The Flintstones*.

"I never go up that hill," he protested. "But it's about you and Desperadoes!" I sweet-talked.

"People would be shocked to see me up there."

"They'd be happy."

"They may know me but I don't know them."

Eventually we coaxed Marshall out of his funk, despite his pouting and fuming on the trip up the hill.

The minute we drove into the yard, though, three men sitting on a bench in front of a parlour and another sucking on a small carton of juice gave him the hail of a king who'd spent his time in the palace.

"Bertie, what you doing up here? But you don't ever come up here!"

"See what I tell all yuh. Let's do this thing quick so I can get back to *The Flintstones*."

Marshall's attitude was in stark contrast to his buoyancy a few days earlier when Highlanders held its first reunion in the other Laventille where genius was born and bred. The reunion happening on the very spot where his house once stood. An empty lot, dreams buried with ashes underfoot. And strains of music, too. Like *Every Valley Shall Be Exalted*, and *May the Lord God Bless and Keep You*. And yes, *Romance* (Chopin's Concerto in E Minor).

Romance for Pan. That's what Marshall carried in his soul all these years, transporting it from one Laventille to the other, and laying it finally to rest by the dry river, far from Erica Street, which still mourns his unfinished symphony. And forever will.