

Panorama 'murdering silence'

...Raf Robertson strikes unconventional notes about culture

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As large and medium steelbands prepare to compete in the National Panorama finals later today, respected local musician Raf Robertson has sounded a warning about the lack of proper musical standards in the competition.

Here, made available exclusively to the T&T Guardian, are the hard-hitting views he expressed to writer and filmmaker Dalton Narine at lunch on Wednesday with Robertson, the Bird-song arranger.

A recorder wasn't planned, yet Robertson didn't flinch when it joined in...even when Panorama came up.

Robertson: When you don't know yourself, you have an illusion of yourself. Because you don't get to see yourself.

Q: An illusion, or delusion?

Robertson: Well, both. A perception is something that comes from you, and a perception is not the truth. So when you see yourself, you go into shock. Look, Trinidad is the mecca of mediocrity. We live a lie. Trinidad is the greatest, etc, and we know that is a lie. For example, the arts is imprisoned by commerce. People like (Len) Boogsie Sharpe are like little islands in this sea of mediocrity.

And (Clive) Bradley's music, too. His genius was being able to function between his constraints, because he could not do what he wanted on pan. No creative freedom on The Hill...

Now, Panorama has become a performance competition, so you're playing for people who aren't musical. They're there to have a good time and they want something to relate to.

But the music of Panorama is not generally arranged from the heart. Many bands arrange to suit the performance. Take a band like (Trinidad) All Stars, the arrangement should have something to do with the tune. You could put a motif, or whatever, not so? They start off with a chromaticism—and, the visual image of the players performing that chromaticism will dull anything relating to the tune. Just like Silver Stars, the reigning king of performance in the Panorama.

Q: But doesn't performance play a role in the competition?

Robertson: No, no, no, no. The tune should be arranged as improvisation, and the music should inspire the

improvisation, not the performance.

Q: You mean "structured" improvisation, don't you?

Robertson: Frozen architecture, that's what it is. Within the sound, there's an arrangement, and the arranger has to get there. If you're not required to go there, because, for one thing, the judges...Look, I entered the competition [this year] and I came last. But you don't compete if you're not in favour with the judges' decision.

So, I have no...but that does not stop me from knowing that the judges don't know. I happen to know a few of them...People are basically dishonest and not dishonest with malice. Dishonest from a cultural perspective. Hear what, if you ask a Trini how to get to Manzanilla and he doesn't know, he'll never tell you he doesn't know. In his purview, not knowing is not good. Mind you, not knowing is the beginning of knowledge, eh.

Q: Where're you going with this?

Robertson: A journalist in France went to Lyon to cover a rock festival, and the editor told him, "You spent six hours at a festival and you had nothing to write?" He said, "Sir, with all due respect, there was no music there. They were murdering silence."

Q: And is that's happening here?

Robertson: In many ways. I look at the parameters of Panorama, because you don't want to be there and play something that nobody will appreciate. My self-editing wasn't based on what the judges would think. As an arranger, you have to get the people to like the music.

Q: Did you have a problem with the band about arranging from your heart?

Robertson: I had a problem in the sense that the band comprises kids. And there was a lack of discipline. They don't have that conviction. All this bling generation knows about is the price of things as opposed to the value of things.

Long ago I used to stand up in panyards for hours and take night dew. Now, they saunter in about nine, half past nine. One night, a player forgot to bring his sticks. Would you believe? In the end, they may have played well, but not to their capabilities...

You gain more from losing than



Raf Robertson

winning. You investigate yourself more. Why did you lose? Well, I must pay more respect to the times that we live in. I have to take more control of the arrangement. The person drilling the band doesn't understand what you're trying to say in the music, and that's a problem.

Q: What were you saying?

Robertson: There are certain parts of "Do Something for Pan" that represent pan labouring up a slippery slope. Pan is a sad lament, to me. So I tried to let my thought process influence my feelings, and then the feelings would bring the music, because you can't just manipulate creativity. It comes when it comes. I change things often.

Not because you have to have a part there you think that any part will work. And pressure might influence you to lay down anything; but, you'll have to change it if you're honest.

Q: Then, who are your favourite arrangers?

Robertson: Neville Jules (founder of Trinidad All Stars) and Ray Holman. I judged a J'Ouvert pan contest (Bomb competition) a few years ago and All Stars came up...I'm not necessarily a fan of "Smooth" (All Stars' arranger) though I have much respect for him.

Neville Jules brought the band up and they played his arrangement of "Theme from The Good, The Bad and The Ugly," (which Jules arranged when he was 78), and I'm in awe of a guy who has never been to music school, but adheres to all the principles of arranging. Arranging period. Like art, it needs balance. And I'm hearing all the harmonies, all the lines...I say but this

guy is a genius, though they may call him an icon.

Coming out of La Brea, I wasn't exposed to Pan. But when I went to London for the first time, a friend played Starlift's "Penny Lane," arranged by Holman. As a people, we don't put a specific value on ourselves and what we produce, so when I'm in awe of people like Jules and Holman, it's kind of misplaced.

How to put value on their work? On esteem? It's priceless. When an audience hears something that rises way above mediocrity, it interferes with their perception of themselves, and that's where shock comes in. Excellence doesn't accommodate everybody. You either are or aren't.

Q: What's your take on Pan and its possibilities?

Robertson: You ask Duke Ellington what's his profession, and he would say "dreamer." And I understand that. Where we are now, the steelband has made a U-turn and in trying to come back has lost its way. We are the quintessential classical people. Grabbing at the shadow and leaving the bone. Why hasn't anyone done the TASPO story on film? They have to come back to that. The danger is that they don't know that they don't know.

Q: Let's go back to Boogsie for a moment. You started to say earlier that he is an anomaly...

Robertson: Boogsie recognises that his competition is not All Stars, Renegades or Despers, but Silver Stars, which represents people who don't know anything about Pan and want to feel comfortable. Because music is like that. So when the band does all these runs and all these chromatics and all this juvenile harmony, people who are slightly inebriated are comfortable, for it has nothing to do with music.

If we don't know about music, we'll be playing pan—on pan. And if you're musically inclined, it is music. Pan is an instrument that we're trying to define as not an instrument, but something special. Anything that has 12 notes is an instrument. And you better learn music because you shouldn't be playing the pan, you're playing music...

We have this new crop of arrangers who don't listen to good music. I always tell my students "intent is more important than anything else." So here

we are at a junction...because we're in mob rule. Everybody at the Savannah has an opinion, even though they don't have the wherewithal to have an opinion about the music. They don't know harmony or rhythm or melody. To them, it's either something's sounding good or not.

Maybe that's why [the judges] have curtailed Boogsie. He is musically intuitive and he knows the cultural thinking in his genre. If your music is good, you don't need a gimmick. The judges mark you, 10 for performance, 20 for...to me, that is suspect. I've been hearing a lot of regurgitated stuff. And that is not a surprise.

But Boogsie is the epitome of creativity, and he's not going up against All Stars, but Silver Stars. It pains him to do that. Going against somebody who doesn't have that creative thing like Bradley, who once put a fist fight in a (New York) band into the music he was arranging, as it was happening.

It is disingenuous, therefore, to have a competition and you claim you're looking for excellence.

Q: What does Boogsie's music do for you? What have you heard in his music this year that makes you sparkle?

Robertson: In my travels to the Middle East, I've marvelled at how money grows in sand. Look how they've pigeon-holed him and he's able to still come up with something creative.

I like his introduction and his approach to the improvisation. I like the harmony. He's saying in the music look where we are and what we're doing. What do you want us to do again? Look where you are. I like to think I've got careful analysis without emotion getting in the way.

For instance, this present Pan Trinbago office would be good for the 18th Century. How you change your life is by changing your mind and you do that by changing your thinking. You might not be wrong if you call Trinidad the Siberia of music. It's so anti-music in many respects. Hence, "Do Something for Pan."

I had a Russian lecturer at Long Island University who gave me this line: There might be a musician who speaks properly but has nothing to say, and a guy who has a lot to say but he doesn't know how to say it.