



TCL Group Skiffle Bunch in full flight last November. *Guardian file photo*

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Feeling the blues

By AFIFA BUTLER

THE best playing steel orchestra in the world, TCL Group Skiffle Bunch is like a king without his glory, said band leader Junia Regrello.

In an interview last Thursday, Regrello said the band had done very little since winning the World Steel Band Festival in 2000.

He said band members were jubilant on the night of the festival and two days after, but then their enthusiasm waned. Why?

"It took us six months to get our prize money from the Ministry of Culture," he said. "You had to go back and forth with the Ministry complaining and asking for it, so by the time you got the money the sense of appreciation dwindled and you forgot what you got that money for."

Regrello said when the band was finally given its prize money, "everybody who contributed to our participation demanded their pound of flesh."

"We had to pay the musical director, the conductor, to have the screen music scored, the arranger, for transport, for the clothes..." he said. "Pan Trinbago really needs to review the prize structure that goes to a festival of that magnitude, because at the end all we

got out of it went into a CD." The CD, *In the Rain Forest*, captures the band's live performance at the festival. It costs \$100 and is available at record stores nationwide.

"It is selling reasonably well," Regrello said. "Though it will take us a long time to recover what we spent."

He said everything else is an anticlimax.

"We have not even been invited abroad to perform. We have not had an opportunity ever since we won the festival, and I think it is very unfair on my young players who worked very hard to save the skin of Trinidad and Tobago."

Regrello said Skiffle Bunch had only recently been approached by Pan Trinbago to tour in December.

"I don't want to come across as a sour grape or a cry-cry baby," he said. "But if we had not won the pagament, the first prize would have gone to the United States. If we had lost to them, that would have been a real hard pill for us Trinidadians to swallow."

At the competition, Skiffle Bunch, performing under the direction of conductor Ben Jackson, presented "Pan by Storm" by Ken Philmore and "In the

Rain Forest," by Len "Boogie" Sharpe. Sharpe arranged both.

The band scored a total of 576.5 points, 25 points ahead of the second-placed band, Northern Illinois University Steel Orchestra.

"But that doesn't seem to matter to anybody now," Regrello said. "People like Tidco and the Ministry of Culture are responsible for tours but they have their own steelbands that they lobby for. In fact there have been bands that went away since then via Tidco."

Regrello said although he knew winning the festival did not guarantee tours, he felt the band had been treated shabbily.

"Even in San Fernando (Skiffle Bunch's home town) we have to grovel to get reasonable treatment," he said.

"There is no dressing room for the players; there are no basic allowances for you as to how you get there, where you set up; a programme is printed and there is no courtesy extended to you."

"If we are World Steelband winners, what do we have to show for that? Are the San Fernandians and the Trinidadians giving us that respect?"

Regrello said one of Skiffle Bunch's major disadvantages is its location in

San Fernando.

"Opportunities do not come our way," he said. "Most of the companies have their head offices spread around Port-of-Spain and their executives are made up mostly of people from Port-of-Spain, and if there are opportunities for sponsorship they would most likely consider the Port-of-Spain bands."

"The bulk of the economy comes from the South, but how many south bands are so sponsored? We make the money and they spend it in Port-of-Spain."

Regrello said there were five outstanding bands in Trinidad and Tobago: Desperadoes, Trinidad All Stars, Renegades, Phase Two Pan Groove and Exodus.

"In people's minds those are the five top bands in the country," he said. "And I have the greatest respect for those bands, but I also think that Skiffle Bunch is just as good as one of them, if not better. Our winning the festival was no fluke."

Skiffle Bunch started off as a pan-around-the-neck band in 1975 but changed to a conventional orchestra in 1993.

"And in seven years we moved to

one of the top bands in the country," he said.

The World Steelband Festival was the first major victory for the band, which placed third at the 1998 National Music Festival to qualify for the festival.

The last time a South-based steelband won a major title was in 1975, when Hatters captured the Panorama title. Prior to that, Southern Symphony won the Pan Festival back in the mid-1950s.

The next World Steel Band Festival is to be held next year at a venue to be announced.

Regrello said he did not know if Skiffle Bunch would be asked to defend its title at the festival, but the band would compete anyway, as it was a good experience for the players.

"Coming out of the festival you are always a better, more rounded player," he said.

At present, he said, the band is listening to some of the new calypsos being released. Undaunted by the lack of follow-up to their world championship, they're planning to participate in all national pan competitions and preparing for Panorama 2002.

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