



Gabriel Assing, who gathers a crew each year to load the band onto trucks, puts his weight behind getting a rack into place.

Two weeks before the finals, judges visit the panyard to hear the band. Though they are not required to compete at this stage, a crowd has gathered to hear a competitive performance.



On the track, the band depends on its fans and the crowd to move the pan racks to the stage for the semifinals.

Getting into Phase

The sun is dimming on the horizon and there are disjointed tinkles of tenors and rumblings of bass drums in the Woodbrook panyard of Phase II.

It's hours after practice was supposed to formally begin on my first day photographing the band, and I'm still to make the time-zone adjustment between intent and reality that's part of the way that Phase II gets their work done.

The music is created in sections before it's assembled and rehearsed by its arranger and composer, Len "Boogsie" Sharpe, and his drill lieutenants.

First, the music is played at half speed, the senior musicians listening for misplaced or laggardly notes. This isn't what casual pan fans come to the yard to hear, but if you're patient you can imagine the piece even in these component parts.

This odd little hollow at the dead-end of Hamilton Street is where Phase II has been putting together the chords that have become the defining music of an age since 1972, when six young men decided, with all the arrogance of their years, that they knew better than their elders in Starlift and struck out on their own. They found a home in a little clearing in overgrown bamboo and bush on the street, across the road from the home of one of their number, Selwyn Tarradath.

The original plan was to pursue fusion music, working with traditional musicians and creating their own songs for the pan.

Part of that plan worked out, and not

in the way that they imagined. As more panmen dropped by, it seemed possible to field a side that could go to Panorama in 1973, where they played Kitchener's Mas in May, the first and last time that they would perform a traditional calypso in competition.

In 1974, they played I Music, the first in a four-decade-long run of original compositions by Sharpe (in 1995 and 1995 the band played Ray Holman compositions), daring arrangements and sometimes controversial appearances at Panorama that have made Phase II one of the most discussed bands in the history of pan.

Thirty-nine years later, they arrived at the Queen's Park Savannah stage to play More Love, one of dozens of Sharpe compositions the band has played over the years, and emerged in first place with 273 points, a single point ahead of long-time rival Exodus.

Since Ray Holman's Pan on the Move in 1972, much has changed for pan music. Far fewer composers are creating calypsos for the steelband and the notion of bands coming to Panorama with their own compositions has become commonplace, but Sharpe's adventurous arrangements and Phase II's independent spirit keep it just one step apart from its competitors.

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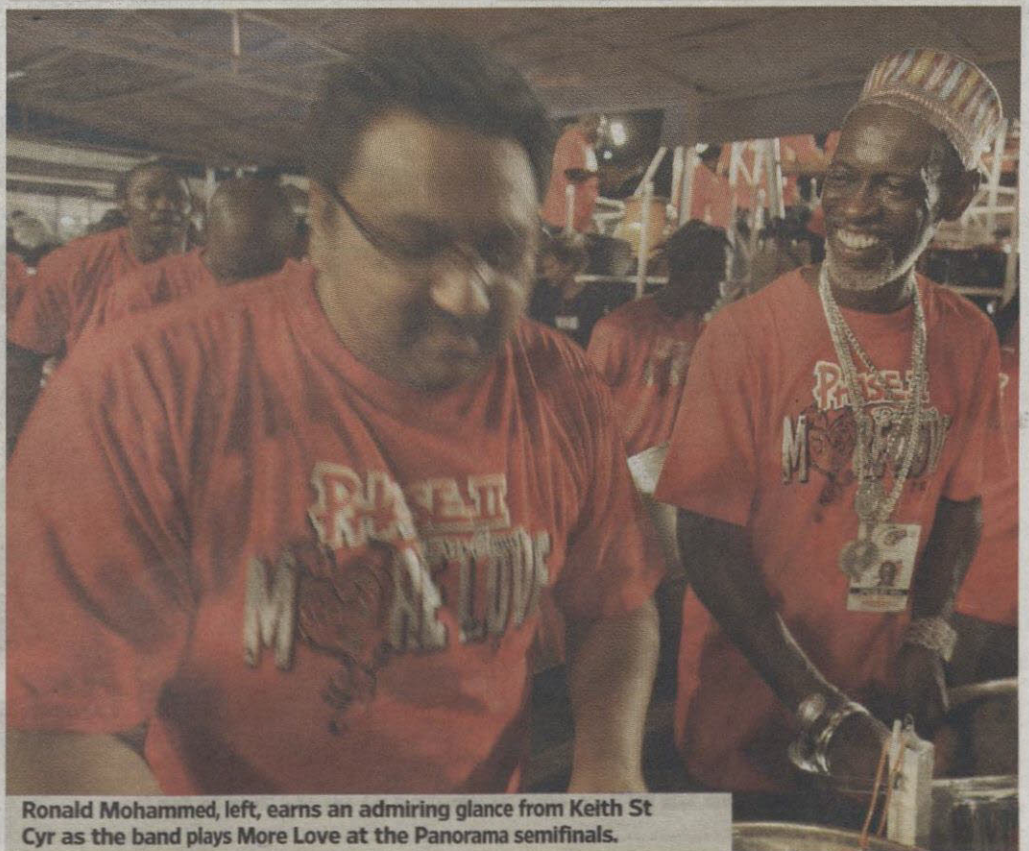
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Terry Bernard and Danica Livingston quickly buff their pans before facing the judges.



Sharpe, impatient with the slow pace of the semifinals, grabs a rack and begins pushing.



Ronald Mohammed, left, earns an admiring glance from Keith St Cyr as the band plays More Love at the Panorama semifinals.