

Jules' star band strikes again

KIM JOHNSON interviews **Neville Jules** in New York, courtesy BWIA

EVEN before Trinidad All Stars placed first in last Saturday's Pan is Beautiful VIII, the Duke Street band had already won more Steelband Festivals than any other. Their total of six Festival victories is twice that closest runner-up, Desperadoes. And at first it doesn't seem strange, for All Stars have long been known as the classics band which kept form with its biennial Classical Jewels concerts.

How surprising it is then, to discover that All Stars kept away from the Steelband Festival for nearly a decade and a half—from the second Festival in 1954 until 1968 when they came first—all because band captain Neville Jules couldn't tolerate the adjudicators' unpredictability in the early days of the Festival.

It started in the first 1952 Festival with the upset victory of Point Cumana's Boys Town. Jules, who now lives in New York, was Trinidad All Stars' main man at the time. He captained the band, selected their tunes, tuned their pans and arranged their music, and was bitterly disappointed when Welsh adjudicator Dr Sydney Northcote placed them third. Northcote had criticised the bands which played classics for rearranging their pieces but he hadn't said much about All Stars' performance of "Dream of Olwyn".

"When he condemn a lot of the bands and thing, he had one thing to say about we, something about crescos was too hard or something like that," recalls Jules. Northcote had especially criticised the bands which had introduced solo parts into the classics, so Jules took note and planned for the

next Festival.

It wasn't difficult insofar as Jules was concerned. He'd always preferred orchestration to individual improvisation. And as the time drew nearer, he began drilling the band.

"They doing a little thing, but nothing to talk about because they want to stay within the guidelines, because this man (Northcote) is a music man," recalls Jules. Up come Mr Theo Stephens with 'Anna' and he start to solo."

Theodore Stephens, the leader of another constellation—Southern All Stars—had begun pan as a prodigy. The first time he played with the older fellas in the San Fernando band Free French, he immediately became the main ping pong player.

"Port of Spain was it and at that time Jules was it, so my godfather say he got to take this boy to town and see if we could get him a good pan," recalls Stephens. "So myself, Zola (Williams) and my godfather and a friend went up for the day. So we went to him and after a little bit of style he decide to make it and he did. It was an eight-note pan and we brought the pan back in the night."

Stephens went on to become the youngest member of the famous Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra, and he and the other youngster, Anthony Williams, learnt the most from Taspo leader Lt Joseph Griffiths. But Stephens was the main soloist.

After they returned from England, Stephens left Free French to form his own steelband, Metronome, which he left in 1954 after a Barbados tour. "I came back Christmas, and then we rest for a while, and then open Southern All Stars," he says. "It was ten weeks before the Music Festival."

One supporter of the band was also close to Merry Makers in Port of Spain, so he asked the town boys if the southerners could take a last-minute rehearsal in their Corbeau-Town panyard before going to the competition at the Globe Cinema. Merry Maker's captain, Alfred "Sack" Mayers, agreed.

"They came down the morning, they rest down their instrument in we pan tent and then we talk, ole talk. They went about, they went their way and they come back about four o'clock the evening and they start to play this 'Anna,'" recalls Mayers. "When we hear it, I say these people win already."

There was tense moment when Southern All Stars arrived at the Roxy for the competition when the gatekeeper refused to allow Theo Stephens's mother in for free. As they argued outside, Theo Stephens insisting his band wasn't going to perform if his mother couldn't enter, the other stars arrived, Trinidad All Stars. And Neville Jules sided with the southerners.

"Yeah man," said Jules. "If the damn man mother eh go in, we eh beating no pan."

She was let in and the bands played, Stephens unleashing his dazzling tune of choice, "Anna".

But Northcote had criticised Free French in 1952 for introducing variations into Handel's "Largo". And the second time around, in 1954, Stephens had taken "Anna" and given it a Latin kind of flavour around which he improvised his own counter-melodies.

After the performances that night, Jules was confident, at least for the band. As a ping pong soloist, he was less so. He'd started his test piece very stylishly, and the audience went wild, but their applause had put him off. He forgot what came next, got up and walked off. The adjudicator called him back and he started again, this time completing the piece successfully. And when the winners were announced, Jules was placed third.

Dudley Smith of Belmont's Rising Sun, the ping pong solo winner in the 1952 Festival, was given first prize again, having the same tune again: Beethoven's "Minuet in G".

Then the ensemble winners were announced.

"Here comes Sir Thomas Beecham himself," declared the adjudicator calling back Jules, and he complimented the Trinidad All Stars for their performance. Beecham, a conductor, was the

founder of the London Philharmonic Orchestra in 1932 and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in 1947, and it was a great—and appropriate—compliment to Jules.

Ahhh! murmured the crowd as the players began to celebrate backstage.

But the adjudicator was Dr Herbert Wiseman, for Northcote didn't adjudicate that year. Northcote adjudicated in 1952, 1956 and 1962, but in the second year steelbands performed in the Music Festival, 1954, the adjudicator was Wiseman.

As the cheer began rising for the Trinidad All Stars, however, Wiseman interrupted it with words that still echo in Neville Jules' memory.

"Wait!" said Wiseman. "More runs to come after lunch."

And he gave the prize to Southern All Stars whose ping pong soloist had dazzled him with his improvisation, thus prompting Neville Jules and the Trinidad All Stars to ignore the Steelband Festival for the next 14 years and create instead the Bomb Competition, until 1968 when the band got sponsored by Catelli and reentered the Festival fray to win their first of six Festival trophies.



JULES



STEPHENS