BOOGSIE'S CHALLENGE

Newsweek Editor Knolly Moses reminisces on Panorama '84 and the work of the strongest contemporary influence in the creation of original music for the steelband, Len Boogsie Sharpe. Mr Moses is a New York-based Trinidadian.

This year, the leading steelbands extended the range of music Panorama usually produces. Carnival's most competitive activity also generated a fresh excitement because of a fiercely fought semi-finals. With the players pretty evenly matched and pan tone differences too minor to matter, the contest was among arrangers rather than the bands. Whose run would be more intricate, whose melody line more appealing? Who would jam something serious and give his band the energy necessary to stir the audience? "The arrangers search for a groove that can catch everyone's ear," says David Happy Williams, Trinidad's foremost jazz musician and an ardent Panorama fan.

Renegades found that groove and Jit Samaroo blew away the competition with his forceful rendition of Kitchener's "Sweet Pan". The other big guns scattered in runners-up positions. Leon Smooth Edwards' heated arrangement of Sparrow's "Doh Back Back" for All Stars was sometimes brilliant, but it had more runs than a cheap pair of stockings. Casablanca's "Tourist Elsie" was steady, driving and even spirited at times but essentially it lacked championship material.

Desperadoes' failure was probably more its choice of tune than weakness of arrangement. Clive Bradley laid down a vigorous and complex piece of work for the four-time champions. There are combinations of chords and bass lines in that piece that some judges probably have not heard. Still, for all Bradley's ce and skill, the tune never quite

found a groove that grasped the audience.

And just as Panorama '83 belonged to Bradley, the '84 championship was convincingly Jit's. He cleverly combined the velocity Smooth Edwards gives a tune, with the musical logic that is usually a Bradley trademark. "Sweet Pan" moved and grooved with just the right amount of verve. That arrangement also makes Jit's Panorama credentials permanent, now that his 1982 championship is no longer considered a fluke. For the self-taught Samaroo, it was a sweet victory to savour.

While Renegades and Jit enjoy a one-year reign of supremacy, however, a menacing challenge lurks in the West. Jit and the other top arrangers aren't guaranteed any sleep as long as the youngest member of their revered fraternity prowls the pans. Next year, Len "Boogsie" Sharpe is sure to salvage whatever loss of pride he suffered from placing sixth with a piece everyone agrees is a superior product. With a clean jazzy sound that spells crossover, Boogsie now threatens to redefine Trinidad music and in the process broaden the parameters Panorama has set for itself. Despite the judges' rejection, Phase II Pan Groove elicited an earthy enthusiasm this year. The band demonstrated a sexy spunk and style that the older bands lack. The sound was new, rendered with finesse, and more energetic than anything Boogsie has so far composed. And while Jit may have found what everyone wanted for 1984, Boogsie may already possess what's required for 1985 and beyond.

Boogsie's carefully crafted arrangement of his own composition, "I Music", flashed a brilliance that we have slowly come to expect from him. It also edged him closer to the Panorama title that has eluded him. And at least one set of judges awarded him a first prize: he easily beat out the admittedly sparse competition in Berger's Las Lap competition. But his real victory in 1984 was the music itself. This

time, he gave a public usually skeptical of compositions written specifically for pan, no excuses. By launching the conventional music version of "I Music," Boogsie showed a slowly surfacing marketing savvy that the band sorely needs. With the tune on everyone's lips, his rendition for Phase II could be fully appreciated. As good an example of this could be found in the North Stand's silent attention, Panorama night, when the band made its way on stage. Anything that can keep the North Stand quiet cannot be all bad.

Phase II began with a ripe and textured introduction and a phrasing of the low pans that must be the sweetest line ever heard on a Panorama night. The band then laid out a clear-cut melody through the mandatory number of bars to establish the tune in the listener's mind. Then Boogsie went to work. The tenors swiped at notes in what jazz musicians would call riffs. He twisted and reshaped the melody sometimes beyond recognition. Frills and flourishes flew in all directions. Sometimes the tune would appear out of a floating line only to disappear into a skirmish of chords. He phrased lines so obliquely they sounded like jazz licks from some jam session. Most of all, he jammed in classic fashion though at a slower tempo than what a Finals night audience usually likes. At one point, the pans whispered a line so softly it swapped a silent secret between the arranger and his audience. Boogsie drew pulse and breath from his major musical influences, Stevie Wonder and Herbie Hancock. He fused funk, rock, jazz and soca.

In structure, "I Music" is a tonal tapestry of Boogsien vitality. Remember "79 is Mine". Nowhere in the tune is the music simply calypso or soca. That was intentional.

"There is no reason that calypso has to

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sound a particular way," says Boogsie, in his usual self-effacing way. "Of course, we want to jam, but my first inclination is to write a good piece of music. That doesn't mean I don't consider the mood of a Panorama audience. But I instinctively try to push their music appreciation beyond its normal borders."

To an extent, that approach worked well. People loved the tune and what he did with it, and very often they said so.

The inevitable comparison with Ray Holman's style was heard all too often. What probably was missed just as often is that Boogsie has outdone Holman in many respects. And, of course, there is nothing wrong with borrowing from a man who taught him a lot of what he knows.

"If you plant good seeds, they must grow," says bandleader Peter Minshall. Though Minshall was too modest to phrase it precisely the same way, he agreed that Boogsie was stretching the barriers of the music in a way similar to his own attempts to give Carnival a broader meaning. "He already had recognition," says Minshall of Boogsie, "but this year he achieved stardom."

It is not undeserved. Boogsie's promise and potential seem certain to surpass the rich talents of competitors like Clive Bradley, Jit Samaroo and Smooth Edwards. As a pan soloist, he is even more versatile than Robbie Greenidge and Earl Rodney, both of whom are superb talents.

As a composer, however, he may be much stronger and is certainly more prolific than any of his peers. Boogsie simply bubbles with musical ideas, mostly for the pan. So much so, that he has been praised by one adjudicator as the Mozart of steelband music, while another said he had musical diarrhoea. That he over-arranges sometimes is unarguable. So many things are happening in the music at one time that the listener's concentration is stretched to all its limits. One could call it cerebral clutter. His frequent use of the jazz idiom, as Dalton Narine puts it, further complicates his music for those unfamiliar with those moods.

"His work is abstract to many Trinidadians", says artist Leroy Clarke. "We have not yet begun to appreciate that kind of expression coming from one of us", he adds.

That is so true, it hurts. Boogsie's album of a few years ago, for instance, was as excellent a piece of work that we could expect of any major artist. There was an urban contemporary energy in the music on that album that would have made it a certain success had it been produced on one of the major American record labels. Trinidadians paid it scant attention.

It's not difficult to understand why the public and the judges in Panorama '84 were not ready to bow to Boogsie. More than a few people complained that they did not go to the Savannah to hear the kind of music Phase II played. Those same people admitted, though, that the music sounded good to the ear. What they really objected to was Boogsie's attempt to crash their perception of what Panorama is supposed to be. By bringing a mellowness to his rendering of a Panorama tune, Boogsie was asking too much of a very critical audience. He was asking them not to be lazy. They did not buy that.

"Panorama is a music festival in its own way", says Boogsie. "It is there to test the skill of the steelbands and the arrangers". We hope it will broaden to test the talent of composers.

It is obvious, Boogsie is determined to make his point. He knows as much as anyone else that had he chosen to arrange music by the calypsonians these past few years he would probably have had a winner by now. And that's not difficult to imagine, since he has done it in a roundabout kind of way. For the past several years he has arranged for Moods Pan Groove, a Brooklyn-based band of former Starlift, Phase II and Pandemonium players. Not once has he tried to arrange his own composition for the Panorama in Brooklyn. And his arrangement of calypsoes has always matched the level of work one hears on Panorama night in the Savannah.

But, as everyone is well aware by now, that is not enough for someone who started on the instrument at the tender age of four and now can arrange for as many as four bands in one season. This year, in addition to his arrangement of "I Music" for Phase II Pan Groove, Boogsie also arranged Blue Boy's "Lucy in the Savannah" for Fertrin Pandemonium; Kitchener's "Tourist Elsie" for South/Central Zone Champions Siparia Deltones; and Blue Boy's "Fete" for Skiffle Bunch.

He sees arranging a calypso, which he has done numerous times, as a totally different exercise from arranging for Panorama. "I insist on writing pan music for the pan", says Boogsie. "It is an instrument unlike any other and should be treated as such". Boogsie is a musician unlike any other and he should be treated as such. Give him room.