

## A short history of the shiny drum

### How discarded oil barrels evolved into a global musical tradition

*By David Mangurian, Laventille, Trinidad reproduced by Davis Deen aka coco p for Manchester Heritage Week*

There are not many working-class neighborhoods that can claim to have produced an original musical instrument recognized around the world. But Laventille, a suburb just east of commercial Port of Spain, Trinidad, justly prides itself in being the birthplace of one of the most popular musical instruments created in the 20th century—the steel drum or "pan," as it is more correctly called.

Laventille was settled in the mid-1800s by freed African slaves. There, the African tradition of drumming evolved over the years into rhythm bands of young, often paraded the streets during Carnival and other celebrations pounding skin drums and, when those were outlawed, hollow bamboo drums. In the mid-19th century, bands began to use metal objects like garbage can lids, automobile parts, pots and pans, and biscuit tins because they were louder and stronger than bamboo. They evolved into all-steel bands, or "steel bands" by the end of the 1930s.

In 1942 or 1943, according to one legend, a 12-year-old Laventille youth named Winston "Spree" Simon, loaned his large iron "kettledrum" to a friend. When his drum had been beaten concave and had lost the "special" tone Simon liked. He started pounding the under surface of the drum back to its original shape so that the pounding created different pitches or notes. He produced a four-note drum and, by this accident, started the transformation of the steel "drum" rhythm instrument into a melodic one.

According to steel band historian Felix Blake, Simon, using a small oil drum, developed a 14-note pan that caused a sensation when he played it during Carnival held in Trinidad after the celebration was banned at the beginning of World War II. The instrument was quickly copied by other musicians, and Trinidad's steel drum bands soon evolved into music bands.

Next, one of Simon's friends, began using discarded 55-gallon oil drums (the standard for today's pans), which he hammered concave, trimmed, heated to make longer and more able to retain notes in tune, and then hammered from the underside to create convex notes on the concave surface. By 1947, he had produced a drum with two octaves of a diatonic scale.

Chromatic scales were soon developed. In 1951, the Trinidad All Percussion Steel Orchestra (TAPSO), a group of 10 all-star pan men that included both steel and drummers, was sent to represent Trinidad at the Festival of Britain in London. The group, which had increased the range of pans by inventing low-note base pans, played Caribbean music but classical selections as well. The event put pan on the world map, and the group toured England and France and played on BBC radio and television. TAPSO panman Edric Conner wrote back home: "I don't want to hear any West Indian say we haven't got culture."

Today, steel bands have from four to 10 players. Some are orchestras with more than 300 pans spanning five octaves from single "tenor" (soprano) pans of 24 notes to sets of nine bass pans of three notes each played by a single person. Steel bands play music from calypso and jazz to the Beatles and Bach. Since they cannot read music, they memorize their parts, an incredible feat for classical "tunes" such as Rossini's *William Tell Overture* or a Bach fugue. Len "Boogsie" Sharpe is thought to be the world's best pannist, often compared to jazz vibraphone great Milt Jackson. Sharpe can play pan upside down and can harmonize his own melody with a third playing stick.

Pans are tuned in at least 10 different registers—each with its own distinctive "keyboard," or note layout. Some pan manufacturers have steel drums made especially from specially formulated steel. A good chromed tenor pan costs upward of \$750, and a full orchestra can cost more than \$60,000. Most of the large steel bands and orchestras have corporate sponsors.

Despite the cost, there are today more than 190 steel bands in Trinidad (population 1.1 million), according to Internet listings, and more than 800 steelbands in other Caribbean countries, including 300 in the United Kingdom, 240 in the United States and 130 in Switzerland, where 70 percent of the players are women. Pans are played in at least nine countries besides Trinidad. Steelband orchestras have played concerts in New York's Carnegie Hall, Washington's Kennedy Center and the Lincoln Center Art Hall. The "First European Steelband Festival" was held in Paris, France, in May 2000. A world conference on the "Science and Technology of Steel Pan" was held in Trinidad in October 2000. Scientific American magazine has published an article on steel pan physics.

Steel pan players worldwide communicate via the Internet. There are dozens of sites from bulletin boards and individual steelband pages to listings of steel bands, tunings and players by country. Two of the best sites with links to other sites are [www.pantrinbago.com](http://www.pantrinbago.com) and [www.seetobago.com](http://www.seetobago.com). A Swedish site has published a complete manual on how to manufacture and tune a pan ([www.musikmuseet.se/pan/tuning/](http://www.musikmuseet.se/pan/tuning/)).

Trinidad claims to be the capital of pan. At least 15 steel bands have pan yards (courtyards/compounds where band members practice and leave their instruments).

