

The Steelpan, originating from Trinidad, is the only musical instrument invented in the 20th century. Its story is one of oppression, resilience, and triumph...

The steel pan evolved out of earlier musical practices of Trinidad and its invention was a specific cultural response to the conditions present on the island. The enslaved Africans of Trinidad used hand drums for their celebrations, dances and ceremonies and to communicate with each other. Slaves also performed during Mardi Gras celebrations, joining the French that had brought the tradition to the island. However, the British, who took control of the island from French rule, subsequently outlawed the musical form of expression in 1883, since they feared that the passing of secret messages by means of drumming might become the impetus for social unity and revolt among the Blacks. http://www.lafi.org/magazine/articles/steel.html

However, rhythm being the most important element of African-based music, many drummers simply replaced their drums with tunable bamboo sticks that they called Tamboo Bamboo. Tamboo Bamboo was used as an instrument that when pounded against the ground produced a distinctive rhythm. Each group developed its own distinctive rhythmic pattern, which served as group identification. Free Blacks and slaves would participate in stick-fighting dances and other musical manifestations that were considered violent by the British colonial rule, and Tamboo Bamboo was eventually declared illegal. Drumming is, however, ingrained in African cultures, and the people of Trinidad continued to develop instruments to replace the banned ones, including tin cans and woodbarrels.

It was not until the beginning of the 20th century that drums and tamboo bamboos were again allowed, with restrictions, during Carnival time. The elaborate processions of Carnival required elaborate rhythms, and drummers started perfecting their instruments to produce a more varied tonal range.

The year 1938 is generally accepted as the birth of the steelpan, the transition from bamboo to metal. That year, Alexander's Ragtime Band, led by pioneer Carlton Forde, is said to have been the first known band with an ensemble exclusively consisting of steel instruments. http://hotpans.se/pan/pan_history.html



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Seepersad Naipaul on Ellie Mannette

The Trinidad Guardian has log been in the forefront of reporting on culture. Takes from our archives, for instance, once, Ellie Mannette, written in February 1950 by another pioneer, Seepnary 1950 by another pioneer

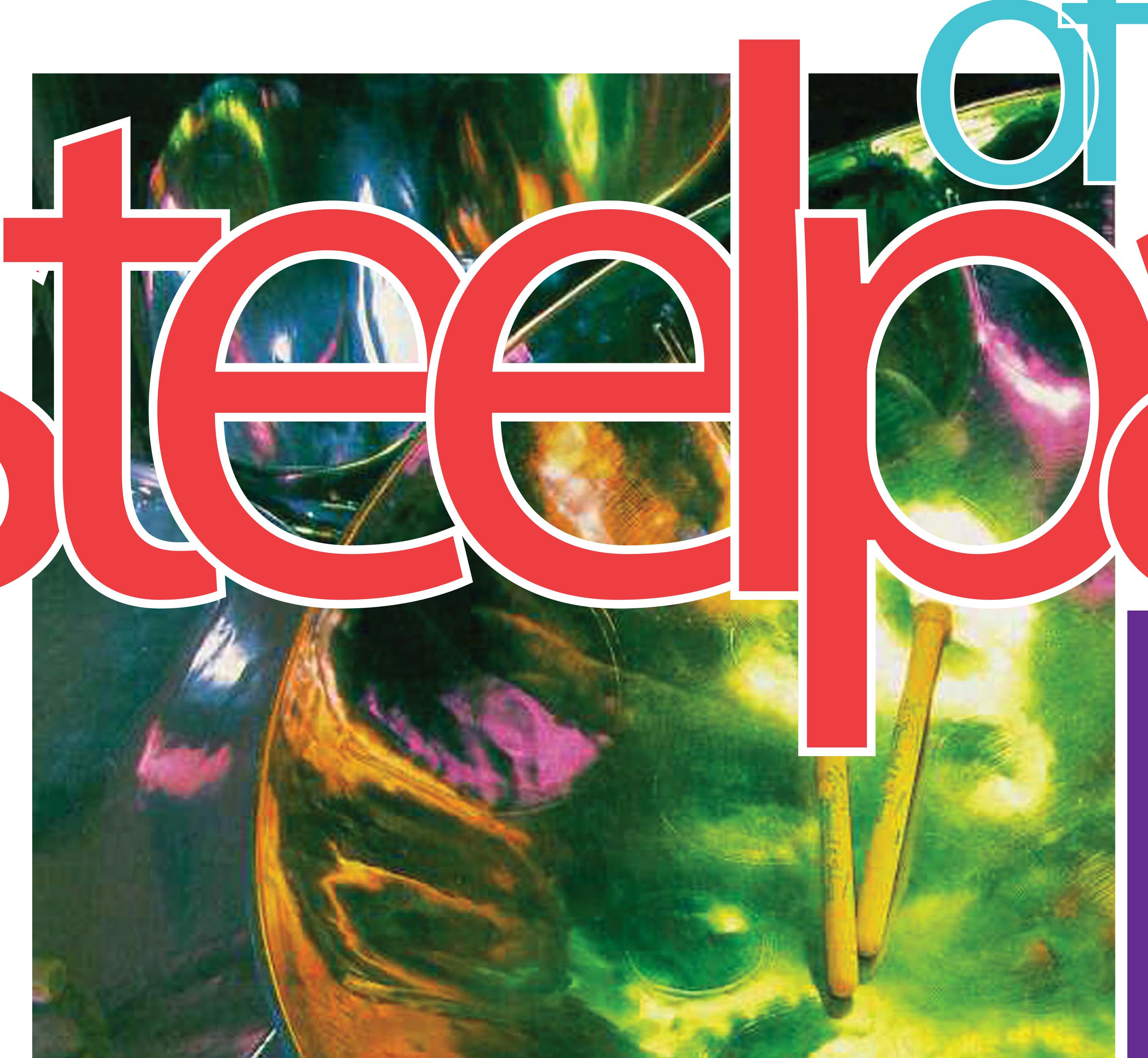


The first true steelpan used by musicians was an empty biscuit container. The next development was the discovery that when you hammered a paint pan out from the inside, different notes could be played on the pan. Soon drummers discovered that bulges of different sizes in the botton of a tin could produce sounds of various pitches. In 1939, a drummer named Winston "Spree" Simon began playing melodies on the first tuned tins. He is considered to be the inventor of the tuned tins. Spree later produced the first convex (dome-shaped) steelpan, however, the pursuit of a wider range of notes produced the development of a concave instrument. Throughout the 1940s, the steelpan had become the preferred Carnival accompaniment of young underprivileged men.

In 1946, Ellie Manette created the first steeldrum in its concave form, made from a steel 55 gallon oil drum. The Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra (TASPO), formed to attend the Festival of Britain in 1951, was the first steelband whose instruments were all made from oil drums. Members of TASPO included Ellie Mannette and Winston "Spree" Simon. As a result of their participation in the festival, the steelpan was strongly identified as an important element of Trinidarian culture. This also greatly enhanced the social "respectability" of the steeldrum.

Today, huge steel band orchestras are common in many Caribbean islands, but the Trinidadians are credited with having been the creators of the steel pan. As Charles de Ledesma and Simon Broughton comment in their essay about Trinidad: "The Trinis put something cheap and abundant to extraordinary good use and created one of the few acoustic instruments to be invented this century."

World Music Rough Guides. London 1994.







1935 - 1939

rival groups.

A gradual change to steel instruments in street bands. 1938 - 1939 are considered to be the "birth" years of the steel drum. Tamboo Bamboo bands finally switching over to steel. Alexander's Ragtime Band, led by pioneer Carlton Forde, is said to have been the first known band with an ensemble exclusively consisting of steel instruments.

1942

Carnivals forbidden during World War II for "security reasons", which gave people more time for acoustic experiments with the emerging "steel drum".

1939 - 1945

The first melody pans with three to eight tones was introduced. The pan crafting process was improved by sinking, grooving and tempering. Sticks damped with rubber tubing were starting to be used. The instruments were grouped into categories as iron, boom, dudup, ping-pong.

1945

In a spontaneous Carnival at the end of the war there were several bands consisting of only steel pans - the first real steelbands.

1946

The 55 gallon oil drum finally replaced the biscuit tin as main raw material. Elliot "Ellie" Manette, was reported to have unveiled the first fourteen-note steel drum with chromatic tones. http://hotpans.se/pan/pan_history.html



Steeldrums are built using sheet metal with a thickness between

0.8mm and 1.5mm. Traditionally, steelpans have been built from used oil barrels. Nowadays, many instrument makers do not rely on used steel containers and get the resonance bodies manufactured according to their preferences and technical specifications. In a first step, the flat sheet metal is drawn into a bowl-like shape (this is commonly known as 'sinking'). This process is usually done with several hammers, manually or with the help of air pressure. The note pattern is then marked onto the surface, and the notes of different sizes are shaped and molded into the surface. After the tempering, the notes have to be softened and tuned (initial tuning). The technician will use the best possible tuning device to correctly tune the steelpan's playing areas to the desired pitch. Often they will use an electronic tuner called a Strobe tuner to assist the tuning of the steelpan.

The note's size corresponds to the pitch—the larger the oval, the lower the tone. The size of the instrument varies from one pan to another. It may have almost all of the "skirt" (the cylindrical part of the oil drum) cut off and around 30 soprano-range notes. It may use the entire drum with only three bass notes per pan, in which case one person may play six such pans. The length of the skirt generally corresponds to the tessitura (high or low range) of the drum.

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