

STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE DESPITE THE ODDS

Reflections on steel

WHEN the steel pan as a musical instrument was conceived and later developed, the microphone was the last thing on the minds of the pioneers of pan.

They never considered how this unconventional innovation would interact with established and developing recording methods. The steel orchestra, comprising approximately 40 players can hardly be considered suited to the usual small recording studio.

The modern practice of recording instruments separately and then mixing them to achieve what the recording would perceive to be acceptable is more suited to the rock band or the small pan ensemble. It

is accepted that the steel orchestra, like its more established predecessor the symphony orchestra, needs to be recorded in an acoustic environment which is responsive and sympathetic, and not one that is constantly conspiring to detract from it.

The Jean Pierre Complex where *Pan is Beautiful V* was recorded can hardly be considered the ideal setting. Traffic noise, disc jockeys blaring away at adjacent venues, camera clicks and even shuffling patrons are so easily picked up through sensitive microphones that are adept at capturing unwanted sounds with as much accuracy and clarity as they do wanted ones. The quality achieved on the three

volumes of *Pan is Beautiful V* is therefore a credit to recording engineer Frank Agarrat and his team, and certainly not to the location.

In order to fill the accepted void in the music world as it relates to recording steel orchestra music, the question of suitable recording venues needs to be addressed. The biggest criticism of recording steel orchestra music has been the inability to achieve something approaching "the real thing". The lack of clarity, separation and a sense of presence have been the main shortcomings. Perhaps we can draw on the experience of others who, in recording symphony orchestras playing classical music, have opted for the use of large acoustic venues such as concert and church halls.

Given a good acoustic hall, in theory it should only be necessary to sit the stereo microphone in a suitable spot in the hall and allow it to capture what it hears.

Making an impressive recording of the steel pan orchestra is an extremely difficult and painstaking exercise. The latest recording of *Pan is Beautiful V*, is no doubt the closest we have come to achieving the desired natural sound.

Looking for a pan recording?

PAN IS BEAUTIFUL V records and/or cassettes are available at the following outlets

- Crosby's Music Centre
- Ibrahim's Record Shop
- Rhyner's Record Shop
- Disco Trak
- The Inn Shoppe — Holiday Inn
- Pat Florist — Piarco Airport
- Airport's Authority — Departure Lounge
- Paperbased — Normandie
- Kam's Record Shop
- Metronome Record Shop
- Off the Wall Record Shop
- BWIA — Tri Stars
- Fine Leather — Piarco Airport