



TG Jun 2, 1987 p.15
ML 1040

Despers rock New York City

PORT OF SPAIN, Trinidad — This is heavy metal, islands style:

The 45 men and two women who call themselves the Desperadoes are standing outdoors on the top of a shantytown hill called Laventille, banging away with rubber-tipped sticks on 44-gallon iron oil drums that have been chopped into various sizes and tuned, according to tradition with chisels and two-pound sledgehammers. The conductor cues them by rapping on a cowbell with a metal washer.

The setup looks like a smalltown toxic waste site, and the music that the band is rehearsing is the kneesup "Can Can" ballet from Jacques Offenbach's comic opera "Orphee aux Enfers."

It should sound like rush hour in a body shop. Or Spike Jones, tongue-in-cheeking his way through a golden oldie. It doesn't. It sounds like serious music, played seriously.

And the Desperadoes, the current top steel band on the island where steel bands were born, play it with the same galloping lyrical abandon that Jacques Offenbach meant when he wrote it 130 years ago.

"I don't know it, man," says David Davies, who for 16 years has played the double

1986 STEELBAND FESTIVAL Champions WITCO Desperadoes caused the skyscrapers to shake in New York City this past week as they excelled in their various performances in the 'Big Apple.'

As a matter of fact after their very first performance they commanded an entire page in the entertainment section of the New York Daily News.

The story, written by Staff writer Bill Bell appeared under the headline "STEELIN" and subhead "Actually, they're called Pan Bands now — and they cook up a storm."

SUB EDITOR Vernon Khelawan in New York for the weekend picked up a copy of that story. It is reproduced her today.

second pan, which has 32 separate notes "I just remember it."

The Desperadoes, who will perform next week at Carnegie Hall, the Apollo, the steps of City Hall and the Brooklyn Academy of Music, are leaders in the Big Band steel bands still play calypso for tourists coming down the gangplanks of the cruise ships calling at Port of Spain. But, more and more, the sound is fuller, richer and more serious.

Once scorned as the music of the ragged underclass, it now enjoys national sanction and international fame. In popularity, it even rivals calypso and the limbo, Trinidad's two other artistic

claims to fame.

Officially, they're not even called steelbands now. The preferred name, bestowed by the government, no less, is pan orchestras because "pan" is the preferred name for the instruments (turned upside down, they do resemble large cooking utensils.)

By whatever name, Trinidad is alive with the sound of ringing metal.

"How many steelbands?" says Pat Bishop, the Desperadoes' conductor, arranger and all-round guru. "Nobody knows. Hundreds."

Sixty-five of them turned up for this year's Carnival season competition, which the Desperadoes, decked

out in tuxedos, won with a spirited mix of rag, calypso and classics.

The Desperadoes, which began as the Dead End Kids just after World War II, produce haunting, exotic harmonies that change with the flick of a wrist from the moody rhythms of, say, the Alexandr Borodin opera "Prince Igor" to the frothy syncopation of the Scott Joplin rag "The Entertainer."

(The name actually was Gay Desperadoes until a few years ago, when Robert Greenwich, the leader, who also is a member of Jimmy Buffett's band, learned that gay doesn't always mean happy-go-lucky).

Among other things, Bishop, a cheerful woman with a master's degree in history, is a musical missionary.

"The thing that interests me most," she says, "is that nobody appreciates the full potential of pans."

The pans range from shallow tenors, which carry the melody, to the full-sized bass drums, which come in six to nine-drum combinations. When they go onstage, the Desperadoes will play more than 100 drums — double guitars, double tenors, double seconds and tenors in rows facing the audience, basses and tenor basses bunched at each end.

Traveling with musicians are two tuners. "They're very important," says Bishop. "A new tenor pan costs \$1,500. Even a bass costs \$800 or \$900. It's cheaper to keep them in good repair and tune."

In fact, one of the most famous tuners, Rudolph Charles, of the Desperadoes, was buried in a steeldrum two years ago — after a marching concert and funeral procession through the streets of Port of Spain.