

Steel Band Maestro Makes Own Instruments And Plays Them

By S. NAIPAUL

Many people look upon the steel band with disfavour, but last night I stood for two hours with the boys of the Invaders steel band, listening to their performance on steel drums. I quite enjoyed myself. I heard the boys produce music that the conventional string orchestra would hardly improve upon.

The band played under a mango tree in a barrack yard on Tragate Road. It was about 8 o'clock. A murky sky bespoke rain; but people kept trickling in. Soon there was quite a crowd.

There were eight players. Each had a steel drum hanging down his side. They were young men in their early twenties, and they looked neat and carefree in shirts and trousers. For a short time they practised simply at random. Each man played upon his drum with a pair of 10-inch-long sticks, elastic-bound at the hitting ends. The elastic tips on the sticks made for resiliency when struck against the drum.

Elliott Manett, leader of the band—called Eli by his friends—said to the group: "Come on, boys, play the rhumba!" Eli himself took up the pingpong—the piano of the steel band; Carlton Drayton handled the kittle, which equated to the saxophone; Murray plied the tune-boom that made up for a middle bass; Vernon sounded the boom—the double bass.

They played "The Street of Laredo."

Then the boys played the tune for the waltz, "Irish Eyes Are Smiling." There followed the music to the hymn, "Come, Holy Father"; and, lastly, they played "God Save the King."

Someone in the crowd called out "Bravo!" and then there was clapping.

booms (whole drums that once contained biscuits), and some 16 kittles; but no pingpong. The music of the pingpong is swallowed in the loud volume of the other drums. The pingpong is for more dulcet effects.

Eli is proud of his drum instruments and has painted them in green and red. In the middle of a kittle he has even carved the figure of a woman with long tresses painted in silver and inscribed "The Fairy."

STEEL DRUM ORCHESTRA

Eli said it takes him at least one week to turn out a pingpong, and almost the same time to complete a kittle. The grooves are roughly a quarter of an inch wide and about one-sixteenth of an inch deep. They are done with hammer and chisel.

"Now you can use a steel band instead of an orchestra, and the steel band will play just the same," Eli said. "We play, for instance, at the Country Club every Monday, and tourists dance to our music. We play also at the Little Carib. Some people condemn the steel bands. The fact is some bands just keep making a lot of noise the whole day. But we play something that one can enjoy."

Eli is a lathe-shop machinist. He lives with his mother, four brothers and four sisters at Tragate Road. He went to an elementary school in town and