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No steel band without the pan tuner

BERT ALLETTE tunes in to
Pan Development Unlimited

WITHOUT labour nothing prospers and without the sweat of the pan tuner, there is no pan. The pan tuner is not often seen but can be heard cutting, hammering and finetuning his instrument with the dedication of a true craftsman.

His skilled hands and his auditory facility gives us that finished product that we all enjoy and which gives us the opportunity to boast of the creative genius of our people.

At the end of Pan Week, Trinidad and Tobago gained an additional six graduates who had gone through intense training under the guidance of tuner Andy Neils.

Neils has been training a new generation of pan tuners under the auspices of Pan Development Unlimited, an organisation committed to the development of the art form to ensure that there is continuity of skills especially when the more recognised tuners are lured to places like Sweden, Japan or the United States.

It is also an avenue for employment opportunities for those who are sufficiently dedicated and wish to become masters of their art.

What are the stages in making a tenor pan? According to Barry Yeates, Project Manager of Pan Development Unlimited, the tuner must first get a good drum and sink the surface area; then draft and countersink the surface of the drum. After this is done, the pan must be grooved.

This is done by literally engraving into the surface of the drum, the curves, circles and straight lines that encompass each note. After being grooved, the surface of the drum is then stretched a bit more and the notes themselves are shaped out. The next stage is to cut the instrument from the drum. When this is done, the pan is placed on a fire in order to temper the steel and make it more malleable.

The pan is then ready for tuning. To look like a quality instrument, it is "chromed" which gives it that attractive silver finish. This is done by a process called electrolysis.

The pan is placed in a chemical solution called the electrolyte and a direct current is passed through the electrolyte coating the pan with chromium, not more than a few thousandths of a centimetre thick.

This improves the appearance, hardness and corrosion resistance of the pan. When this is completed, the pan has to be finetuned before it is released as a finished product.

Last week was Steelband Week and one corporate sponsor, TSTT had made an investment of about \$100,000 as an independence gift to the nation with pan soloists featured in Port of Spain, San Fernando, Tobago and Point Fortin.

Says Yeates: In order for pan to keep on



PDU's Course Instructor Andy Neils (seated second from right), gives some pointers to, from left: Lio Douglas, Frankie Le Maitre, Celia Le Maitre, Kurt Sargeant, Andre Battersby, Marlon Edwards and Barry Yeates, Project Manager. Photo by BERT ALLETTE

the move, more firms with the wherewithal to provide assistance should come forward and give tangible assistance to pan tuning trainees for the specialised training that they require."

At the same time, he was full of praise for Amoco Oil Company, Petrotrin and the Glass Shop for sponsoring this year's seven week programme which drew students from bands such as Renegades, Belmont Fifth Dimension and Birdsong. "Tuners are the life blood of pan," says Yeates, "they may not be on the front line providing the entertainment but the power of the player is through the tuner. The tuner is like the technician behind the scenes and through his labour comes the sweet pleasure of pan."

Many of our tuners have received offers from abroad, some very lucrative and as a result, bands are appearing in every continent.

At a recent speech in Trinidad, the legendary West Indian fast bowler Wesley Hall related that he was in South Africa two years ago and as he strode into the hotel lobby, he heard the sounds of steel pan emanating.

Hall who worked in the Laventille area as a cricket coach after retirement from test cricket muttered to himself that it could be no other than his good friends from "up de hill" and decided to go over to greet the band but suddenly found himself on the receiving end of a well executed Stockholm bouncer, somewhat characteristic of his glory days when he discovered ten white men all from Sweden behind the pans.

Maybe in time we could be sending off

to Sweden for pan tuners if we continue in the present state of inertia by showing lack of concern and support for the pan tuner.

It is well known that we have exported some of our most creative masters such as Ellie Manette, Denzil "Dimes" Fernandes, the inventor of the Bore pan, the U-Bass and the Denryl Bass to the USA, Arthur Culpepper to England and Trevor Kidd to Sweden.

Some of these countries are also sending their own to Trinidad to learn the skill. Japanese piano tuner Naohira Takeda employed with Yamaha, recently enhanced his career by coming to Trinidad for extensive training in pan tuning and on his return to Japan, he will be the resident pan tuner for the Sukiyaki Steel Orchestra, the only steel band in Japan.

It may not remain that way for very long as more Japanese who realise the potential of pan will soon follow Takeda.

Barry Yeates does not want to see what he calls "the further politicising of pan and he is wary of those who use the art form for personal aggrandisement, social mobility or political gain. He sees pan not only as an instrument from which we get those rich vibrant sounds but as an instrument of nation-building, community development, cultural identity and even as a vehicle for establishing good international relations throughout the world.

It also provides opportunities for travel, career enhancement, higher education and personal development. It has stood the test of time, overcoming an enormity of denigration, vilification, and undeserved attempts at its destruction from its unfolding to the attainment of its present status

where it stands like an olympic torch; as a symbol of national pride and unity in the hearts and minds of every citizen. It transcends race, politics, religion, even national boundaries and stands on the cutting edge of innovative technological development.

Women have long been involved in pan but mainly as players. Some are now coming forward to learn the rudiments of pan tuning. Two graduates of Pan Development Unlimited have been Cecelia Le Maitre and Allison Dyer. Not only did they learn well, Cecelia Le Maitre, on her own merit was judged at the most recent course, as the most outstanding student based on discipline, punctuality, attendance, general attitude and the quality of instrument that she produced.

Allison Dyer was also the most outstanding student in her class six years ago. She is a veteran pannist having played with Phase 2 and is today the leader of In-Focus Steel Orchestra, an all female band which practices on Jerningham Avenue in Belmont. Classes were held at the Belmont Junior Secondary School three times a week over seven weeks and three of the graduates will be invited to attend an advanced course at a later date.

Pan Development Unlimited is grateful to the Ministry of Education and the Principal of the school, Ms Maureen Ashby for their support. The location which is ideally suited for the purpose is like the fertile garden, where the cultural seeds are planted and pan rises bearing those amazing sounds that reaches deep into our souls.