

Trinidadian introduces steelband to area

If Cliff Alexis has his way, the Twin Cities may well become a cultural center for the steelband, a music form indigenous to the Caribbean. If what he has accomplished so far is any indication, he might well realize his goal.

In less than four months of teaching at the St. Paul Performing Arts Center, he has molded a group of junior and senior high schoolers into a band, which has already played to several appreciative audiences around the Twin Cities.

The 12-piece band performed at several St. Paul high schools before making their public debut June 3 at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. They were back at the center for a return engagement July 8.

Wherever they perform the reaction is generally the same, according to Alexis. Onlookers are always curious how empty oil drums can produce such music. They also suspect that tape recorders or other musical instruments are hidden under the drums.

To convert the drums into musical instruments, the 45-gallon drums are cut in various sizes and the tops tempered to the chromatic scale in five octaves from bass thru tenor, alto and soprano, Alexis explained.

The steelband, which originated in Trinidad around 1935, is a blend of African and West Indian rhythms, Alexis, informed.

The tourist conceived image of the steelband as a straw-hat wearing banana-leaf attired group, is one Alexis is trying hard to dispel.

The steelband is a viable music form in its own right, which can take its place among any musical art form, he contends. It is the only musical invention of the 20th century, he noted.

Alexis, a native of Trinidad, has had 20 years experience playing the steelband. He has lived in New York City for the last seven years and just moved to St. Paul earlier this year.

He has played the steelband behind such artists as Liberace, Roger Miller and Danny Thomas. He appeared with the Tripoli Steelband of Trinidad during its engagement at the Minnesota State Fair in 1970.

In addition to his teaching job at the Arts Center, a part of the St. Paul School system, Alexis undertakes several engagements around the country. He is currently on a six-week road engagement which includes a stint



Cliff Jr., 5.

Mrs. Alexis is the daughter of John F. Peterson, a long-time resident of Minneapolis. She was born in Philadelphia, but grew up in Minneapolis.

She was graduated from Central High School, attended the University of Minnesota and obtained her bachelor's degree in elementary education from Macalester College. She taught in the New York City school system for several years and was a second grade teacher at Prosperity School in St. Paul last year.

This summer she is teaching summer school at Maxfield and attending graduate school at the College of St. Thomas.

Because of school regulations, the public is not likely to see too much of the high school steelband group. They can only play at school functions and events like the Walker engagement.

Alexis has had several requests from individuals and private groups for the steelband to play for them, and he is actively seeking to get a group of adults together to form a band to fill such engagements.

Alexis lives at 886 Marshall Ave. in St. Paul with his wife, Helen and their two children, Denise, 10 and