

US music professor hails the steeldrum

ILLINOIS, Jan. 28, — "THE MOST unique acoustical instrument invented in the twentieth century," is how Northern Illinois University percussion professor G. Allan O'Connor describes the steel drum.

That's why O'Connor's so happy to have steel drum tuner and player Cliff Alexis at the DeKalb campus this year.

An adjunct lecturer at NIU and native Trinidadian, Alexis is at the fore in the development of "pan," as the steel drum is called in the West Indies.

"In my opinion," says O'Connor, "he's the best tuner in this country."

Alexis came to Illinois last fall, largely due to his long association with O'Connor, who funded the first university steelband in the country at NIU in 1973.

The two men's friendship dates from 1979 when, after hearing Alexis's instruments played by the US Navy Steel Band, O'Connor tracked him down in St. Paul, Minnesota.

"The two of us just clicked," says O'Connor. "It was obvious to me that the guy was a musical genius, no matter what amount of formal musical training he may

have had."

Alexis's genius is now hard at work three afternoons a week in the steel band room in NIU's large Music Building. His instructional approach is different from most American teachers and it hasn't been easy for all students to make the adjustment.

"It's been hard learning by rote," as opposed to reading music, says graduate student Erich Miller. But Miller and other students concur that it is valuable experience for them.

Not As Novelty

"You don't have to worry about reading notes," says sophomore percussion major Lana Wordel, "just about the music and how it feels."

"Your concentration level goes up," says sophomore Joel Davel. "You know the music will stop if your concentration stops." For Davel, what he's learned with Alexis has carried over to other things. "I approach other instruments differently now...with the idea that I'm really going to play them."

All of this is music to the ears of O'Connor, who once was criticised for offering what some professional colleagues saw as a distraction to serious music students.

"It was my intention from the beginning to think of (steel drums) not as a novelty but to have people learn the music of where they came from," he states. "Cliff has tremendous musical abilities in areas most students don't experience."

Alexis originally decided to leave his high

school teaching job in St. Paul and move to DeKalb to devote more time to building, or "tuning," steel drums.

Demand for his instruments has grown over the years and his university steel band contracts alone include building and maintaining instruments for such institutions as the University of Illinois, Indiana State, the University of Akron (Ohio), Brigham Young (Utah) and North Texas State.

Alexis has been a performer since his school days, long before he learned to tune, and his career reads like a catalog of many of the West Indies' most revered steel bands: "Tripoli, Desperadoes and the National Steel Band of Trinidad and Tobago, to name a few."

His zeal for the music of the West Indies (primarily calypso) continues undiminished. "It's always a teaching process — university or no," he says. "The fact that they aren't Trinidadians playing what I want to play doesn't bother me. I can cultivate musicians here just like anywhere else."

The unifying motivation for all that Alexis does is his deep love for the steel drum and its music. He is determined to dispel stereotypes and prejudices that keep people from appreciating a dynamic musical development that is too often "prostituted for its novelty," its bright sound and sunny island connotations played up on for profit.

Asked if he will be in DeKalb long, he replies that he may be if NIU can become a focal point for the development and promotion of pan.

However, he says, with work like his "you can't sit in one place too long. There's a message to be spoken and you have to use a lot of different platforms."