

newsviews

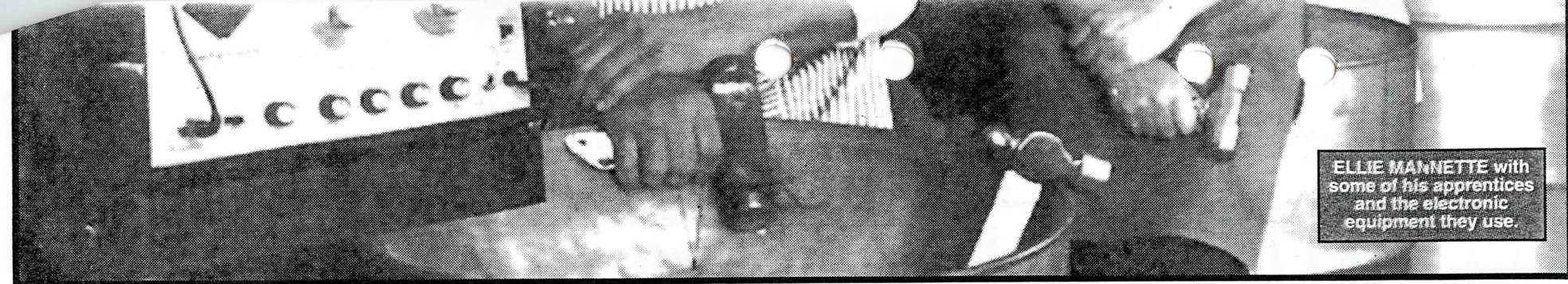
Today

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ELLIE MANNETTE with some of his apprentices and the electronic



ELLIE MANNETTE with some of his apprentices and the electronic equipment they use.

In the USA, Ellie discovered he didn't know it all

By KIM JOHNSON

"WE HAVE developed a language," explained Ellie Mannette, looking over his spectacles.

He was bending over the lower pan from his quadret invention. Surrounding him were the tools of his trade: the range of hammers specially designed and made by the West Virginia University's engineering department; the electronic strobe for sound analysis.

He motioned to one of his apprentices. "This note's floating, it's too wide," said Mannette. "We want to get a darker tone from it. I'll pop it up here and make it longer, pop it up a little bit and shoot for the G."

Then he looked up over his spectacles again. "I have to do it professionally here so the youngsters could learn," he said to me. "When I first came to New York, the people in the schools said I had to use the strobe. I didn't want to. You know how Trinidadians feel they know it all, I was so too — I felt I could do it good enough by ear, but they proved me wrong."

He recalled how they'd asked him to tune his best pan by ear, take as long as he liked, and bring it to be tested. When he did so they showed him how the accuracy of several other instruments — a piano, a xylophone, a trumpet — was confirmed by the strobe. Then they tested his pan. "All my notes were wrong," he says pointedly.

He focuses back on the instrument before him. "I'm trying to get a darker sound here. I created some rings and now I'm having a problem taking it off," he says as much to himself as anyone else, as he taps the note with the hammer. Suddenly he exclaims, "Hendricks!"

A young blond woman looks up, startled. Immediately she smiles and yells back, "Mannette!"

The man for whom steel sings

Exhausting his conviviality, the master returns to talking about tuning, about the temperament of the notes, in which he tries to put as many as five partials. He always puts at least two octaves in any one note, but the harmonics are different. "At one time we were guessing, but now we know it depends on the tones of the metal," he says. "You have to find out what the metal tone is saying and put a harmonic to go with it."

He says that having to teach the art of building and tuning pans to students, all of whom have graduate degrees in music, he has had to hone it to the greatest degree of precision. If he shows them on a blackboard to hit the note here and they'll get an octave, then it has to work when they try it.

"You don't hit the note any more as we did long time — you hit around it and that way you change everything," he says. "As the note begins to 'relate', the overtones play with each other and it sings more."

Much of this is Greek to the layman, but Mannette's chief apprentice Alan Coyle, a music graduate who has worked with Mannette for three years, says that the master craftsman is by far the best teacher he's ever had.

"He always knew what he was doing," says Coyle. "But now he's learnt how to communicate it very clearly and precisely."

This is hardly surprising, because in addition to the apprentices who work with him, the undergraduates whom he teaches during the semester and the 60-odd participants in the annual steelband workshop, Mannette with his team also services over 200 public school, university, community and private bands. So far for this year, Mannette has held five workshops in other universities, and he has written, with Kaethe George and Chandler Bailey, a detailed manual for pan construction.

Taking the art of pan construction and tuning seriously means performing scientific experiments to discover the best steel for different pans, its chemical composition and its ideal thickness. It means designing special tools for making and testing the instrument. In Mannette's work room there are soundproof cubicles where drums are sunk. Earplugs are given to everyone entering the room, so the noise doesn't damage your hearing.

The quality of the programme is shown by the instruments produced by Mannette and his handful of apprentices, for these are the most beautiful pans in the world. Their faces are as smooth and unblemished as the chrome skirt — not a single hammer dent. Acoustically, they all conform to the highest standards of electronic quality control and testing.

The University Tuning Project not only supports itself through the sale of pans, but its success can also be gauged by the special tuning hammers it was able to have designed and which are also for sale, as well as the various packages for the setting up of completely new bands, providing even written arrangements of Panorama tunes, calypsoes, pop, Christmas, and classical music.

"In 1970 when I first met Ellie there were no college steelbands," says musician Jimmy Leyden. "Now there are over 500 collegiate and high school steelbands, and that doesn't count the community bands set up by Trinidadians."

The only thing that remains for Mannette to do, now that he has conquered the US, is to reconquer Trinidad and Tobago — which he might very well do next year, when he plans to take up an invitation from the Culture Ministry and UWI to hold a workshop back home.