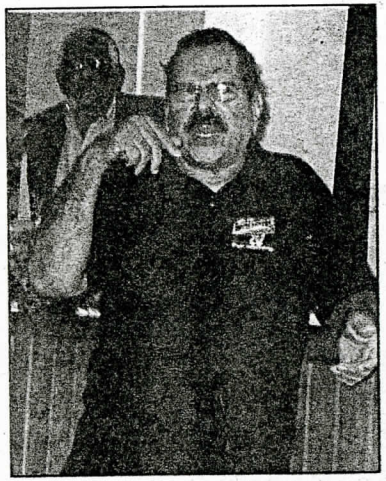
ML 1040

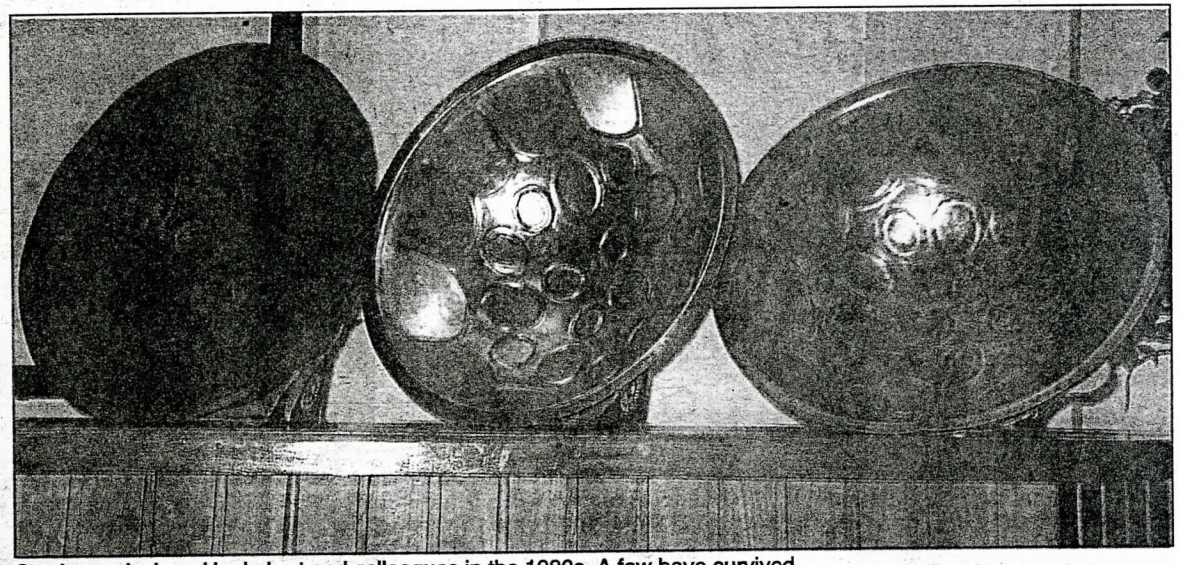
Steelpan history unfolds

Caldeo Sookram

PHOTOS: CALDEO SOOKRAM



Prof Imbert lectures on the steelpan. Behind him is Prof Clement Sankat.



Steelpans designed by Imbert and colleagues in the 1980s. A few have survived.

WHY Steel? Why Drums?

These questions were asked by steelpan researcher Prof Clement Imbert during a lecture on pan at the University of the West Indies (UWI) on Thursday evening.

Imbert also submitted answers on the subject to an appreciative audience at the Faculty of Engineering, UWI.

The audience included students from several faculties, steelpan enthusiasts, steelpan tuners, Pan Trinbago officials and pan researchers.

"For now we can say that it was there, and discarded people took a discarded thing to create a thing highly regarded," Prof Imbert explained.

"Basic people took a basic thing to create a complex instrument to make music, complex in nature but simple to use, to teach," he added.

"You know the history of pan," he told the audience.

To add some colour to his discourse, Imbert played Stalin's 1986 hit "Mister Pan Maker", which he described as one of the best songs on the steelpan.

"So the answer to the question why drum goes much deeper than the definition of a drum," he said.

"The pan is a definite pitch percussion instrument in the idiophone class,' he said.

"The playing surface of the pan is a rigid shell divided into convex sections each of which is a note tuned to a definite pitch and most often delineated by grooves and/or holes," he added.

As a youth, Imbert indulged in a single panside at home in Sangre Grande.

There was the usual intrigue and struggle with pan in those days, so he quit and came to the capital city.

In town, he met calypsonians Cristo, Terror and panmen like Neville Jules, Ellie Mannette, Anthony Williams and Bertie Marshall among others.

"This pan thing," he said "like it following me.."

As a second year student at UWI, he and his colleagues tried to design a yam slicing machine, it turned out to be a steel drum, something like a steelpan.

At UWI Ron Dennis had published A Preliminary Investigation of the Manufacture and Performance of a Tenor Steel Pan in the "West Indian Journal of Engineering".

"As far as I know this is the first thorough scientific research analysis of the pan, certainly the first to be published in a journal," he said.

A hydroforming machine designed by Dennis was made a student.

A Cariri-funded project helped in pressing a steelpan with the machine.

The notes were not perfect, but with tuners like Bertie Marshall and Anthony Williams, perfection was achieved, he said.

It was a project to make pans from brass and stainless steel, sinking these metals and then rolling on a piece of skirt around the instrument, he explained.

Only a few of these pans, three of which were on display, have survived to date.

Ulf Kronman from Sweden spent some time in Trinidad and wrote a book on pan tuning, Imbert noted.

Research papers on the steelpan emerged.

Pan Yard Incorporated of the USA embarked on steelpan research.

"I was concerned Trinidad and Tobago would lose its place as the Mecca of pan, so I started to get involved in pan research again," he said.

Imbert said he returned to researching the pan in 2000.

"We don't have to use a drum to make pan. We could use stainless steel and brass," he said.

"Drums were not made for pans. Making pans from sheets would be faster, more economical and would allow for consistent material selection," he explained.

Chroming is expensive. Materials like stainless steel and brass would eliminate the need for chroming or coatings," he said.