From oil drum to sweet pan

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FIRST of a three-part series on the Nature of Pan by WAYNE CHARLES, 20, of Quarry Road, San Juan. Wayne is treasurer and cello player of The Jammers. He obtained six "O" levels at San Juan Government Secondary and "A" levels in Economics and Geography at St. Mary's College.

THE SCIENTIFIC and artistic process of transforming a crude oil drum into a refined and superb musical instrument is nothing short of genius. And here we must at once pay tribute to Spree Simon, the father of the pan tuning technique.

But before we plunge into the process of tuning a pan it is important to explain what tuning a pan means.

When a pan is tuned all the respective notes which would render that pan harmonious with the rest of the orchestra in a particular key are super-imposed on the pan in question.

All the pans in an orchestra are tuned in one key i.e. in a system of notes or tones definitely related to each other and based on a particular note.

Thus it is important to note that a set key will first have to be resolved and agreed upon before any standardisation and pan industry is set up.

GROOVING

Basically and irrespective of the pan which is being tuned, the delicate and skilful processes involved follow a certain pattern.

The very first process in tuning is sinking i.e. the surface of the pan on which the notes are to be super-imposed must be sunk to the required depth.

In sinking, the pan tuner is increasing the surface area for the notes by expanding or "thinning out" the steel.

This expansion plays a major role in determing the pitch of the sound from the pan in question. The higher is the pitch required, the greater is the depth to which the pan be sunk.

Depth varies between pans and are usually from six to 16 inches measured from the centre of the surface of the pan. It is because of this one finds that the higher note of any pan will be found in the centre of the surface.

Grooving is the next stage in tuning a pan. In grooving, the pan tuner demarcates on the pan's surface the exact position or sector where the note will be placed.

The size and shape of the grooved area must be precise. For, if the note is a fraction smaller or larger than it ought to be then this will affect the type and quality of the sound.

If all goes well up to this point, the pan is then burned. Burning is very important since it prepares the surface of the pan for the notes.

This usually goes up to about 300 degrees for 30 to 40 minutes.

Oil is now thrown on the surface of the pan. This tempers the steel i.e. brings it to the required state and also hardens it. Now the preliminary work has been done and the notes are ready to be super-imposed on the pan.

WAYNE CHARLES

Here the intricacy of the art is most apparent. The pan tuner must concentrate and display his finest ability and taste to capture the various scales and exact tone of each note.

It is now, using his flute harmonica as a guide, the pan tuner sets about to create a musical instrument by laying down precise notes on the surface of the pan.

HARMONY

By hammering the surface patiently and delicately he eventually captures the very tone which he desires. If the qualities of rhythm, melody and harmony are to be found in a steelband, each note must be sweet and precise.

Each pan is now cut (if this is necessary) to the particular size or height required. Cutting is extremely important. One only has to reflect on how ridiculous it would be if the size of the tenor and bass were interchanged with each retaining its original notes.

Thus the size of the note, the depth of the pan and also the height of the pan must all be well co-ordinated if the pan is to be tuned properly.

Pan tuning is our unique art. However at present there is a shortage of pan tuners.

If this art is to live on and continue to develop there is an urgent need for more education, experimentation and innovation in this area.

One can only hope that as we mature and develop as one people we will ultimately achieve these ends.