

# From rote to reading

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new-found respect — some more than others, perhaps. Those who are definitely among the pleased lot are those recent graduates of the first two courses in sight-reading for pannists conducted by the Ministry of Youth, Sport, Culture and the Creative Arts at the University of the West Indies' Creative Arts Centre.

The course/workshop which was designed to educate the pannist in interpreting musical scores was the dream of the ministry's Steelband Development Officer, Leon "Smooth" Edwards, and others in the ministry. But though it has long been a dream, it was only this year that "Smooth" was able to make the project a reality. According to "Smooth" who is also the assistant musical director of Catelli Trinidad All Stars Steel Orchestra, last year a determined effort was made to get the project on stream, but this met with the usual constraints of getting a budget and a venue. However, this year Rawle Gibbons, director of the Creative Arts Centre at UWI, offered him the use of this venue three times a week from 9 am to noon and having decided to invite the course participants to provide their own instruments, stands and sticks, "Smooth" was ready to lift his baton.

"This course was always a dream of mine and I had a strong desire to get it off the ground. I had already experimented with members of All Stars and as far as I am concerned you don't have to have a music school to teach music; you could teach it under a tree. I also knew that it would be a long wait to get the ministry to provide instruments, this was why it was decided to enroll representatives from the various steelbands who would be able to borrow band instruments and equipment," said "Smooth".

He added: "When I was a pannist, I always had the feeling that something was missing. Learning by rote made the pannist seem so stereotyped. They always have to wait on the arranger to come and show them what to play so I knew that pannists have the same desire as myself. I also believe that pannists are more ready now to accept formal music training. They are beginning to see the pan as an instrument and would like to know how to interpret a musical score."

"Smooth's" introduction to formal music training was through All Stars' musical director Jerry Jemmot.

"I started learning through Jemmot and by the 1970s had begun arranging for the band. I then went on to Florida where I did a percussions course that formally introduced me to little things that I had not learnt from Jemmot. The course went into more detail and I graduated from having a layman's knowledge to more formalised knowledge."

The All Stars "Panorama" arranger explained that Jemmot is still responsible along with himself for teaching the band's members a basic interpretation of music. He said Jemmot's practice was to give each member of the band's stageside, copies of musical scores, which was why they were able to learn classical pieces quickly.

"For instance All Stars' stageside took one night to learn the test piece in the last Steelband Music Festival. It would take other bands longer learning by rote."

But being musically proficient has its disadvantages as well, and as "Smooth" states: "The All Stars' stageside members have become so dependent on scores, they would not put the extra effort required to learn the piece. They are now being ordered to put aside the scores and look up at the conductor."

With the conviction that his job as steelband development officer is to promote not just the development of the instrument, but



Nylah Ali

the player too, "Smooth" was one of the officials of a panel that chose the first course participants. Other officials came from the steelband organisation, Pan Trinbago, and fellow officers at the ministry. Only players of

tenors, double tenors and double seconds instruments and with at least two years' stage-side experience were considered and a final assessment was made by Louise McIntosh, principal of the Pan Pipers School of Music.

"This first course was hand-picked and while it was a positive step for the pannist, it was an entirely new discipline. Whether that pannist had been playing for 10 years or one year, everybody had to start from the basics."

Commenting on the performance of the first course participants, the tutor said: "It had its fair share of failures. A teacher can only teach so much but it depends on what the individual puts into the course, that he or she gets out of the course. The overall top scorer of the first two classes was Noel La Pierre of Phase II Pan Groove. (See sidebar) He got an "A" grade and scored 91 points. But he was a keen player and paid full attention. It was evident that he went home and practised what he had learnt. He had a genuine interest. Another player who had talked his way into the course and who had a difficult time-keeping up with the class, persevered and in the end was able to get a decent grade. The attitude of the player is what is important."



As course tutor, "Smooth" said his aim was that when the course was concluded, the participants would be able to speak in musical language.

"Pannists must be musically literate. Other musicians have always had the advantage on us because they can read. But now that the novelty has worn off and we are thinking of the pan as a serious instrument, we must make sure that Trinidad is the leader in the pan world. We must educate our pannists so that they can talk, speak and relate musically."

At a graduation ceremony held for the course participants recently, "Smooth" noted that the acclaimed musicians who were present and who saw an exhibition of the graduates interpreting musical scores, were impressed.

"They knew the value of what they were seeing and hearing and many of them offered their services towards further projects. As music teachers they realised that pan is ready for scoring and grading."

Basking in his success, "Smooth" added that an intermediate course for those graduates who gained "A"s and "B"s would be held at the end of this month and an advanced course is scheduled for next year. A further elementary course is also scheduled for April next year or soon after Carnival celebrations.

In addition, the steelband development officer and his colleagues in the culture ministry and the education ministry are looking at incorporating the teaching of the steelpan in the school's syllabus.

"We are projecting a syllabus of pan music, the same as you would have for the piano or any other instrument with a theory and practical examination. This means that the pan would have to be graded and that is what we are working on right now so that in time we would be sending examiners abroad to grade pan students, in the same way other foreign examiners visit here to grade our music students."

If this comes to pass, and things are certainly looking positive, we may yet be beating our chests for a long time to come.

"Once long ago  
Not so long ago  
Ah man take ah pan  
Wit' hammer in he han'  
Cool so he invent something new.

...An' he heated it an' he beat it,  
An' he stretch it an' he mark it,  
An' de pan start to make ah new soun'.

...Was ah do-re-mi, an' ah me, re, do.  
Dat was all he could make it play.  
But it soun' so sweet  
Dat he take it in de street  
Was the fus time dey hear pan play."

— Excerpts from Paul Keens-Douglas's "Pan Rap" in his collection "Is Town Say So".

**A** BEAUTIFUL narrative whether told in prose, poetry or lyrical song. And like all good stories, the tale of pan contains all the ingredients of a good storyline — the evolution, the struggle, the conquest, the glory.

Today while there are still the obvious drawbacks, the instrument that is boastfully ours is gleaming with pride as its practitioners take it into hallowed concert halls and institutions worldwide. And what of these practitioners? They too are feeling the effects of this

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