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Pan greats come together for West Virginia workshop

Playing one for Ellie



ANDY NARELL playing Ellie Mannette's newest pan invention, the quaduet.

IT WAS near the end of the first half of the show that the old southern lady to my right leaned over and spoke.

"Ah doan know what yew think of this burt I find it's great!" she'd felt compelled to whisper in the dark to the stranger sitting beside her, so surprised was she at how the ensemble of students were performing the Eagles tune "I Can't Tell You Why" on pan.

It was a good choice of tune for the middle-aged, conservative audience from Morgantown, and also for both the novice players and the virtuoso Ken Philmore.

This was the concert that climaxed West Virginia University's Fourth Annual Steel Band Workshop, and was a celebration of the 50th anniversary of Ellie Mannette's first tuning a 55-gallon oil drum in 1946.

Mannette, the captain of Invaders until he left Trinidad in 1967, never to return, has been acknowledged as the most important innovator in the steelband movement. It was Mannette who sank the pan into a concave shape, it was he who began wrapping sticks with rubber, and it was he who popularised pans made from 55-gallon oil drums in 1946 — an anniversary celebrated this year throughout the US with steelband concerts and workshops in a dozen states.

West Virginia University's one-week workshop had grown from ten to over 60 participants in four years, and for the Golden Celebration the students were divided into three ensembles and instructed by Ray Holman, Ken Philmore and Jeff Narell, Andy's brother.

The show had opened with Narell's group playing a short piece by Hugh Masakela, "Grazin' in the Grass". To Masakela's simple melody Narell added a funky beat, himself taking charge of the percussion, to set some of these old southern white people swaying.

"He was soooo good!" said Ravita, Holman's companion, about Ato Boldon's performance half an hour earlier in the 100-metre heats.

"I'm proud of that group — we've only been together for four days," said the curly-haired Jeff Narell, with his drooping moustache and warm, easy manner. "This week has been a heartfelt experience."

Narell played the Brazilian "Zazueira" with a smaller ensemble, dominating the group with his improvisation on the double seconds. Then Ray Holman came on stage.

Holman had written two pieces for Mannette, and he launched into "Meet Me in Morgantown" — a cheerful, slightly jazzy piece. Although the night before at Ali Baba's restaurant Holman had taken a turn to ramajay on the double seconds, for his own song he retreated to the back of the band to keep time with Narell.

Later Holman told me, "I only know this man (Narell) for a week and I feel like he's my brother."

It was a sold-out house at the Creative Arts Center's opera theatre, with only standing room for many. A group of about six Trinidadians, led by a tall Indian man, bobbed their heads and bounced shoulders, but these West Virginians are less exuberant. The fat lady next to me remonstrated with her two-year-old son, who insisted on dancing to the music on his chair. Eventually, unable to control the child, she left with him.

Holman's piece was followed by George Benson's "Breezin'", with Philmore positioning himself in the front of the ensemble. The crowd was excited and cheered enthusiastically when the adolescent Alicia Davis performed a simple solo, so Philmore went one better and silenced the band to run up and down the chromatic scale at lightning speed in a long solo before the song's final bars.

The crowd went wild and Philmore, bald head glistening in the spotlights, looked fit to burst with pleasure.

Between tunes there were brief remarks by staff of the workshop, but the turnover was rapid and no excitement was dissipated between songs. Just before Philmore returned with his ensemble for "I Can't Tell You Why", the old white lady shuffled to the seat on my right, from which the little dancing boy had been removed by his embarrassed mother.

"Ah doan know what yew think of this burt I find it's great!" she said to me. I looked around at this audience of middle-aged to elderly white Morgantonians and true, they were discreetly tapping their feet or nodding their heads.

Holman's beautiful "Commemoration", dedicated to Mannette, followed, then, after an inter-

mission, came an excerpt from Andy Narell's haunting, introspective "Songlines".

Narell had only arrived that evening so the band had been rehearsed by Darren Dyke, a staff member of the project.

"Someone up front will have to keep nodding so you could follow the time," he'd proposed. "It would look stupid to have a conductor."

It was decided a drummer would keep time, because the tune's overlapping rhythms were confusing for the newer players. "We call it 'Wronglines'," joked tenor player Shelly Irvine at the rehearsal, and true, in the show even the drummer lost time and had to stop briefly, although the tune's lyricism still emerged powerfully.

Narell's ensemble then launched into a simply arranged "Hold On To Your Man/Margie" medley and the Trinis behaved as if they were in the North Stand.

Then came the big moment when Mannette was handed a Pan Ramajay plaque, and he unveiled his new quaduet set of four pans for Andy Narell to essay a tentatively solo "Songlines". Narell had never played the instrument before and couldn't move smoothly between the double seconds and the lower pans. Still, he was warmly applauded and he moved over to lead Holman's arrangement of "Outcast" on an ancient tenor pan which made him skip the higher register.

The show closed with Philmore's group rendering "Old Lady Walk a Mile and a Half", into which was spliced a funky "On Broadway" — the high point for many in the audience.

To me, however, the sublime moment had come long before, during Ray Holman's "Commemoration".

"I'll go back to when I was 14 and I was in high school and it wasn't good to be seen going into a panyard," recalled Holman in his introduction to the tune. "Every afternoon I passed by and one day I entered and there I saw Ellie Mannette tuning a pan. He was wearing cream shoes, socks, cream pants and bare back."

Mannette stopped the panmen from chasing off the young Holman from the Invaders panyard, and he taught the boy how to play, beginning with the correct way to hold the sticks to get the best sound.

"When he invited me here I thought, what can I do? I cannot tune," said Holman, "so I wrote a piece in his honour."

And the band launched into his specially-written tune of such sheer uptempo joyfulness that even the most intense players, the most wooden listeners, couldn't help but smile with the pleasure.

— Kim Johnson travelled to West Virginia courtesy Petrotrin, sponsors of the Invaders Steel Orchestra.

By
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