

THE GOOD

As told by **ELLIE MANNETTE** to **ANDY NARELL**

STEELBAND as we know it today has come a long way. But while some of us may remember bits and pieces of how it all began and others would have heard tales about it, very few know of the actual beginnings of the steelpan.

One of the first panmen Ellie Mannette, who is almost a recluse when it comes to being interviewed, recently sat down for a detailed interview with one of today's panmen - American Andy Narell.

Narell who is now known to local audiences through his appearances at the last Panorama competitions in which he played for both Phase II Pan Groove and the AMOCO Renegades and before that through a "pan shoot-out" with Len "Boogie" Sharpe, did the interview at Mannette's New York "pan laboratory."

Being the generous person that he is and one dedicated to the promotion of the steelband, Narell shared this interview with SUN entertainment reporter **PETER BLOOD**.

Today we begin serialising that interview and will continue every Friday until the evolution of the percussion instrument we taught the world has been traced.

MANNETTE: Let me give you a little history of this art form called the steelband. It originated in Trinidad which is way in the southern Caribbean. Steelband was born from the many ethnic groups which make up the population of Trinidad. It came about in the year 1935. The person I really know to have started this art form is a gentleman by the name of Alexander Forde. In those days, throughout the Caribbean in general, everybody had aliases for other people. In those days they called him "Hamburger."

I was nine years (1935) when the art form began, I was too small to jump along at the time but, two years went by, and at the age of 11, I thought that I was old enough to take a part in it. I started tramping the streets with the big guys and playing the small drums which they were playing then.

Q: What were you guys doing in the street? What was your first pan experience?

A: Well, it was exciting because we switched from the bamboo joints. Prior to the steelband, we had the bamboo which you call bamboo tamboo and they played these bamboos with bottles and spoons, and break-

drums of all kinds, creating whatever rhythmic noises they could have created to parade and sing. When that was outlawed in the early '30s and the steelband came in 1935 it was something new. It was exciting, it was dynamite and you could just imagine the tremendous impact it had on my mind then. So I really ... it hooked me and I am still hooked at this time.

Q: What were they playing at that time?

A: They weren't playing any song. It was just a matter of rhythm which we call contrary beat and what they were doing was singing or what was called at that time "lavway," which is something like what the calypso music is now; but it was more folk music at that time. Simple calypsoes with only two lines - nothing like what they have today - and playing the drums as rhythm, created a different sense completely from what we had before, as it is completely different from what exists today.

Q: Can you describe what the instruments looked and sounded like, the very first instrument that is?

A: Well, it was just a paint tin, a small

“Steelpan came about in the year 1935.”

grease barrel that someone picked up off the street corner, or wherever they found one. They knocked the bottoms up instead of down. They knocked it from inside out and played on the top of those cans with pieces of broom handles, or any piece of hard dowl they found; any piece of wood for that matter. It was more of a rhythm than music notes, something more like a "toc toc" instead of musical notes. No melody and no notes.

After two to three years of that tremendous amount of noise and whatever we called it then, the guys started denting the top of those convex with the broom handle, putting little dents on them. Each time they dented an area, they received a sound. Nothing in formation, because you just hold the top of the tin, and dent it wherever you could have accommodated a dent on the surface. In between there you got several little sounds. Nothing you could have controlled, to say, pitch wise. So in that area of discovering



This exclusive SUN photograph showing some of the first panmen playing biscuit tins with sticks should invoke much nostalgia among old pannists.

Supposedly taken around the early 40s, this picture — given to Andy Narell by Ellie Mannette — shows

young Mannette (second from right) tuning some of the first pans as we now know the instrument to be. Mannette, a pioneer of the steelband art

form, now resides in the United States where he tutors and continues experimentation with the instrument.

The story of pan

something new, everyone was trying to find something more effective than the other person.

A gentleman by the name of Spree Simon, managed to obtain about four to five notes on this convex top while denting several areas. Simon was then able to play a little folk song called "River Vine Corali." That took about five to six years to accomplish, because

most of that time was spent with only rhythm, using bass "kittle" for the bass line. The one note bass "kittle" used to go "boom de dum, boom de dum." We also used a biscuit drum to slap, to hit the ... for that matter we used to wrap our hands with a kind of towel and beat against the barrel — I mean the biscuit drum — and it gave a deep sound like a "boom boom." So you called that

the boom, and for the bass we used the bass kittle. We gave it a silly name — we called it the "dud-up."

So okay, we had the "dud-up," the "boom," and all those melody lines. The high notes we called melody line at that time, just doing a lot of contrary beats to accommodate this rhythm pattern, to go up the streets and sing. Spree Simon came up with a little

melody playing from the drums and that was not done before 1941. He came up with the "River Vine Vine," one, in that same year, I decided 'wait!', I going to sink my barrel down. Instead of having the convex top, I sunk my top in. I got the concave and I reversed the process by putting the little humps up instead of how they had it before.

And from 1941-45, during which time the

OLD DAYS

celebrations were all abandoned due to the war that was taking place in Europe, we did a lot of experimenting. The size of the drums grew from 14 inches across to, I think, 16 or 18 inches across. We began using the sweet oil drum, which was a 35-gallon barrel then. With those 35-gallon barrels, we could have gotten a particular type of drum which we called the "ping pong" and, from that we were able to get as many as nine notes.

From what Spree Simon did with the "River Vine" song, played on a comparatively small drum, accomodating four to five notes, we were now getting nine notes, using the 35 gallon barrel. Now having the "ping pong," we took the "boom" that we was playing with our hands, cut it in different ways and we created what we called a "tune boom."

The same biscuit drum that we slope like this, we indented it with the same broom handle and a hammer, creating the "tune boom" with four or five notes. From the "tune boom" we arrived at the "cello." So we then had the "tune boom," the bass "kittle," and the "slap boom" as a deeper sound.

“I wrapped my sticks with rubber in 1943 and everybody jump right in and started wrapping.”

There was also the "ping pong" which, after adding some lower notes, we eventually arrived at the single second and a single guitar. But, all of them were actually done with the 35 gallon barrel.

Okay that was up to 1945, and during the latter of that year, with what we called V.J. — (Victory Over Japan), the celebrations started again. The bands came out on the streets for the first time after four years and, by that time, we were playing several melodies, coming from those 35 gallon barrels. During that period we had a lot of contests taking place all over the country with those small drums. Roxy Theatre, Skinner

Park and auditoriums across the nation became popular for the steelband. With the coming of '46, we had a contest in a stadium they called Harris Promenade Stadium and I took part in the contest. I decided, well I am going to show up with the big drum because I had in mind for several years while using the small drums, that I would tune a big drum. I never told this to anybody until the time I was really prepared to do it. I wanted to build a big drum so I started building it secretly, unknown to everyone.

First and foremost, I told them I was going to build a 55-gallon barrel. I did not call it a 55-gallon. I just said I am going to build a big steel drum from that barrel out there, and no one felt it could be done. Everyone felt it was too big and too heavy, we couldn't operate it so. Anyway, the competition was going to take place at Skinner Park, Harris Promenade. At the same time, I couldn't remember exactly, so I went secretly behind the pavilion in the Oval and I worked on that drum every day - from work, from school, whatever I did, and at a certain time, the competition came up and I had the drum all completed and I learnt two songs secretly, unknown to everyone. I learnt the two songs called Brahms Lullaby and Laura. Those were the two songs I learnt on my big pan. Prior to that we were using the sticks on the drums and everything had a lot of impact and there was a very harsh tone coming from the top of those drums. Then in 1943 I could remember exactly, I used **RUBBER TIPS**. I wrapped my sticks with a bicycle tube. I cup it and I wrap it. Before we were using the same broom handles and different hand mallets and we found that the cushion was not good enough to give a good sound. So what we used to do at one time was to take a hammer and take a stick. For that matter we cut black sage sticks - that is a kind of tree we have in the Caribbean which could bend like a whip. We called tamarind rods another type of stick that could bend a lot. We took the coconut limbs, the coconut branch, and stripped it in different ways and took those sticks and pounded it with a hammer until you get a kind of fibrows end and we played with those sticks on the drum. And in playing with them, we still could not get it right because it was too soft. At one time, it was too hard, next time we had it too soft. So I decided I was going to wrap my sticks with rubber and I wrapped it in 1943 and everybody jump right in and started wrapping.

Next week we continue the story of pan and explore the beginnings of the cello pan.