

Cover Story

IT'S A VERY IMPORTANT EXHIBITION, WE WANT THE PEOPLE OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO TO COME SEE AND LEARN ABOUT OUR NATIONAL INSTRUMENT

Nigel Telesford

PAN tuner Marvin Connor has been tuning pans for over 20 years, but after explaining the process involved in the art last Friday evening, he confessed it was the first time he had been asked to do so by a native of Trinidad and Tobago. Yes, the pan is our national instrument and has long been touted as "the only acoustic musical instrument invented and accepted worldwide in the twentieth century", but how many of us really know the history of the instrument and how it has evolved?

As we celebrate our 48th year of Independence, the Steelpan Tuners Guild of Trinidad and Tobago, in association with Pan Trinbago is hosting an enlightening exhibition entitled "The Evolution of Pan" from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily in the foyer of the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago, Independence Square, Port of Spain.

"We got this opportunity because August was declared pan month," explained interim president of the Tuners Guild, Fitzroy Henry. "So we teamed up with Pan Trinbago to host this exhibition in order to shed some light on our national instrument, to showcase the work done by tuners and the plight that we are facing due to a lack of raw materials and investment in the industry.

"Since 1973, we had a discussion with, the then Prime Minister, Eric Williams and laid the groundwork for the establishment of an academy through which we could streamline the manufacture and export of these instruments. We have all accepted the fact that we will not have oil and gas forever, the pan and the culture is what we need to develop and industrialize in order to sustain this country."

Henry officially opened the exhibition last Friday, along with Pan Trinbago President, Keith Diaz and Central Bank Deputy Governor, Operations, Joan John. Specially invited guests were entertained by 16-year-old pan prodigy, Keisha Codrington, who was later joined by her father Cary they played before, during and after the official function.

Diaz said, "We are pleased and thankful to be working with the Central Bank and the Tuners Guild in order to showcase our national instrument at this time and present its origins and evolution to the public. The pan was officially declared the nation instrument of Trinidad and Tobago on August 30, 1992, so we want to honour this achievement by inviting the public to come and see how it all began. Here we have all the tools used to shape and tune the pan, we have the Tamboo-Bamboos, as well as a few of the first pans, which were convex rather than concave... It's a very important exhibition and we want the people of Trinidad and Tobago to come and see and learn about our national instrument."

Outlawed by the British colonial government in 1783, drums had previously been used as a form of communication among slaves for many years. The invention of the pan was a cultural response to the conditions present on the islands of Trinidad and Tobago at

the time and represents the evolution of the drumming traditions of both Africa and India. The first instruments developed to replace the drums were sticks made of bamboo called Tamboo-Bamboos. These were hit onto the ground and with other sticks in order to produce sound. Tamboo-Bamboo bands also included percussion supplied by the use of a bottle and spoon.

By the mid-1930s, bits of metal percussion were being used in the Tamboo-Bamboo bands, the first being either the automobile brake hub, "iron" or the biscuit drum, "boom". The former replaced the "bottle-and-spoon" and the latter the "bass" bamboo that was pounded on the ground. Throughout the 1920s and 30s these bands flourished, but by 1940 the world was changed by a dark, destructive force and plunged into the most notorious period of the twentieth century. Unwittingly, the events of that era would provide

the beam that lit the way to the discovery of a new musical instrument. When Adolf Hitler drew Europe into World War Two, the British colonial

government summarily banned the Tamboo-Bamboo bands, forcing the people to look for other ways to make merry. Readily available were steel drums discarded by the oil refineries of the island. As they banged against the flat surface of the drum, the fun seeker accidentally stumbled upon a sound that would lead to further experiments, and consequently: the birth of the pan.

"We need the population to become more aware of our rich cultural history," said Diaz, "and to recognise how valuable our contributions are to the world. Out of the oil we created something even greater, an instrument that is more powerful and potentially even more lucrative than the oil and gas which will surely come to an end some time. The pan is included on our dollar note and we are extremely proud of our Central Bank Governor because he came from the bowels of the steelband movement. It is therefore extremely significant that we are hosting this exhibition on the grounds of the institution that regulates our money because we believe that the pan is the key to sustaining our economy in the future."

For more on the pan, please visit "The Evolution of Pan" exhibit now showing daily at the foyer of the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago or log on to: www.pantrinbago.co.tt.



SWEET PAN: Father and daughter pan duo, Cary and Keisha Codrington. —Photos: ANISTO ALVES