

The Story Of Pan, Part VII

A place for pan

CLASSICAL music has brought out the best in the steelpan, according to **ELLIE MANNETTE**, one of the original pan-nists who continues his discussion on the evolution of the steelband in this exclusive interview with **ANDY NARELL** in New York.

Q: Do you think steelpan would have a place in a symphony orchestra? Do you envision that?

A: Yes I envision that but it would take much more than what we have today because a symphony orchestra may call for certain things that the drums might not be able to accommodate right now. With regard to the resonance, the flow of notes, the perfection of notes, things like that — a symphony might call for that and we might not be able to accommodate that on the drums at present. But I think it will come to that.

Q: Do you ever wonder what you would be doing now if you hadn't gotten into pan?

A: Well, I thought probably I might have been...I would have been an engineer. I would have been working in machinery because I love that and I think that is what gives me a lot of insight to work the steel-drums this way. I love a lot of metal work; I love to work with my hands and that is what I would be more or less doing today. But I never really gave it a thought because I never said "well I wonder what I would be doing today if I wasn't in the steel-drums". It was so long ago that I started, I forgot what I would like to be doing.

Q: How do you figure you survived financially all the years — the first 20 years of your involvement in this? How did you make a living, the first 20 years of your involvement in this?

A: That is a most important question. That is exactly why I said a while ago that you have to have the dedication and the obsession to do what you did because it was...financially it had no benefits whatever. You could not make a living by tuning a steel-drum because they were going for peanuts. You had to work extremely hard, I think even harder than now because at that time you didn't really know exactly what you were doing to accomplish the kind of quality you wanted to accomplish — you were struggling to do it. So the drum was really harder to make at that

time. Most people might feel oh, it was easier to make then but to accomplish something good, reasonably good, it was much more difficult and you had to struggle and guess more than what you do today. Today you have a lot of finesse and perfection. You have more or less mastered it. So you know exactly where you're going. It might take some time but it is not quite the struggle that it used to be and now you can make more money. So I have to say again that it was an obsession and dedication and something you wanted to do. There was no money in it; none at all.

Q: What do you think the role of classical music has been in the development of this art?

A: Classical music has brought out the best in the steel-drum and the steel-drum player because the co-ordination, the perfection has to be so meticulous. It has to be done without a score sheet and matched against those guys who play classical music at concerts and festivals. You have to develop every technique possible to make those instruments answer you the way it is supposed to be. And as a result, the guys have developed the technique and the craft, the type of sticks they use, the mobility of how they move around the drum to get to and from notes — it has more leaps and bounds than festival playing.

Q: What did your mother think about what you were doing?

A: Well my mother never had too much to

say in anything I did but my sisters and father did not want me to be in the band. My mother was a very laidback person and she did not say too much about what was going on as the noise never bothered her. But my father created a problem for us all the time, up to recent times for that matter when I was at home. He liked pan but it bothered him quickly. He would complain that the noise was too much and "stop, you practice too loud, something like that". And my sister never wanted me to be in it because they felt well...they looked at it as being hooligan and vagabond to be in the steel-band. My other relatives, other than my mother, never wanted me to be in the steelband. And we were ruled by the British at the time — up to 1962 I think it was — and we in the Caribbean, although the calypso was there, we listened to a lot of English classics like waltzes and things like

that. And I always listened to a lot of beautiful music. Up to the present if I am driving around or at night in my bed, I never listen to calypso and pop, I listen to beautiful music, you know, violins and all this type of things. During the period that I was young and I was listening to the music, I heard voices in the music. I would say: "Wow, listen to that!" I could hear the violin, I could hear the bass and hear the voices in between there, you know. And I will like to get that kind of voice on the steel-drum. How do I get that? What shall I create to get that voice? And those were the things that were on my mind. To come up with cellos and tenor basses and I think it was the obsession of thinking about those things — the more you think about it, the more ideas would get to your mind. And I was obsessed. I dreamt it.

