

Steel drum inventor is

'Stradivarius of Steel'

By JEFF YOUNG

THE steel drum may have come from the islands of the Caribbean but many who want to learn to play or build the instrument are travelling to the hills of Appalachia. The man known as the "Stradivarius of steel" has put down roots in West Virginia where he's teaching the next generation of steel drummers.

There's not a palm tree in sight in Morgantown, West Virginia. The only sand is on the banks of the Monongahela River. But this Appalachian college town has become a second home to the Caribbean's best known instrument.

That's because the man who created the modern steel drum makes his home in Morgantown. Trinidad native Ellie Mannette got a job teaching one semester at West Virginia University. That was 10 years ago.

"I am here to this day. For some reason this small state has generated the students that I was looking for. Because I want to pass my skills on," he says.

play more notes. "So I said well if we can get a few notes on a little can like this maybe we can get more notes on a bigger drum. And so it gradually went on like that until this one, the first one ever in what we call the modern steel band, the 55 gallon drum, is this one right here in 1946," he said.

"It can play like," he says playing a scale on a drum, "You see that's what it was. And this was a great achievement at the time."

He had taken a sound that existed only

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in his mind and made it solid as steel. And in the process, a crude folk instrument became modern and melodic. But that was just the start.

Over next 50 years Ellie Mannette developed seven versions of the instrument to give the steel band a full voice, from the high ring of his original pans to the rumble of the bass.

So the instrument now has an orchestra's range.

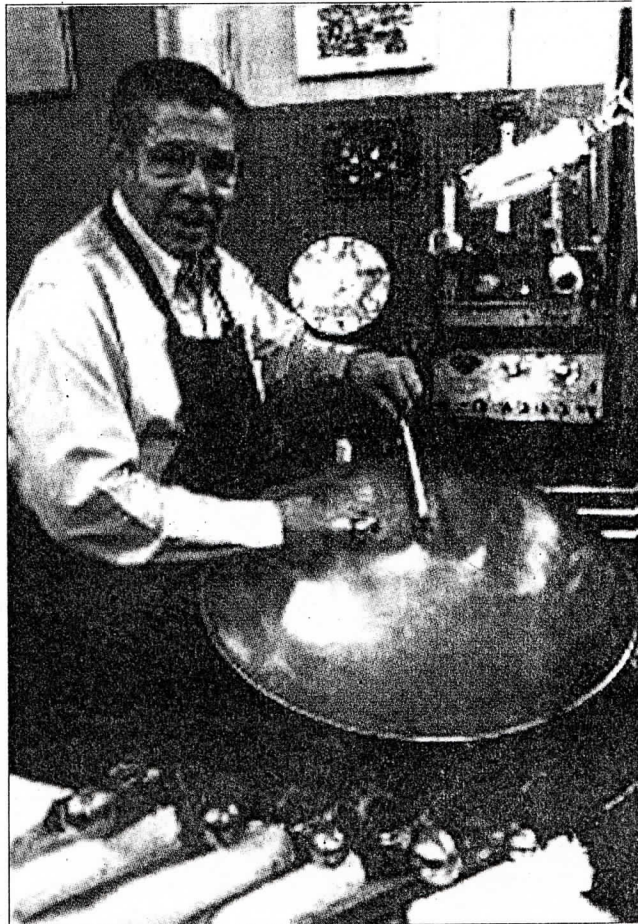
But much of the steel band repertoire still sounds like background music for a Caribbean cruise and that's far too limited for Mr Mannette. "I want it to be incorporated into the conventional orchestras of the world like, a symphony," he says.

One of his students transcribed this Bach piece from strings to steel.

Ellie Mannette is counting on the young people he's training to move the instrument beyond calypso to classical, and to come up

with the next innovations in steel drums.

"Because this instrument is gonna blossom. And for me to fade away, retire, die tomorrow with these skills in my hands and in my mind it would be a loss for the art form. And these young people is gonna take it on and they gonna move with it and I expect them to take my work on into the future. I expect that to happen," he says.



CONSIDERED "the father of modern pan", Ellie Mannette unveils a new instrument at his mountain facility in Morgantown, West Virginia.

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Man of Mannette's students become professional musicians or instrument builders. Hundreds more learn the instrument in his annual summer workshops.

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"I play the instrument Ellie Mannette invented. The guy who invented the piano, the violin, they're dead now. So we're so lucky to have Ellie alive talking about how it started with him because he is rare gold," said Philmore.

With help from the University, Mannette launched a small company that now supplies steel drums to some 500 school music programmes around the country as well as top-line professional musicians.

He spends a lot of time in his workshop with hammers in his hands, fine tuning the notes into his drums.

It's kept him remarkably fit for a 75-year-old, his shoulders are broad from a lifetime working with steel.

Graying hair and a decade in academia have given him a professorial seriousness. But when talk turns to steel drums, Ellie Mannette still has the animation and energy of the brash teenager who banged on oil barrels until he heard something more.

"When I was a very young boy, I listened to classical music all day on the radio and I said to myself, 'One of these days I'm gonna build a symphony of steel, all steel drums, to sound as good or better as that symphony I'm hearing on the radio,'" Mannette explains.

Pretty ambitious for a poor boy from Port-of-Spain in the 1940s when Trinidad's steel drums were little more than overturned trash cans — simple things that played only rhythm.

"And this sound was going on 24 hours a day in the back yard," he says. So you can imagine the racket that was going on, and the neighbours was very concerned about the noise level and they chase you from one yard to another call the police and they come and smash your drums, oh it's a heck of a story!"

All those night sessions damaged the drums and while beating one back into shape, Mr Mannette made a breakthrough discovery.

The smaller dents he made allowed him to