

The Story of Pan, Part III

AMERICAN pannist ANDY NARELL continues his exclusive interview with ELLIE MANNETTE at the latter's New York pan laboratory. In this excerpt, Mannette talks about the "badjohn" days of pan.

Q: Can I take you back a little?

A: Yeh.

Q: You want to talk about the steps - how were they made? While we are on history, I just want to ask you a few things about the early days, alright? I understand in the early days that panmen had a reputation for being kind of rowdy. Could you tell me about that?

A: They fought among each other a whole lot and most of the fighting was due to jealousy over who played better than the other one. For that matter, when it really started to get bad was in 1945. That was the first steelband clash and what happened was we had these small drums at contests in the early 1940s. My band Shell Invaders was like one of the top bands at the time, winning a lot of contests and we were very young kids and due to the fact that we had been winning so much contests, the older guys were just very envious and jealous of that whole situation. So on VJ Day in particular we came out on the road and I had a special pan I used to call the barracuda which was the top drum like you have today. We had this drum especially made by myself. But the whole of town knew we had the barracuda. So now the band from John John they call Tokyo wanted that drum and that night on the road they attacked our band, broke up the band, beat a whole lot of people and they took my drum from me and took it to John John and hang it up on a tree and told me if I want to come and get it.

So I say hey, (laughter) no way was I going to do that because I was a much younger kid at the time than those guys in the early '40s and I left it there. I do not know what became of the barracuda. That fight was in 1945 and when I created the first big drum in 1946, our band was getting all the popularity.

So everywhere you turn a band want to beat you up. We took a certain amount of abuse and beating, but then suddenly we turned tail and started to fight back. But you get a bad name because your band

started to attack everybody in sight. So there was a lot of violence and riotous behaviour and that was really a bad stigma against the bands. It was really bad and the person who really corrected most of this was a guy by the name of Lennox Pierre. He managed to get all the bands together and formed an association.

Q: When was the first organised competition?

A: 1952 was the first organised contest and it was played at the Globe



WINSTON "Spree" Simon...the first man to play a melody.

THE DAYS OF BAND CLASHES

Theatre and was won by a band by the name of Boystown. The others were just really some private guy who may have said "let's have a contest with the bands around" not doing anything significant.

Q: How do you feel about competition and how it affected the development of the steelpan?

A: It is very significant for the development of pan because when you know a contest is coming, you have to prepare. You have

to do everything out of the ordinary that you don't usually do and the more you think about it, the more you will get ideas to do it. As a result of that, the art form grew considerably due to competition.

Q: Were you and Spree Simon friends?

A: Very close friends. We talked a whole lot because I respected him for being the first person to play a melody line. He managed to get notes to accommodate each other that could create a melody and he had a very creative mind like what he was doing with that broom handle on the convex top. So I also had a creative mind as a young gent and whenever we got together we discussed a lot. We discussed what we should do to make a better drum, but we were still only talking about the small drum. We were pretty close friends, yeh.

Q: Tell me about your musical education?

A: Well, I had absolutely no musical education. All my music came from what I had in my mind. I wanted to hear...I wanted to play a song and I built a drum just to play that song with certain notes that I wanted to hear - a certain harp note or whatever note here. So I put that note in a particular instrument just to play that song. Okay, and when I played that song I could accomplish it but then when I tried to play another song, I still needed another note somewhere in between. So I had to build another drum to get that other sound. That shows you clearly that I had actually no musical concept. If I only had all the half tones in, I would have accommodated most of any sound. All I wanted to hear was a particular note at a particular time, so I really did not have any musical background. But as I developed the art, knowledge came - this goes better with this. And this is a chord and the chord is a "d" or "f" or whatever. I get in my mind what the tune is and chords and things like that. So I started working along these ideas and developed a heck of a lot of musical knowledge. Right now I can't read the score sheet right off, but I can take it up and figure it out. And I can play from it slow going. I am actually self-taught.

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