

# Saturday school at Merry Tones panyard

By KIM JOHNSON

**IF THE FUTURE of the nation is in our children's schoolbags, as Eric Williams once said, then the future of the steelband movement is in their backpacks—or wherever else they carry their pan sticks.**

"But the panyards are no longer nurseries for people who want to learn to play," says Merry Tones manager and arranger Kendall Lewis. "Long ago bands played simple pop tunes, the season was long enough to learn them. Now the first thing you meet is a Panorama tune—how a beginner learning that?"

Out of that need was born, in 1987, the Merry Tones Pan School, which starts classes once again on September 7 under the tutelage of Lewis himself.

Lewis began playing pan with Merry Tones as a 13-year-old boy in the early sixties. He had a good ear and learned fast, but he felt he needed to know music so he began taking lessons until he could pass the GCE in music.

Now classes are held on Saturday mornings at the band's panyard at the end of the Diego Martin Main Road. The three-month course is held twice a year: May-July and September-December. Usually there are about 15-20

students ranging from ten-and-under children to 40-and-over adults. American anthropologist Steven Stuenkel was one of the school's first students back in '87 when he was researching *The Steelband Movement: The Forging of a National Art in Trinidad and Tobago*—by far the best book to date on steelband.

In his nine years teaching pan, Lewis has developed a system which he claims prepares novices to be better pannists, especially tenor players which account for nine out of ten students. Only two students, for instance, have ever enrolled to play double tenors, only four on bass.

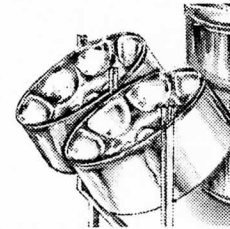
"My focus is on technique," he explains. "I insist on the optimal use of both hands, especially the left hand—the exercises are all carefully worked out."

But this doesn't mean that it's easy. As a matter of fact, one of the difficulties in teaching adults is their belief that pan is easy to learn and they could just jump in and within weeks play in Panorama. "Children are easier to teach because they don't feel it's easy and they aren't preoccupied with Panorama," says Lewis. "Adults always have a problem when they discover it isn't so easy: if they don't have a natural

talent, they get flustered and that makes it harder for them."

Even the bass takes a while to learn, what with its difficult co-ordination of foot movements and body placement.

By the end of one course the student knows half a dozen scales, the chords, and can play a few melodies—including the National Anthem, which Lewis insists they must learn. But he cautions the optimistic: don't expect to be an accomplished pannist in one year, no more than you could become an accomplished pianist in a year.



It's no surprise that it should be a small band to pioneer teaching of pan. Players in the larger and more popular bands hardly have the time to teach novices, because they're embroiled in the Panorama syndrome. Significantly, Merry Tones has only made it once into the big band category of the Panorama finals, although in the eighties the band placed third and fourth in the Steelband Festival. Last year Merry Tones won the Panorama small bands category.

It's also appropriate that the pan school should come from an old community band, because Merry Tones has a history that reaches back to the early forties, starting without a name and the same group of young boys passing through names such as North Dakota, Ice Water Boys, Northern Syncopators, Boys from Behind. In the late forties they became Merry Tones, then changed that to De Boys (under which they entered the first Steelband Music Festival in 1952).

Like most "town bands" in those days, Merry Tones got into fights. They fought with bands from Four Roads, Crystal Stream, La Puerta, Richplain. Once, when they were called De Boys, they went into town, only to be attacked by Swan Stars from Charlotte Street who'd mistaken them for the Belmont side, Dem Boys. Squabbling amongst themselves, De Boys split and one side reverted to Merry Tones and the other, half-mile away, became Mellow Stars—the better to fight one another at every opportunity.

Between 1968 and 1971 the band functioned as a stage side named Modern Harps, after which Merry Tones was revived once again and has been going ever since. Because you just can't keep a good band down.

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