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California panman Andy Narell keeps trying his hand

By DEBBIE JACOB

Music maker to the world

HE ONCE dreamed of leading a steel band from Trinidad and Tobago onto a Panorama stage to play a song he composed and arranged. But a few days ago, Andy Narell's musical dreams were narrowed down to finding a tone to suit a horn-line he was arranging for Andre Tanker's album.

Jazz musician/pannist Andy Narell returned to Trinidad a little over a week ago—not to play pan in Panorama as he once did—but to produce two tunes and play keyboards and pans on Tanker's album.

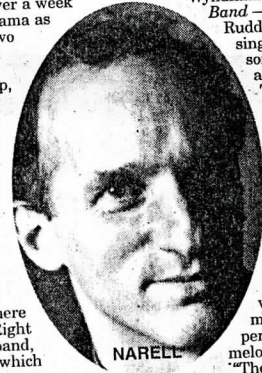
As Carnival was gearing up, Narell was in the Caribbean Sound Basin recording studio diligently working on what he described as an album that will "knock people's socks off".

While that happens, Narell will be packing his socks and shoes for another whirlwind tour across the Caribbean, US, Europe and Japan.

"I have gigs already planned so I won't be down here for Carnival," said Narell. "Right now I'm busy with my new band, the Caribbean Jazz Project, which includes Dave Samuels, (an accomplished marimba player) and Paquito d'Rivera (a Cuban reed player)."

The band has a new album out named, you guessed it, *The Caribbean Jazz Project* on the Heads Up label.

The album was inspired by the band's successful tours last year—over 60 jazz concerts and jazz festivals around the world.



NARELL

more gigs planned in the Caribbean, but hurricanes knocked out part of the season," said Narell.

In many ways it's been a stormy season for Narell's music. Last year he hardly played with musicians like Dutch drummer Paul van Wageningen and Cuban percussionist Luis Conte, who appeared on his award-winning Wyndham Hill Jazz-produced records of the past.

But Narell did release a new album on Wyndham Hill this year—*Long Time Band*—named in honour of David Rudder's composition. Rudder sings Narell's version of the song and another track on the album entitled "Groove Town."

"Danceable music," is how Narell describes the album. Conte's percolating percussion is featured heavily. There's a rich blend of zouk, samba, soca and jazz consciously arranged by Narell in a "steelband style".

"The music is getting more percussion-oriented," Narell explained, and this was his interpretation of good music which could capitalise on percussion while maintaining melody, style and arrangement.

"The album has been doing well. I'm happy with it. I'm really proud of how it came out," said Narell.

This is Narell's ninth album on Wyndham Hill and it's been getting good reviews in music magazines.

But Narell, like many other musicians who stick to their ideals and principles of producing good music instead of a hodgepodge of rhythm tracks, is beginning to feel the pinch.

About 100 US radio stations have been faithful Narell music fans over the years, but radio stations have been following a new

trend called focus-group marketing. This means radio stations play the music which advertisers determine will suit the widest variety of listeners.

It's enough to make experimenting musicians cringe.

"A lot of people who were always on the fringe of the radio playing are getting frozen out because of this new marketing trend," said Narell.

These days, the in-sound on most radio stations which once tried to lend a helping hand to avant garde music is light pop. Narell continues to get airplay, but he's taking no chances. He's travelling the globe searching for new sounds while exposing his music to a wider audience.

"The past year I've been on the road more than I ever was," said Narell.

THE MORE he's on the road, the less we see him in Trinidad. It's been a full decade since Narell first came to play pan with Phase II. He hasn't played in a steelband since 1987 Carnival.

"I like to come here other times when things are happening. I can always come and play in the steelbands, but it's just not something I need to do. Writing a tune and arranging is an enormous time commitment that I don't have right now."

Narell never formally got permission to arrange for a local steelband. The public and organisers of steelband events had mixed feelings. Some felt Panorama songs should be written and arranged by citizens of this country. Others felt pan should broaden its horizons.

At one time Narell had a burning desire to challenge the tradition. He even considered Trinidadian citizenship. His dream of writing and arranging for a local steelband was featured in the famous, now defunct, Charles Kuralt's *Sunday Morning News* magazine in the US.

"I still think I could arrange a song," says Narell. "I just have to get a band and do it. But right now I would just rather be friends with everyone," he laughed, as he referred to the controversy his ambitions have caused in the past.

"When it comes time to do it, I'll find a band who is brave enough to risk being disqualified and just do it. I would imagine the scenario would be they wouldn't let the band play at all or maybe they'll let them play but not qualify for the finals. It will be hard to know how people will react unless I just do it at some point."

But right now, Narell emphasised, there are other priorities taking precedence.

"I'm doing what I want to do right now—being here in a studio in Trinidad creating live music with live rhythm sections. I just want to keep doing what I'm doing. As a musician looking at the whole musical scene in the world, you want to be part of the solution—not the problem. For me, I just keep trying to point ahead. I try to contribute something good and be part of what's good that's happening."

He's becoming more involved with choro music, a Brazilian version of bebop from the 1940s and 1950s. Last year, Narell said he used to break down into choro music during sound checks for jazz concerts.

Another highlight of his life last year was being the only non-Cuban to play on a Cuban all-star record.

"I thought I could have retired from music after that honour," said Narell.

Narell has big plans for the next year. "I want to get back to my own writing and remodel my kitchen," he laughs. No doubt it will be a cosy place to shelf his Carnival plans for the time being.

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