

**Pan-America: Calypso, Exotica,
and the Development of Steel Pan in the United States**

A DISSERTATION

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ANDREW RICHARD MARTIN

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Beatrice learn to dance while listening to a 1950s Lord Invader recording of “Marianne.” It seems as though while daddy was transcribing the steel pan parts, little Bea was bitten by the pan-jumbie. Only time will tell.

Abstract

Scholar Reuel Rogers once commented that Caribbean immigrants to the United States were “ignored for many decades in much social science literature, prompting one observer to dub Afro-Caribbean immigrants the invisible minority.” The American steel band story is one of migration and the appropriation of the national music of Trinidad by and for the cultural dominance of America. Yet, the characters in this narrative have, in a metaphorical sense, created poetry out of their invisibility. That is, despite its humble beginnings the steel pan has slowly and pragmatically positioned itself to thrive in the United States and remake traditions, temporarily dominate American popular music, and integrate into institutional academia along the way. The following discussion will parse out the development of steel pan in America into sections that include an analysis of early steel band influences within Cold War American popular music, the Calypso craze, the New York Carnival scene, Pete Seeger and steel pan as American folk music, the United States Navy Steel Band, early examples of steel band success in academia, steel band’s attempt to find voice and identity within the American popular music landscape and commercial music, American steel pan’s first virtuoso Andy Narell, several individual case studies, and current national trends.

In America, the steel drum ensemble is quickly becoming a popular fixture in public schools, universities, and community centers. Despite its unique nature, the steel pan has experienced a fate similar to many other non-western folk instruments; it has been integrated, appropriated, and modified by American practitioners into an entirely new and independent genre, increasingly different in style and character from its roots. Yet, the title of this study suggests a master narrative to the development of the steel band in the United States, and the present study explores the whole social and artistic phenomenon of steel band, with a geographical focus on the United States rather than Trinidad, and its development over time. The development of steel pan in America is a serious art movement in both social identity and artistic development, and it is my aim to illustrate these methodologies while attempting to explain the sociological and artistic motives behind them.

Throughout this dissertation every attempt will be made to explore, locate, and provide a historical analysis of the first appearance of steel band music in the United States, drawing links between institutional locations (military bands, school and university programs, recordings/record labels, and more) and regional sites (Harlem, Brooklyn, Dekalb, Illinois) whenever possible. An understanding of the role of Trinidadian immigration to the United States and remade traditions created therein (*J’ouvert* in Brooklyn for example) will be crucial to portions of this historical analysis, and to a lesser extent methods of cultural theory which utilize the principles of cultural hegemonic domination. Avenues of research considered include American steel band’s historical links to conflicts with other, related Trinidadian musical genres, including calypso and soca, and to relevant Afro-Caribbean, black diasporic, and (white) mainstream postwar cultural practices in the United States. Under discussion, too, is the

global impact of the American steel band ensemble, the historical impact of American popular music on steel band music, cultural appropriation, transvaluation, and remade traditions such as the aforementioned Brooklyn J'ouvert tradition.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In the prologue of his 1952 work *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison offers a poignant critique of postwar cultural and race relations in the United States. With specific reference to the black jazz artist Louis Armstrong, the protagonist of the story comments that:

Sometimes now I listen to Louis while I have my favorite dessert of vanilla ice cream and slogin. I pour the red liquid over the white mound, watching it glisten and the vapor in to a beam of lyrical sound. Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he's unaware that he is invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music.¹

In the published report of the 2000 United States Census, the population of Afro-Caribbean residents in New York was listed at 524, 107.² Caribbean scholar Reuel Rogers comments, "Indeed the group was ignored for many decades in much social science literature, prompting one observer to dub Afro-Caribbean immigrants 'the invisible minority'."³ The history and development of steel band in the United States is perhaps best understood by someone who is aware of its invisibility. Steel drums (or steel pans, the two names are used interchangeably) are the music and/or instruments that we all know, but don't really know.

The American steel pan story is one of migration and appropriation of the national instrument of Trinidad by and for the cultural dominance of America. Yet, the characters

¹ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: The Modern Library Edition, 1992), 7-8.

² U.S. Census Bureau, "New York Population by Race and Hispanic Origin" (2000) <http://www.census.gov/> <accessed May 13, 2009>

³ Reuel Rogers, *Afro-Caribbean Immigrants and the Politics of Incorporation: Ethnicity, Exception, or Exit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 45.

in this narrative have, in a metaphorical sense, created poetry out of their invisibility. That is, despite its humble beginnings the steel pan has slowly and pragmatically positioned itself to thrive in the United States and remake traditions, integrating into institutional academia along the way. My aim in this study is to tell the narrative of steel pan in America as coherently as possible; however, one must note that, like American popular music, the development of steel pan in the United States is not a tidy and directly chronological lineage. Slippage and overlapping occurs frequently, and geographically distinct scenes—New York, Dekalb, Illinois, Southern California and others—often develop independently of one another. Borrowing a methodology from popular music, I turn to Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman’s concept of “streams of musical influence” to help negotiate the steel band narrative. Waterman and Starr apply their streams of cultural influence principle to the historical chronology of American popular music development in order to provide a master narrative that is chronologically linear in a general sense, but which also has room for overlap and flexibility.⁴ Based on this model, the following discussion will parse out the development of steel pan in America into sections that include an analysis of early steel band influences and the Calypso craze, the New York Carnival scene, Pete Seeger and steel pan as American folk music, the United States Navy Steel Band, early examples of steel band success in academia, several case studies examining steel pan’s attempt at finding a distinct voice within Latin-jazz, pop music, and commercial music, American steel pan’s first virtuoso Andy Narell, several individual case studies of successful American steel panists, current national trends, and a conclusion of final thoughts.

⁴ Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MTV* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1-17.

In structuring the overall thread of this study, much inspiration was drawn from Steven Stempfle's landmark text *The Steel Band Movement: The Forging of a National Art in Trinidad and Tobago*. Here Stempfle employs the term "movement" to represent "the whole social and artistic phenomenon of [steel pan] as it has developed in Trinidad over time."⁵ In a similar vein, although the development of steel pan in America is not exactly a "movement" per se, the present study explores the whole social and artistic phenomenon of steel band, with a geographical focus on the United States rather than Trinidad and Tobago, and its development over time.

Stempfle's study is one of two major works that explore the development of the Trinidadian steel band movement; the other is Shannon Dudley's *Music From Behind the Bridge: Steel Band Spirit and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago*. Although both monographs address the steel band movement in Trinidad and Tobago, Stempfle focuses more on the sociological aspects of the steel band movement where as Dudley's study is more solidly focused on actual music and music making. The present study attempts to bridge the two approaches, though ultimately it takes a course more congruent with Stempfle's methodology. However, in several instances throughout this study, effort is made to explore the actual music and music making of steel pan in America and the focus is not fixated only on the social aspects of steel band. Kim Johnson (quoted in Dudley) sounds his frustration that "[Steel Band] fell to the social scientist by default, as if beating pan was some quaint folk practice, an aspect of ethnicity or national identity or pluralism—anything but a serious, modern art form."⁶ The development of steel pan in America is in many ways a serious art movement in both social identity and artistic

⁵ Steven Stempfle, *The Steelband Movement: The Forging of A National Art in Trinidad and Tobago* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pg. xv.

⁶ Kim Johnson, *Pan lime* Vol. 3, No. 4 (April 1996).

development. For instance, the United States Navy Steel Band strove for the highest artistic standards and yielded in excess of 200 steel band arrangements, ranging in style from folk calypso to complex Panorama-style tunes (I will return to these styles in the pages that follow). Moreover, the United States Navy devoted significant resources in an attempt to improve the technology of steel pan building and tuning in order to create the highest level of artistic product and sound quality. It is my aim to explore these methodologies while attempting to explain the sociological motives behind them.

Another area in which this study diverges from the work of Stempfle and Dudley is in the range of the time frame under discussion. Most studies on steel band history tend to focus on pre-independence developments (before 1962) in Trinidad. Dudley suggests:

Writers tend to construct the steel band's master narrative in reference to Trinidad's pre-independence history, when the most dramatic transformations in the steel band's social and musical status occurred. Little has been written about the Panorama competition, which began in 1963 and which has come to dominate the repertoire and the energies of most [Trinidadian] steel bands. The abundant popular and journalistic discourse on contemporary steel bands is often characterized by nostalgia for the time when steel bands had a more varied entertainment role, and by dismay at the creative stagnation or commercialization of pan.⁷

Along with his focus on music and music making, Dudley further attempts to frame his monograph around the activity of post-independence Trinidadian steel bands, drawing a comprehensive narrative that, while focusing on contemporary steel band issues, has recourse to the pre-independence heritage. A dominant force in the history of the Trinidadian steel band movement, Trinidadian independence had little impact in America, and the development of steel pan in America felt only tremors of the Trinidadian restructuring.

⁷ Shannon Dudley, *Music from Behind the Bridge: Steelband Aesthetics and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pg 25-26.

Moreover, the development of steel pan in America, which can be seen as a continuous stream beginning in the 1920s, was impacted more by WWII and changes to immigration laws in 1965 than by any Caribbean post-colonial migration or political activity. The present study differs from the work of Dudley and Stempfle in that the focus is mainly on the development of steel pan in America, rather than Trinidad, and encompasses the course of the entire twentieth-century. The two countries have significantly influenced each other for decades, exchanging commodities such as oil and natural gas, as well as cultural capital such as calypso and rock'n' roll music. Yet, the impact of steel pan in America is something that thus far has eluded serious scholarship. Trinidad and Tobago is the birth place of the steel pan and the small island nation has, without question, guided the socio-musical culture of the instrument for the past century. However, considering the island's strong economic ties to New York City, Trinidad and New York City have long enjoyed a constant exchange of people and commodities for the past two centuries. Moreover, since Trinidad and Tobago's independence in 1962, the spread of steel pan throughout the globe has increased exponentially. As of 2011 the steel pan is no longer *only* Trinidad's national instrument but a global sound and phenomenon.

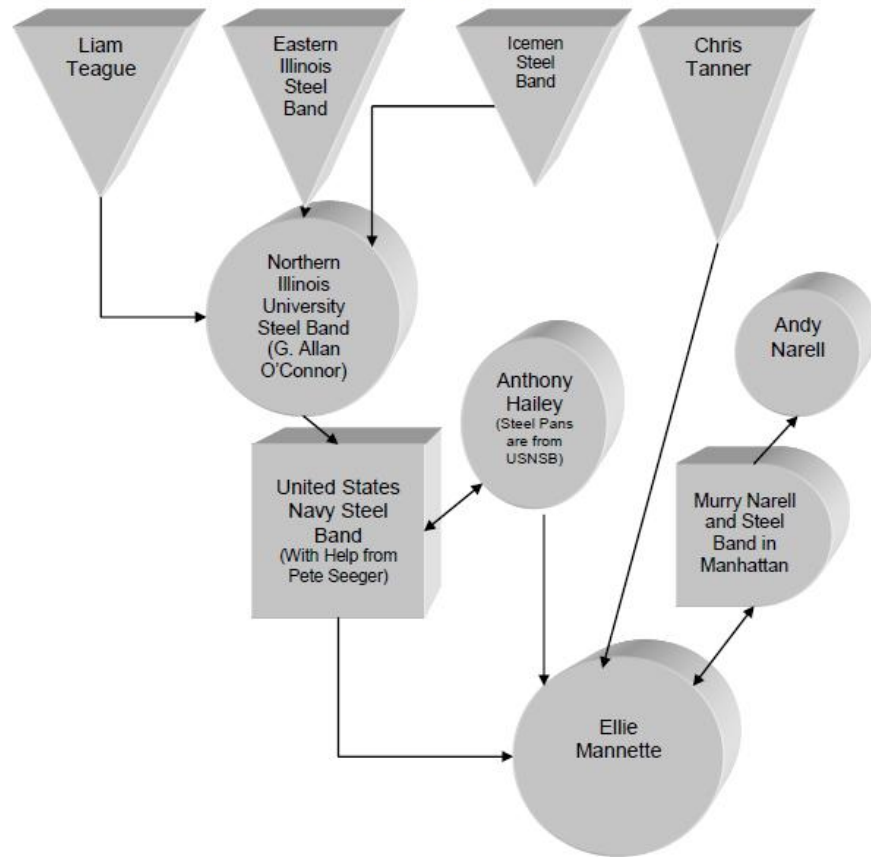
Followers of Pan, Followers of Man

Returning briefly to Stephen Stempfle, it is import to draw one major distinction between his work and the present study. The steel band "movement" in Trinidad is a unified social movement and Stempfle carefully describes how the people of this nation collectively created steel pan (and steel bands by extension) over the course of the

twentieth-century. By itself, the steel band movement in Trinidad could also be seen as a metaphor for the independence movement of Trinidad and Tobago as the nation broke free of Britain's colonial tethers. Conversely, the development of steel pan in America is not a unified "movement" and more accurately resembles loose strands of thread that once woven together create a single cord. As such, the title of this study, "Pan-America: Calypso, Exotica, and the Development of Steel Pan in the United States," makes specific reference to three specific themes (calypso, exotica, and steel pan). There is no assertion of a master narrative to the development of the steel pan in the United States, nor would that be a useful way of characterizing the study at hand.

Beyond calypso, exotica, politics, and social movements, the development of steel pan in America, and indeed this study, can be reduced into two primary elements: steel pans and steel panists. The spread and growth of the instrument throughout America is primarily driven by skilled individuals—steel pan performers and steel pan builder/tuners alike—rather than a unified social movement. The individualized nature of steel pan in America is not, however, entirely independent. Interestingly, despite their exclusivity in any given geographic region, the lineage of steel panists and steel pan makers active in the United States is often tangentially connected. The following chart (Below) illustrates the ancestry and interconnectivity of several key steel pan agents discussed over the course of this study.

Connectivity of Steel Pan In America
Chart #1



As we can see in Chart #1 above, Ellie Mannette is the basis for one specific thread of American steel pan development. Mannette was brought to America by the United States Navy Steel Band in the late 1950s for the purpose of building steel pans for the Navy. The United States Navy Steel Band, in turn, influenced several other steel bands and steel panists including Anthony Hailey of the Virginia Rhythm Project and Allan O'Connor of Northern Illinois University. Through O'Connor several other steel bands formed including the Icemen Steel Band of the University of Regina, Saskatchewan, and he also aided steel pan virtuoso Liam Teague in immigrating to the United States. Mannette also had a similar influence on Murry Narell and the development of steel pan in New York;