

World Steelpan Day Brief

Primary Schools

HISTORY AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

The Steelpan (also known as the steel drum) was invented in Trinidad and Tobago in the 1930s and is widely regarded as the only acoustic musical instrument invented in the 20th century. The history of the Steelpan can be traced back to working-class African males who, after Emancipation in 1834, having been allowed to participate in the yearly Carnival activities, were prevented by the authorities from using African-based percussive instruments, such as drums. The drums, which were created from wood and animal skin, were deemed to be loud, disruptive, and associated with African spirituality. These restrictions by the colonial authorities led to the creation of improvised instruments made out of bamboo tubes. The bamboo tube instruments formed the basis for “Tamboo Bamboo” bands, which are widely accepted to be the precursor to modern steel bands.

The Tamboo Bamboo had different lengths and sizes of bamboo stalks that were stuck together to sound like the four (4) main voices of music: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. This became the pillar for masqueraders during the Carnival season until the authorities ended its use. Subsequently, objects made of metal like paint cans, motor vehicle parts, biscuit tins, chamber pots, pitch oil tins, graters, and dustbins were used instead of bamboo instruments in the 1930s. As Carnival parade music grew, people used large 55-gallon oil drums instead of the earlier metal objects and smaller drums. These drums made more musical notes with more challenging music.

With the invention of the Steelpan, community Steel Bands or Steel Orchestras were formed as musical groups that took part in Carnival celebrations. By the 1950s there were over eighty (80) established Steel Bands in Trinidad and Tobago and in 1963 the first ‘Panorama’, Steel Band music competition was held. The annual Panorama continues up to today and currently has around two hundred (200) junior and senior bands in the competition.

The Steelpan movement is officially governed by Pan Trinbago who is recognised as the parent body for Steel Bands. Pan Trinbago was formed in 1971 following its predecessor, the National Association of Trinidad and Tobago Steel Bandsmen.

STEEL PAN INNOVATORS

- **Winston ‘Spree’ Simon** - credited with creating the first ‘melody pan’ which carried eight pitches. This was the first pan that could accommodate an entire melody.
- **Ellie Mannette** - credited with being the first to wrap the playing sticks with rubber and was also the first to sink the surface of a pan into its now characteristic concave shape.
- **Anthony Williams** - credited with inventing the ‘spider web pan’. This layout is now the most popular and accepted design for tenor pans. Mr. Williams is also credited with being one of the first in steel pan history to use the large 55-gallon drums as starting material for the pans, a tradition that continues to this day.
- **Bertie Marshall** - credited with inventing the double tenor pan. He also recognised the negative effects the sun had on steel pans and was the first to place canopies over the instruments when they were played outdoors.

OTHER FAMOUS PAN PLAYERS, COMPOSERS AND ARRANGERS:

- Ray Holman
- Ken "Professor" Philmore
- Jit Samaroo
- Len "Boogsie" Sharpe
- Leon "Smooth" Edwards
- Carlton "Zanda" Alexander
- Andy Narell
- Liam Teague
- Robert Greenidge
- Duvone Stewart
- Dane Gulston

STATE RECOGNITION

The Government supports the Steelpan fraternity in many ways, such as, through sponsorship of some Steel Bands and assistance in the award of prize monies for the competitions, in association with Pan Trinbago and the National Carnival Commission.

In August 1992, the Government declared the Steelpan as the "National Instrument of Trinidad and Tobago". Following this, in 1999, the Government formed the Trinidad and Tobago National Steel Orchestra and in 2007, the Orchestra was renamed the National Steel Symphony Orchestra (NSSO). The NSSO is made up of some of the country's best Steelpan players.

Additionally, the Ministry of Education through its 'Pan in Schools' initiative, which began in the 1980s, has ensured that today there are over 100 school Steel Bands that compete in the School's Panorama Competitions.

STEELPAN FRATERNITY

The Steelpan as a musical instrument is internationally recognised and is played in many countries. The following facts are evidence of its international popularity:

NATIONAL

- Pan Trinbago's list of Steel Bands at <https://www.pantrinidad.co.tt/Overview/Bands-Contact-Information> includes 289 bands.
- The steelpan is the main creative product exported from Trinidad and Tobago.
- The film *PAN! Our Music Odyssey* which shows the Steel Band movement internationally (<https://www.pan.tt/>) won Best Documentary Award at the 2016 ReelWorld Film Festival (Canada).

REGIONAL

There are Steel Band programmes in the schools in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the Bahamas, and the British Virgin Islands.

INTERNATIONAL

- World Steelpan Trust – United Kingdom <https://www.steelpantrust.com/>
- Steelpan International – Germany <https://www.steelpaninternational.de/>
- Japan Sukiyaki Steel Orchestra
- The United Kingdom has over 160 Steel Bands in its schools.
- www.stockholmsteelband.se/pan/bands/ lists 146 Steel Bands in 21 countries.
- <https://www.panonthenet.com/> lists 138 Steel Bands in the USA.
- <https://www.pan.tt/pan-music/> states that there are over 135 Steel Bands in Switzerland.
- In March 2024, the Steelpan was featured on Sesame Street, the popular US television series.

WORLD STEELPAN DAY – AUGUST 11TH

In 2022, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago formally requested that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) proclaim August 11th as World Steelpan Day from 2023, and annually, after that. Subsequently, in July 2023 at the 77th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, August 11th was officially declared World Steelpan Day. On August 11th, 2023, Trinidad and Tobago celebrated World Steelpan Day for the first time.

The Trinidad Express Newspaper in its article dated August 10th 2023 entitled ‘It’s World Steelpan Day!’ quoted the Pan Trinbago president Beverly Ramsey-Moore as saying:

“This really is a victory for Ellie Mannette, Bertie Marshall, Neville Jules, Anthony Williams, Winston “Spree” Simon and many others upon whose backs we stand. These are the people who first exposed pan to the world, bands like Trinidad All Steel Percussion Steel Orchestra, this is a victory for them.

“This is a victory for our ancestors who were involved in the struggle and branded rogues and vagabonds. The people from behind the bridge who were branded outcasts in society, this is a victory for them. This is a victory for Trinidad and Tobago,”

Additionally, the following link to the World Steelpan Day message from the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts is also useful:

https://mtca.gov.tt/press_release/world-steelpan-day-message/

References:

- Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts. 2021. Towards the Acceleration of Recovery and Growth: Initiatives for the Tourism And Creative Sectors in Trinidad and Tobago 2021 – 2023.
- UNESCO. 2022. UNESCO International Days. Accessed on July 11, 2022. <https://www.unesco.org/en/days>.
- United Nations –World Steelpan Day: <https://www.un.org/en/observances/steelpan-day#:~:text=Acknowledging%20that%20the%20steelpan%20promotes,August%20as%20World%20Steelpan%20Day>
- Pan Trinbago: <https://www.pantrinbago.co.tt/Overview/About.aspx>
- National Library and Information System Authority (NALIS): <https://www.nalis.gov.tt>