
Steel Drum

Bare Bones Productions

The Steel drum or "pan" was invented in Trinidad in the late 1930's and is one of the most modern instruments played in the world today. It is a chromatic instrument with each section producing a different note.

From Violence to Music

The History of the Steel Drum

In the late 1800's, the government of Trinidad, banned the playing of hand drums. The drums were banned because the rhythms played were used to call gang members together to rumble. This was a very violent time in Trinidad. To replace the drums, gangs used bamboo poles to bang out their gang's signature rhythms. These rhythms were an early form of today's gang colors or signs. It wasn't long before the government banned bamboo poles as well. But, the banging went on, using anything the gang members could find including pots and pans, trash can lids even the oil drums left on the island's military bases. These impromptu parades of gang members banging out rhythms on bits of scrap metal earned the gangs a new name: Iron Bands.

At a particularly violent Iron Band clash during the 1930's it was discovered that a dent in an oil drum produced a particular note. Winston "Spree"

Simon is credited with being the first person to put a note onto a used oil drum. And it wasn't long before all the gangs were making these primitive steel drums and began competing with rival gangs for bragging rights of best iron band. It was no longer about who was the most violent but who had the best band. Nowadays, more than 80 years after the first steel drums were made, the rivalry between what is now called steel bands is as strong as ever. Every year Trinidad hosts Panorama, a contest for which steel drum orchestras practice all year to debut their compositions to earn the same bragging rights as their musical predecessors. A Modern steel band consists of up to 100 musicians and sometimes over 300 drums. From their origins on this tiny island, Steel Drum Orchestras can now be found in most countries of the world.

Although it's history is steeped in violence, the sound of the steel drum evokes the tranquility and happiness of the Caribbean in everyone who hears it.

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Making a Steel Drum

The Steel Drum, or Pan as it is commonly referred to, started as a convex or dome on the bottom of an up-turned 55 gallon oil drum. The first person to give the pan it's modern concave or dish shape was Ellie Mannette who's pans are still played today. There are 3 phases involved in the creation of a Pan. First, a sledgehammer is applied to the bottom of a 55 gallon oil drum, stretching the metal into a concave bowl or dish shape. After "sinking the pan", the steel must then be tempered to increase the resilience and strength of the metal. In Trinidad, pan-makers take their drums down to the beach, build a fire and, after burning the pan for a short of period of time, plunge it into the ocean to cool. A template is then used to mark the placement of each note on the sunken head of the drum. Each note outline is then "grooved" using a nail punch and a hammer. Grooving the notes make the notes more visible and also isolates each note's vibration somewhat from the other notes in the drum. At this point, the barrel's side, or "skirt", is cut to the proper length, and holes are drilled near the rim to hang the drum from a stand. The pan-maker then takes his hammers of various sizes and "pongs" the notes up from beneath, making them stand out like bubbles from the interior of the pan. This gives the note the approximate tension it needs to vibrate at the correct pitch. Now, the pan-maker uses a tuning device and carefully hammers at each note from the top, pounding and

smoothing the note area so that it will vibrate precisely. Finally, the pans are finished by painting them in bright colors or chromed.



Different Types of Steel Drums

Bones plays a "Tenor" or "Lead" pan.

Steel Drum Orchestras typically have up to 30 Tenor players as well as:



DOUBLE SECONDS
that play Contra Melody,
Harmony Alto



DOUBLE GUITARS
Rhythm/Chords Tenor



TRIPLE CELLOS
Rhythm/Chords Low Tenor



TENOR BASS
Bass/Rhythm Baritone



SIX BASS
Bass Lines/Bass

The larger the note on a pan the lower the pitch of that note. For instance a bass pan will typically only have 3 notes on each pan where as a tenor pan will have up to 30 notes on one pan. Bones' has 28 notes on his pan. There are many different configurations of the notes on a pan but Bones uses what is called a 4th & 5th style. This means that the 4th and 5th notes of the scale are on either side of note being played.