

The History of the Steel Drum

Steel drums were invented on the island of Trinidad around the time of World War II. One can trace the roots of these instruments back to the African slaves who were placed on the island by Spanish and French plantation owners as early as the 16th century. The constant struggle against the "elite" upper class brought many hardships and frustrations to the African slaves; most of them had been separated from their families and lost their native languages. Music was their only link back to Africa.

The elite classes were notorious for setting specific rules and hours for African drumming. They were fearful the drums would incite the slaves to rebellion and that perhaps they were sending rhythmic messages. Over the centuries, as the upper classes would ban the lower classes' instruments, the lower classes would simply invent a new performance instrument. Rhythmic elements of African drumming can be heard throughout the evolution of steel drums and is used in the percussion sections (engine rooms) of the steel bands today.

The African rhythmic patterns were later reproduced on bamboo stomping tubes by bamboo bands who marched in the streets during Carnival. These instruments were constructed by cutting varying lengths of bamboo sticks, stomping the larger sticks on the ground, and striking the smaller ones together.

The next important step in the evolution of the steel drum was metal beating bands of the early 1930's as a gradual replacement for the banned bamboo. These bands consisted of players using all metallic instruments (i.e. tin pans, biscuit drums, dustbins, ect.) and were sometimes referred to as "iron bands" or "pan bands". It was soon discovered that these non pitched metal instruments changed pitch after they had been beaten for a while.

The very first pitched steel drums were made from smaller metal containers and were convex in shape. The performer would carry the smaller metal drum with one hand and beat the metal with the other. These instruments were crude; they were still in their experimental stages and had no intentional pitches. In the 1940's and 1950's pan innovators experimented with the stylings or note patterns, and improved upon the tuning. Today the drum is constructed from the bottom of a 55-gallon barrel, sunk down in a concave fashion, and tuned with precision.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STEEL PAN

Despite the achievements and hard work of the innovators, modern day steel pans still have a few limitations:

- Most have a limited range compared to other instruments (approximately 1 1/2 octaves)
- The highest notes of the frontline pans do not sound as well as the lower notes
- The bass pans are large, difficult to transport and take up a lot of space
- Some musical effects such as staccato (a detached style of playing) are difficult to achieve on the steel pan.

Steel pan is a work in progress. Pan makers around the world are constantly investigating ways to improve and refine the instrument.

