



EDUCATION/COMMUNITY RELATIONS  
650 WALNUT ST.  
CINCINNATI, OH 45202  
PHONE 513-977-4116  
FAX 513-977-4150  
WWW.CINCINNATIARTS.ORG  
EDUCATION@CINCINNATIARTS.ORG

## Bacchanal Steel Band

### *Bacchanal Steel Band Performance*

### *The World of Pan*



*Classroom photo by Rich Sofranko*

#### STUDY GUIDE

Edited & Designed by Kathleen Riemenschneider

Contributions by Brian Malone & Kelly Albin

# Artists on Tour

# BACKGROUND INFORMATION

## TRINIDAD

Trinidad is an island in the Caribbean Sea. Native Americans were the sole inhabitants until Columbus landed on the island in 1498. The Spanish controlled the island from 1498 until 1797 when control was conceded to Great Britain. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, many French settled in Trinidad and established plantations, which were worked by slaves from Africa. In 1838, the slaves on Trinidad received emancipation. The plantation owners still needed a cheap source of labor, so they hired East Indians and Chinese as indentured servants. Today, Trinidad has a diverse culture, influenced by Spanish, French, African and Asian cultures. The two major religions are Catholicism (29%) and Hinduism (24%).

## CARNIVAL

Carnival is a pre-Lenten festival. In Trinidad, the festival was introduced by French settlers. Originally, plantation owners held masquerade balls in their houses, while their slaves had their own version with African music in their quarters. After Emancipation in 1838, former slaves celebrated Carnival in the streets. The elite class considered their parading to be vulgar. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the festival had become an opportunity for the unrespectable to mock the respectable. However, by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was a national affair with all classes participating. There are several competitions associated with the festival: Carnival Queen, Calypso King, Pan-Around-the-Neck, Dimanche Gras (masqueraders) and band competition. Bands often start practicing for the competitions around Christmas. On Monday and Tuesday prior to Ash Wednesday, the bands parade through the streets, sometimes in costume, which is known as 'playing mas.'

## CALYPSO

Calypso is based on a Spanish troubadour tradition of spontaneously creating epic poems to music. These lyrics often contained political satire, irony and double entendre (saying one thing that could have another, usually unpleasing, meaning). The Spanish tradition was joined with the African tradition of call and response. French plantation owners in Trinidad would have their slaves entertain their guests. The songs would appear to praise the slave owner but were really criticizing them by using double entendres. After Emancipation, former slaves continued the tradition during Carnival. Calypso developed into brass bands that back a vocalist. Popular calypso, which is played on the radio, is also known as soca or soul calypso.

**TROUBADOR**—one of a class of lyric poets and poet-musicians often of knightly rank who flourished from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and whose major theme was courtly love

# STEEL DRUM

Drumming was important to the African culture. Prior to emancipation, plantation owners banned slaves from having drums because the owners believed the slaves were using them to send coded messages. After Emancipation and with the influx of East Asians (where drums were also an important part of their culture), drumming was revived and became an essential part of the Carnival Festival. In an effort to suppress the alleged offensive behavior during the festival, the elite class banned certain instruments, such as drums, or restricted hours when they could be played. However, the lower classes, which were primarily black, would not be discouraged. They began using a new instrument known as tamboo bamboo (“tamboo” is a creolization of the French word for drum, “tambour”). Tamboo bamboo are bamboo sticks of various sizes, which could be as thick as an arm and four to six feet long. The larger sticks are pounded against the ground, while smaller sticks are hit against each other. During Carnival, tamboo bamboo bands consisting of hundreds would parade through the streets. Unfortunately, many band members were also part of gangs. When not parading, the bamboo sticks doubled as weapons used in street fights. Because a blow in the head with a large bamboo stick could be fatal, the police banned tamboo bamboo sticks in 1937.

***The steel drum is one of the newest instruments, invented around World War II in Trinidad.***

**CREOLE**—a language that has evolved from a pidgin but serves as the native language of a speech community

**PIDGIN**—a simplified speech used for communication between people with different languages

Again, blacks were faced with the dilemma of having no rhythmic instruments to play during Carnival. Many began to use any type of metal they could find in a junkyard—tin cans, brake drums, garbage cans, pots and pans. These metal “instruments” were the predecessors to the steel drum.

The invention of the steel drum was an accident. As Winton ‘Spree’ Simon, an early steel bandsman, recounts it: someone threw a rock at his garbage can creating a dent. While ‘Spree’ was hammering out the dent, he discovered that he could control the pitch. Instead of hammering out the dent, he added others, then paraded around the neighborhood playing “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” Through a system of trial and error, it was discovered what the size the dents needed to be to control pitch and tone. Early experimenters were Winston ‘Spree’ Simon, Neville Jules and Birdie Marshall. Elliot ‘Ellie’ Mannelle was the first to construct a steel drum from a 55-gallon oil barrel, which is still the primary material used today. The surface of a steel drum is concave with various size dents; the length of the sides determines the octave.

In the 1950s, panmen, those who played steel drums, were usually poor blacks who, like their tamboo bamboo predecessors, were members of gangs. Rival bands often broke into street fights. The police threatened to ban steel drums, however, the music had become popular with whites, educated blacks and East Indians. By the 1960s, the stigma associated with panmen had changed.

# HOW TO MAKE AND TUNE A STEEL DRUM

A steel band needs at least three instruments, and preferably eight or ten – or many more. Below are detailed directions for making the soprano, alto, tenor and bass pans. While an expert can make one in a day or less, the beginner should allow a week or more to finish his drum. It will take hours of patience – and probably sweat, blood and blisters – before the job is through.

There are actually a number of slightly different systems used in making steel drums – different patterns, different methods of tempering. To save confusion we will give here the method exactly used by Kim Loy Wong in making his own drums. Below we list tools and other items you will need. In addition you need a backyard or field where you can hammer in peace, and build a bonfire to temper the steel.

Main stages in the process:

1. Get a number of empty oil barrels.  
Need: Several dollars per barrel, or ingenuity.
2. 'Sink' the disc to the shape of a shallow basin.  
Need: A heavy sledge hammer (preferably 20 lbs.) and muscles
3. Trace the pattern on the disc. (See next page for sample)  
Need: Pencils, carbon paper, ruler, compass – and care and accuracy.
4. With thousands of taps of a nailpunch, make grooves of each line.  
Need: Nailpunch, 3 lb. hammer, patience, perserverance, patience and muscles.
5. With a 'wedge' go over all the grooves.  
Need: A homemade wedge of the right shape.
6. Cut off the end of the barrel at the correct height. Make strap holes.  
Need: A sharp cold chisel, or hacksaw, or an acetylene torch, and an electric drill.
7. "Pung up" each note from the bottom.  
Need: 3 lb. hammer.
8. Burn the pan on a bonfire for ½ an hour  
Need: A small bonfire.
9. Remove from fire and cool with water.  
Need: One pail of cold water.
10. Tune the drum.  
Need: 3 lb hammer, a pitch pipe (or harmonica), several hours of patience and an ear that can distinguish musical pitch.
11. Make straps, or fix a stand to hang it from.  
Need: Straps and buckles, or pipes and fittings for the stand.
12. Paint and decorate it.  
Need: Aluminum or enamel paint.



# ACTIVITIES

## CALYPSO RHYTHMS

Calypso music has a distinct sound. The rhythm is African and the melody is Spanish. Audience jump, stomp, hum and clap their hands to the 2/2 or 4/4 beat of the rhythms. Secure a recording of this famous music at the public library and, after listening to the catchy tunes, let the students join in by clapping, humming and stomping.

Calypso music began with the “Chantwells.” Chantwells were slaves who entertained plantation owners with songs during colonial days. The songs were about people they knew and things that happened to them. It was a way of passing along news, since most of the islanders could not read and write.

- It would be a challenge for students to pass along information of the day through rhythm and words.

## STEEL DRUMS

The steel drums of the Caribbean Islands are fashioned from discarded oil drums that are considered no longer useful. The native islanders used their creativity to make them into something that brought beauty into their lives. An orchestra of the barrel drums, each tuned differently, can produce a variety of effects that resemble the guitar or piano. Bands can play the island music as well as popular tunes and symphonies. The player strikes various parts of the drum’s surface with different parts of the hand or with an instrument. The drums are cut in varying lengths to produce different tones.

- Secure from the public library a recording or an audiocassette of the famous fast-paced music of the steelbands so that students can listen to the music and identify it whenever they hear the sounds.

This is a good opportunity for students to make drums from unusual materials that have been discarded or relegated to the scrap heaps. What can be done with old hub caps, jar lids and other discarded items?

***“Calypso Rhythms,” “Steel Drums,” “Making a Musical Rattle,” “Trinidad Carnival,” and “Creating a Rhythm Band” from: Stull, Elizabeth Crosby. Multicultural Discovery Activities for Elementary Grades. West Nyack, NY: The Center for Applied Research in Education, 1995.***

## MAKING A MUSICAL RATTLE

Give students the opportunity to create a variety of musical instruments from scrap materials. One example is to make a rattle instrument by pounding a long nail through soda bottle caps (preferably the old metal ones, plastic gives a different sound) onto a thick stick. Sounds will vary according to the number of caps, number of nails and thickness of the wood.

The maraca is a popular instrument made from dry gourds and filled with seeds that rattle when the musician shakes them. Try making rattles with different seeds and different-sized cardboard containers if you do not have access to gourds.

## TRINIDAD CARNIVAL

This festival event symbolizes the way of life in song and dance. People get ready for the event right after the December holidays. The parade features life-sized headpieces of biblical characters and legendary figures. Early bands in Trinidad were called “bamboo” bands because they consisted of bamboo poles struck against each other to make sounds. Students can decorate dowel rods with designs put on with paint or felt pen, and use them as rhythm sticks.

## CREATE A RHYTHM BAND

Make instruments from heavy-duty paper plates. Place one plate upside down on top of another. Decorate the exterior with designs made from felt-tipped pens or paint. In between the two plates (like a sandwich) insert small materials (uncooked rice in one, dried peas in another, sand in another, and so on). Glue the edges, and then staple the edges when glue is dry.

This type of instrument, along with the rhythm sticks and other handmade instruments, can be used by students to accompany recorded music. Have from three to five students work together to perform.

**VARIATION:** Students can get ready to go home while being entertained by the music of the rhythm band. Select from three to five class members to accompany the recorded music while students are cleaning up, and getting their sweaters or coats and hats at the end of the day. It is a good way to end the day on a happy note. Students can take turns being rhythm band members.

## SOUNDS

1. The human ear can only hear a particular range of sounds. It is more sensitive to middle high frequencies. Animals also have a particular range of sounds they can hear. Two examples: dogs can hear high pitches that humans cannot and elephants can hear pitches lower than humans can. Have the class compose a list of several different types of animals. Then have each student research one or two animals to find out what range of sounds (pitch and frequency) those animals can hear. Have the students place their animals on a chart (one for the entire class) so they may compare which animals can hear what range.
2. Take a wooden spoon and hit/tap it against different objects, e.g., a pillow, a table, a metal desk, a wall, the window, etc. Have students compare the different sounds: Is it clear or muffled (quality/timbre)? Does it echo? Is the pitch high or low? How long does the sound last? Does it sound like more than one sound (overtones)?
3. Water in glasses: fill several glasses of the same shape with different levels of water, tap the glass near the rim with a knife or other piece of silverware. Students should compare the different pitches. Is the pitch higher or lower when there is more or less water in the glass?

## COMPOSING SOUNDS

1. Patterns: Have students work in groups to create patterns with clapping and snapping. The teacher may want to do a few patterns with the class to get the students started. Examples: “clap-clap-snap-clap-clap-snap” or “clap-snap-clap-clap-snap-clap-clap-snap.” You may also want to throw in a slap on the thigh.
2. After the groups have had time to experiment, have the students translate their clapping patterns into visual patterns using different colors, shapes or sizes. Example: if clap = red and snap = blue, then “clap-clap-snap-clap-clap-snap” would be “red-red-blue-red-red-blue.” Or shapes, “square-square-circle-square-square-circle” or combine the two. Then have students repeat the process experimenting with making the sounds faster or slower and translating that into a visual pattern. Then try longer and shorter sounds, or higher and lower pitches.
3. Have students take the patterns they have created and put them together to create a composition. Students may also want to incorporate different sounds, such as, vocal sounds, a shaker can or drum.
4. Either take a story the students are familiar with or have students write their own, and have the story correspond to the composition they wrote.

# VOCABULARY

**PAN** – another name for a steeldrum

**STEEL DRUM** – a drum made out of a 55 gallon oil barrel, originally created in Trinidad

**MALLET** – a stick used to strike a drum in order to produce sound

**BRAKE DRUM** – originally a car part, used in steel bands to create rhythm

**CONGA** – a type of drum

**COW BELL** – a percussion instrument

**TRINIDAD** – an island in the Caribbean

**CARNIVAL** – the Lenten festival in Trinidad, during which major steel drum competitions are held

**BAMBOO TAMBOO** – Trinidad street paraded that existed prior to the steel drum; Bamboo tamboo was banned and steeldrum was developed as an alternative.

**OIL DRUM** – metal barrel used to transport oil

**LEAD PAN** – highest voice in a steelband, plays the melody, equivalent to the first soprano in a choir

**DOUBLE TENORS** – one voice down from the lead pan, plays secondary melody, equivalent to the second soprano in a choir

**DOUBLE SECONDS** – one voice down from the double tenors, plays harmony, equivalent to the alto in a choir

**CELLOS** – one voice down from the double seconds, equivalent to the tenor in a choir

**BASSES** – one voice down from the cellos, equivalent to the bass in a choir; made from the full 55 gallon oil drum

**LEARNING BY ROTE** – learning by doing, by imitating the teacher

**CALYPSO** – a style of music originating in the West Indies, marked by lively duple meter (two beats per measure) and having lyrics that are often improvised and usually satirize local personalities and events

**Soca** – a style of rhythmic music

**TUNING** – to set an instrument to the correct pitch; with steel drums, this requires hammering the metal to obtain the correct pitch

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