

US NAVY STEEL BAND

A Pan-American Tradition:



U.S. Navy Steel Band Circa 1990s

➤ When conjuring up memories of early steel pan pioneers, one recalls visions of Ellie Mannette and Winston "Spree" Simon pounding-out dust bins and creating life from steel. Likewise, the fame and visibility of legendary internationally touring Trinidadian steel bands such as the 1951 TASPO steel band and the Esso Trinidad Tripoli steel band are also well celebrated. Yet, unknown to many is that in 1957 American naval Admiral Daniel V. Gallery created the first official non-Trinidadian American-based steel band. Unquestionably the most influential of all early steel bands in the United States, Admiral Gallery, Commandant of Tenth Naval District and the band's

patron, stationed the steel band at the U.S. Naval base on San Juan, Puerto Rico.

U.S. Navy Steel Band, Brussels Worlds Fair, 1957

The popularity of the Pandemoniacs, as they were known, immediately took San Juan by storm, instilling enough confidence in Gallery to embark on tours of the continental United States, South America, and Europe for the 1957 Brussels Worlds Fair. Gallery's enthusiasm and much of the steel band's early success is a direct result of Harry Belafonte and the calypso craze that swept America during the mid 1950s.

The first musicians of the U.S. Navy

Steel Band were actually navy brass band musicians stationed in San Juan, fortunate enough to receive Gallery's reassignment.

During the early years, Ellie Mannette was regularly flown in to the naval base from Trinidad for instruction, tuning, and maintenance. The process of hiring Trinidadians to train American steel bands was necessary, considering the only recent evolution of the steel band genre, and continued throughout the early decades of the American steel band movement. Moreover, this method of training was aided by the many Trinidadian-based steel bands extending American tours. When the U.S. Navy Steel Band moved to New Orleans in 1970, band members became expert arrangers and tuners, and the band was self sustaining; though in

later years Mannette, Cliff Alexis, and Phil Solomon periodically built and tuned pans for the band.

Preparing for an appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show, 1958

The U.S. Navy Steel Band was particularly popular on national variety shows and appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1958 and 1959. They also appeared on the Adventure Tomorrow series for CBS in 1960. Equally popular on vinyl, the U.S. Navy Steel Band released a total of eleven albums on the Continental, Cook, Sony-Lab, and A & R labels, most of which were released between 1957-1970. The arrangements performed by the band are by all accounts similar to any of the early Trinidadian steel drum bands; calypsos, mambos, bassa novas, etc... and several of Franz Grissom's (USNSB director and chief arranger 1957-1964) arrangements including Fire in me Pan and Greensleeves have been posthumously published.

Gallery retired in the late 1960s, and the Pandemoniacs relocated bases to New Orleans in 1970, residing there until 1999. Gallery's intensions and motivation for creating the U.S. Navy Steel Band is not entirely clear; however, the resulting cultural significances of the band are readily apparent. The U.S. Navy Steel Band brought the music, dance (limbo),

essentially the cultural capital of the Caribbean Islands to the fore of the American populous. More directly, Gallery employed the steel band's powerful public notoriety for Navy recruitment, goodwill ambassadorship, and as a personal cocktail band for his many social obligations as a naval commandant.

.U.S. Navy Steel Band, Carnival in Antigua, 1957

Former members suggest that since the move to New Orleans in 1970, the U.S. Navy Steel Band gave in excess of 3000 performances world-wide in addition to the approximately 3000 from 1957-1970. Considering this massive exposure, it was a shock to current and former members when in 1999 the announcement came from Navy brass that the U.S. Navy Steel Band was decommissioned and was to be disbanded. Despite early national and international fame, beginning in the late 1960s the U.S. Navy Steel Band gradually fell from public consciousness. In many ways, the U.S. Navy Steel Band has not been forgotten, and undoubtedly its influence is seen and felt in the contemporary American university steel band scene; particularly, Al O'Connor who established the first continuously running steel band program at an American university at Northern Illinois University.

Ultimately, the U.S. Navy Steel Band aided in exposing the American public to steel band music, and ushering it through the calypso and exotica crazes of the 1950s and 60s. But the U.S. Navy Steel Band's specific legacy to the growth and development of steel pan in America is also largely felt in the performance of Franz Grissom's arrangements, the many former members who have formed professional steel band ensembles throughout the United States, and the donation, following disbandment, of the U.S. Navy Steel Band's pans to youth steel bands.

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By **Andrew. R. Martin** ©

