



Alan JNO BAPTISTE

The steel pan fraternity in Dominica and in East London has lost one of its biggest stars and dedicated worker for the musical genre. Alan Jno Baptiste was 57 when he died in his home country Dominica. The sudden death which shocked the island and all his friends in East London was attributed to Leptospirosis.

➔ His career covered more than 30 years and was one of – maybe the best steel pan musician – to have emerged from the island of Dominica. His fast hands, great positioning, elaborate repertoire and wonderful personality made him a friend of all who knew him and he got on with all. Never a bad word was said about Alan. Alan Baptiste had to remain content with being one of the Grand Old East Enders most enduring pan entertainers, and was never in competition with anybody. He worked well with Gerald Forsyth, Ian Beckles, Daniel Lewis, King Gabby (the limbo dancer and pan musician) and all the other big names of the East End. He became a member of Nostalgia Steel Band and

worked well with Sterling Betancourt on many projects.

Alan arrived in London in 1993, and quickly established himself as a pan entertainer. He first worked with John Scruff before branching out on his own. He set up his own gigging band, 'Phase Five' with Freddie Hohenkirk, David Herbert, Janine Williams, Miranda Hohenkirk and Jerry Brown. Alan became a peripatetic teacher at three schools – Eastlea Comprehensive School, Plashet Girl School and Lister School of Performing Arts, all in the Borough of Newham. He later added four more schools to the list; such was his reputation to get the best of the students he was teaching. He met

Felix Joseph in 1994, and became the arranger of Forest Gate Steel Band, now renamed The Newham Steel Orchestra. This was his main stage and the band saw its best results under Alan. In 2001, Alan arranged the first steel band festival in the East End and eight steel bands entered. He engineered the celebrations for "50 years of steel band in the United Kingdom" with a concert at Stratford Circus Theatre, East London, and this was to date, the best exposure of pan to an East End audience. Alan set up the East London Steel Pan Enterprise with three other pan players and had an office at New Vic, Newham Enterprise Project. The East London Steel Pan

Enterprise became well known in the area – but Alan had to return home suddenly and the project ended.

In Dominica he revived the steel pan fraternity there which had seen its worst days. He restarted classes for young talents and set up the Dominica Steel Pan Academy with Prime Ministerial backing. Indeed he received funding from the Minister of Culture and more was forthcoming from Caricom. When Alan died (15th October 2007) the island went into mourning and the academy was renamed "The Alan Baptiste Steel Pan Academy". He was a friend of mine, and I will miss him.

By Lionel MaCalman

