



# pan podium feature artiste spotlight

## DR. CHRIS TANNER

A Pan Profile from America's Heartland  
By Andrew Martin and Ray Funk

Dr. Chris Tanner is Associate Professor of Music at Miami University, located just a few miles north of Cincinnati, Ohio. Tanner occupies a nearly unique position: he is one of only two tenured professors in the United States whose primary teaching responsibility is directing a steel band program, the other being Northern Illinois University's Liam Teague.

With hard work and determination Tanner founded the Miami University Steel Band in 1994 while only a graduate student. Since then, the program has developed into one of the strongest programs in the country. Through Tanner's guidance the ensemble has released four studio albums: Burnin (2001),

One More Soca (2003), Simple Pleasures (2006), and most recently Three Wishes (2009). The Miami University Steel Band gives regular concerts on campus and has performed throughout Ohio and the United States. The group has regularly featured renowned guest performers at their concerts, including Ray Holman, Liam Teague, Andy and Jeff Narell, Tom Miller, Gary Gibson and many others. In addition to the four recordings released through Pan Ramajay Productions, the band's two appearances at the prestigious Percussive Arts Society International Convention have provided national recognition.

A multifaceted artist, Tanner is also a talented composer and arranger for pan and his book *The Steel Pan Game Plan* (2007) is a how-to resource for schools starting pan programs. Moreover, Tanner is sought after for workshops and master classes throughout the States. He has served as a clinician and performing artist from Florida to Alaska, and closer to home he consults with fledgling pan programs at secondary schools. He also served as a faculty member at the Mannette Steel Drums summer workshops for several years.

Tanner first encountered steel pan as an undergraduate music major at West Virginia University in Morgantown, West Virginia. He transferred to WVU in 1990 and was a student of the noted percussion teacher Dr. Phil Fiani. But it was in 1992, when Ellie Mannette arrived as an artist-in-residence, that life changed for Tanner. "When I discovered the pan, I just thought it was a beautiful instrument. I just fell in love with it. I got bitten by the jumbie, as they say." In addition to the beautiful sound of the instrument and the infectious groove of calypso, it was Mannette's charismatic presence that captivated the young student. "Having Ellie Mannette working in a room in the basement of the CAC was nothing short of amazing. Here was a genius, a living legend, a major innovator in pan, right in our midst."

Tanner was hooked. Afternoons spent observing and listening to Mannette had a significant influence on him, and he soon realized that his career goals must include pan. In the WVU band, he learned to play the double second pan, the circle-of-fifths lead pan and the triple guitar pan, and he also tried his hand at arranging. In Mannette's basement workshop he put a hammer to a pan a few times, but with limited success. While tuning would certainly not be in his future, he nonetheless developed a basic understanding of the craft, and along with that a profound appreciation for those, like Mannette, who are able to create these wonderful instruments.

In 1992 Mannette and WVU hosted a steel pan summit that brought together some of the most famous players of the day. Panists Andy Narell, Mat Britain, Tom Miller and Ken Professor Philmore enjoyed a short residency including seminars, performances, and educational talks.

One thing that struck Tanner was the preference among these players for the Invader-style lead pan, based on Mannette's original pattern and very rarely seen these days. As Tanner prepared to move on from WVU and pursue graduate studies, Mannette offered a kingly gift. "Ellie told me in the spring term of 1993 that he wanted to build me a pan as a graduation present. He asked me what kind of pan I would like, and I chose the Invader lead, even though I had never before played on one."

Mannette delivered a Signature Series Invader lead pan to Tanner in the fall of 1993, as he was beginning his Master of Music coursework at Miami University. He counts himself fortunate to be in the small fraternity of players who play and enjoy the Invader-style pattern, with its darker tone and quirky yet oddly comfortable layout.

As a graduate student Tanner attended to his studies while anticipating the arrival of a set of Mannette instruments for Miami University.

Tanner's teacher and now colleague and mentor, percussion professor Dr. William Albin, placed an order with Mannette soon after recruiting Tanner to the graduate program in the summer of 1993. The set of five instruments arrived in January 1994, and the ten-member ensemble debuted to a wildly enthusiastic crowd at the spring Percussion Ensemble concert.

Since that beginning, the ensemble has grown through the unwavering support of Miami University's student body and administration, and Steel Band concerts have become "must-see" events for many on campus and throughout the community.

The program has grown in a curricular sense as well: whereas the group began under the auspices of the percussion studio, the steel band program now encompasses two separate ensembles: a beginner "training" band and a performance ensemble: both of which are offered for credit. The ensembles meet twice weekly and rehearse similar to any other large music ensemble at Miami University.

Tanner finished his Masters degree in 1996 and then joined the faculty as a visiting instructor. In 2000 he completed his doctoral work at WVU, and he has since 2001 held the position of professor of music. Tanner

sees his role as a steel band educator on both a local and global scale. For Tanner, steel band education also reaches to the audience, and he sees audience education and cultivation as one of the major challenges faced by American steel bands in the educational sphere.

"I want anyone who comes to my concert to be entertained," explains Tanner. "That's the main goal, actually...But I also want my audiences to experience a good steel band: good instruments, good music and good performance. In this way, I hope to provide a model for the steel band art form." Tanner, like many Trinidadians, wants to elevate the status of steel pan.

His band performs many of the great calypsos or pan tunes by Boogie Sharpe, Ray Holman and Lord Kitchener; however, they also perform an exciting and challenging range of new music for pan created by others seriously committed to the advancement of pan such as Andy Narell, Tom Miller, and even Tanner himself.

Ultimately, Tanner sees the steel band as his medium for art, and he strives to be true to his artistic convictions while at the same time celebrating and respecting the rich history and vibrant culture of pan.

