

my journey to
Trinidad and Tobago's
National Panorama Finals
2010
by Megan Francis

In February 2010, I travelled to Trinidad and Tobago, which is the Southern most twin island republic in the Caribbean, along with 14 other of my steel band members. I have been playing steelpan for three and a half years now, I started at school with steel pan arranger Paul Dowie and became good enough to become part of the Croydon Steel Orchestra, (CSO)

Each year CSO participate in a competition called Panorama. This is a steel pan competition in which the best bands in the country compete for the title of National Panorama Champions. For this we practice for about 4 to 5 hours daily throughout the summer holidays to perfect the 10minute arrangement.

As you would expect, Panorama competitions are held all over the world and of course being that Trinidad is the home of the Steel Pan, Panorama there is the largest and most renowned competition of them all, with musicians travelling from all over the globe to participate. This is why; to be given the chance to experience this was such an amazing opportunity.

We arrived in Trinidad on Friday 29th January at 6pm local time, and immediately felt the 27 Degree heat. We were met at the airport by the manager of Invaders Steel Orchestra, Michael Dingchong, Who made us feel at ease with his friendly nature. He had arranged a Maxi Taxi (a large minibus/small coach) as there were 14 of us to be transported to the panyard.

There, we were introduced to the Captain of the band, and a few other members who were all very friendly – they found our English accents quite humorous as we did theirs, Then, much to our surprise after an 11 hour flight we had to start learning the tune!!!! At this point we realised that this wasn't going to be a chilled out relaxed holiday.

Fortunately, we already knew the Musical Director, Ardin Herbert because we had worked with him during our UK panorama of summer 2009, It was nice to see a familiar face, It also meant that we already had



some familiarity of his style of arrangement – although to be truthful, I wouldn't say this helped much, being that pan is so widely appreciated in Trinidad, the standards are particularly high and the musicians we were playing alongside were immensely talented. So you can imagine it was a challenge for us! But this was only the beginning!

On Monday, 3 days after we arrived, we began practicing with Woodbrook School Steel Orchestra for Junior Panorama – a similar competition for under 21's. Practice for this began at midday and ended at 6pm, giving us a couple of hours to explore the town, eat roti and lots of ice cream, before heading back to the panyard for main band practice. Our days were extremely long and tiring but fun all the same and our hard work and commitment paid off as we won 1st place in the Junior Panorama competition.

Once Junior Panorama was over, we had more time to relax by the pool and do a bit of souvenir shopping in the mornings before heading off to the panyard. Something we were very grateful for because as the finals for panorama drew closer, rehearsals were longer, often lasting until 4am, and stress levels were high because you did not want to be the one who got it wrong and be told you were not good enough to play for the finals!!!

Nevertheless, with perseverance and the support from Paul and each other, as well as encouragement from our new found friends from Trinidad and America we made the grade and were able to perform as part of Invaders on final night.



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Saturday 13th February, the day of finals eventually arrived, we were all eager to get on stage and perform the tune we'd been working on day and night for the past 2 weeks. So after a few more hours of practice, some food and a group prayer, we began pushing the racks of steel pans down the road to the Queens Park Savannah. This alone was an amazing experience, traffic willingly came to a halt in order to allow all 120 of us to push our Steel pan racks down a main road, it made me realise the level of respect locals have for their culture, the instrument and its players.

On arrival, we found our place in the line up of bands and started to practice..... AGAIN!!! The atmosphere at this point was incredible, almost overwhelming. Queen's Park Savannah was filled with hundreds of musicians, pan enthusiasts, fans, photographers and television crews all present to witness the performances on the national stage, not to mention all those at home and overseas watching it live on television or via video stream on the internet.

We took to the stage and performed at 1.30am and for the ten minutes we played, my built up exhaustion due to the late nights and concentration, a little bit of nerves and a lot of anxiety was overtaken by sheer excitement and an adrenaline rush, This is what I understand Trinidadians describe as 'The Pan Jumbie', a spirit that comes alive within you when you play steel pan, This 'Jumbie' kept me going for the entire night! After performing we waited anxiously for the results and it was announced that we had placed 4th out of the ten bands in our category. I felt this was a huge achievement as the level of musicianship was very high.