

# In This Synthetic Pan World



## The PHI Pan mystifies Southern Pan Jazz Audience

In late October 2008 in the city of San Fernando, the Trinidad and Tobago Steel Pan and Jazz Festival was launched at the Skiffle Bunch Panyard.

To everyone's surprise, an act which was not advertised became apparent, when a group of musicians were seen sound checking some different types of instruments, with electronic gadgets, laptops/monitors and music sheets.

Without much fanfare, the audience was introduced to these instruments, concave in shape i.e. sunk like the 55 gallon steel pans but without sides, hanging on single pan stands, with a black plastic outer surface, and a black and white spider web outlay interior.



**That Pan folks, is a layman description of the PHI pan, the Percussive Harmonic Instrument, which is the second innovation coming out of the UWI Laboratory, the first being the G-Pan.**

Technologically speaking, the PHI merges the powerful facility of MIDI, a computerized interface which facilitates the communication of electronic music synthesizers over a network, with a physical form inspired by the traditional [spider web] Steel Pan. It can be amplified just like any electronic instrument available on the market.

The PHI employs modern electronics, and manufacturing techniques, utilizing lightweight materials to improve mobility and reduce transportation, handling and storage costs, delivering a robust instrument that significantly addresses those major concerns of the current bulky Steel Orchestras. **The PHI looks like a plastic pan which could be played with sticks or fingers, but the music reproduced is similar to a syn-**

**thesizer's wide variety of sounds, which can either imitate other instruments or generate unusual new timbres.**

My initial reaction to this wide ranging instrument, took me back to the lyrics of Synthetic World, a late 60's early 70's Reggae and Pop blend from Jimmy Cliff, a song reviewed with revolutionary phrases by Billboard among others as "politically informed" and "defiantly critical". Although this song is a socio political commentary of the situation then, and not about synthetic music.

Pan Connoisseurs should recall that simultaneously, Steel Pan; its music and Panorama, were reaching new heights and breaking traditional barriers. New styles, sounds and types of Pans were being introduced, arrangers were stepping up their games, so much so that own compositions for Panorama debuted in this period as well.

## Steel & Brass Rocks We Beat St James Live

For quite a few years, including this year's 10th edition of We Beat - St. James Live, a truck borne amplified mix of steel pans, brass, traditional instruments and vocals, has been in receipt of very little attention, although they consistently make potent pan music statements. This incredible mix comes from the roots of **Rhapsody Steel Orchestra which was originally formed in Arima as a conventional steel band in 1979. They became non-existent by 1985, but were rejuvenated after 14 years of dormancy in 1999.**

The band was eventually passed on to the next generation hence the origins of the term/name Rhapsody Rebirth, the New Generation. The focus, name and music of the band was then fashioned to attract the youth and by extension the future. Currently they are known as Rhapsody Steel & Brass, attributed to their successful experiments with the fusion of the steel pans, brass, traditional instruments and vocals.

They have a fantastic product to sell, a powerful musical sound which conventional steelbands lack, being the

ability to match any big band or DJ at Carnival fetes, and, on the road. Many couldn't believe their eyes and ears on Ariapita Ave. this past Carnival Tuesday morning, not only hearing the sweet sounds, but witnessing a modified steelband pounding as loudly as the big trucks.

This new and unique steel and brass product was launched in 2005; their claim is that this has made the band more manageable, and is a great method of preparing young panists and musicians for professionalism in the music industry.



This innovativeness allows them to use fewer players, and to achieve an amplified well balanced sound through an electronic DJ system, utilizing a sound engineer, mixing board, proper microphone setups, and more recently the PHI [Percussive Harmonic Instrument] Pans, has been integrated into their amalgamation.

I encouraged a pan fan like myself, to listen and observe Rhapsody on the streets. His immediate comment after experiencing their big band sound was - Bertie Marshall is the man who started this amplified thing way back in the 1960's, look how long it has taken us to reach this level - when he recognised that the PHI was powered by laptops/computers, and the interior outlay of the instrument was similar to Tony Williams' spider web of the 60's, we both pondered aloud as to whether the non acceptance or misconception of early techno approaches such as these, has made our country losers rather than leaders of the steelpan industry.

## Towards a Brighter Future for Pan in T&T

**The UWI Steel Pan Research Laboratory has certainly demonstrated that they understand the market for Pan, and will deliver a new range of 21st century instruments.**

They have continued to operate amidst some criticism, with utterances such as - the PHI and G Pans are works in progress - who should receive the nation's highest award - who's the first to revisit a National Steel Band - why no consultation with the "World Governing Body" - an organization given business opportunities by past governments to be self sufficient and blow it, and, their massive oversight of protecting intellectual property by patenting the National Instrument, which, by the way, seems to be a major motivation behind the PHI and G Pans.

Simply put, Steel Pan has had to be re-defined and re-invented to be patented and branded as "made in Trinidad and Tobago". Clearly, this era of progress and change gives us a better understanding of the negative effects of frustration, lack of support, and recognition, which prevented Anthony Williams from furthering the spider web and the fourths and fifths concepts. The criticism, jealousy and violence meted out to Bertie Marshall and the Hillanders, curtailing their research and experiments in the amplification of steel pans.

The government has finally decided to embrace, recognize and reward these talents just as the US does for Ellie Mannette, no wonder why he refuses to involve himself with Pan in T&T.

Unfortunately, these earlier researchers lacked high tech resources, funding, government or moral support. They were driven by pure vision and passion for Pan and its music. Therefore, in this synthetic pan world we now live in, it may appear as though the Double Seconds, Spider Web, Cellos, Double Tenors, Rocket Pan, Bore Pan, Quadro Phonic, etc. never existed before the PHI and G Pans.

The mixed views expressed beg several questions. Is this new and improved interest in Pan and its music patronizing, political or for real? Was the award partisan, or given to ensure that the UWI team continues to raise the bar?

Do these recent developments mask or highlight the plight of present inventors and innovators, and of Mannette, Williams, Marshall, Charles and the long list of early pan scientists who were never substantially rewarded or recognized? **My view is that areas such as Culture and Sports should not be Government or State controlled. These should be some of the largest businesses or business opportunities, run by private corporations.**

Notwithstanding my undying loyalty, love and respect of what was achieved with the 55 gallon version of pan, to maintain leadership and gain the economic advantages of the steelpan industry, innovativeness such as the G Pan, the PHI Pan and Rhapsody Steel and Brass is a solid way forward.

For more information on the G Pan and the PHI Pan logon to [www.panadigm.com](http://www.panadigm.com)

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