



RASPO Steel Orchestra – tenth anniversary

RASPO Steel Orchestra started out as a community steel band set up by founder Mary Genis in February 1999. Supported by Arts Council England with instruments and tutors provided by Mangrove Steel Band, the initiative, designed to bring new audiences to Carnival Arts, offered the community a chance to play steel pan music, learn about the history and culture creating a new community steel band for Reading.



The name RASPO - Reading All Steel Percussion Orchestra - was chosen by the participants to celebrate their Reading connection and commemorate TASPO - Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra, the very first steel band to play at the Festival of Britain in 1951.

RASPO's first performance at Reading Community Carnival with Mangrove Steel Band in May 1999 was soon followed by an invitation to film 'The Steel Pan' for the nationally televised children's programme

Rosie & Jim, and for BBC's Millenium Children in Need Appeal seen by over 15 million viewers. TV appearances became a regular event for RASPO including an appearance in 2006 for CBBC's Level Up programme. With bookings at Glastonbury Festival and Caribbean carnivals throughout the region including Reading, High Wycombe, Swindon & Slough, RASPO popularity grew attracting new players and increased demand for educational workshops.

Based in Reading's Central Club and managed by carnival arts organisation



CultureMix Arts, RASPO held annual Black History Month events to raise awareness of steel pan culture to the community; as a result the orchestra grew in size and the RASPO ensemble were in demand for corporate events and private functions. **When Central Club closed in 2004 RASPO moved into its new home at the Grade I listed Abbey Gateway. Soon after, RASPO received orchestra development funding from the Arts Council to improve the orchestra and ensemble repertoire, professional skills and to build a new web site.**

Meanwhile the carnival arts and music service set up by CultureMix provided much needed experienced CRB checked tutors for workshops in surrounding schools and colleges. The music service is now highly respected with trained RASPO tutors encouraging schools to include pan in their music curriculum. RASPO is featured on the autumn 2009 front cover of schools magazine 'Classroom Music' which includes an article written by Mary Genis on how to set up a school steel band.

In 2006 Mary won a Carnival Artist Fellowship award to visit NE Brazil introducing steel pan music to Afro Brazilian percussion band Ylé d'Egbá developing a collaboration which culminated in the opening performance at Brazil's Olinda Carnival. More awards followed with Mary receiving a BBC Radio Berkshire community award for her contribution towards Black culture in Reading, a Clore Fellowship Award in 2007 and more recently a Cultural Champion Pride of Reading Award in 2009 for her dedicated support of RASPO's players.

Eight of RASPO's best players achieved their ambition to take part in the UK Panorama competition in 2007. They joined Mangrove steelband to learn Len 'Boogsie' Sharpe's, 'Sharing Licks'. Although Mangrove placed sixth that year, the competition gave RASPO an opportunity to experience playing pan at its best. The event was covered in a special Thames Valley Tonight feature on ITV. In 2009, Mary joined Mangrove for Andre White's arrangement of 'Boogsie's' 'Magic Drums' which saw them capture second place in the Panorama competition.

Through an internship programme set up in 2006 CultureMix continues to offer RASPO players attending college, training in business administration, arts project management, professional development, finance, pan tutoring and work experience so they can gain essential skills for career opportunities in the creative industries. The interns manage RASPO's administration and gain valuable hands on experience as pan tutors.

RASPO is currently developing a new theatre stage musical. 'Pan Fever' is a family show telling the story of the steel pan through music provided by RASPO's eighteen-piece orchestra with dancers, costumes and calypso vocals courtesy of Michael 'Bubbles' Olivierre. The show premiered to an audience of thousands at WOMAD's 2009 Charlton Park festival in Wiltshire where RASPO also launched their first audio CD 'RASPO Live!' featuring an eclectic repertoire of classical, pop, soul, jazz and calypso. 'Pan Fever' has since been showcased at the Carnival Learning Centre in the Isle of Wight and at Reading's Concert Hall, with a theatre tour planned for 2010.

With ongoing support from Matthew Phillip, Michael 'Bubbles' Olivierre and the CultureMix team, RASPO continues to provide quality entertainment, education and development sharing the positive message of steel pan music to schools and audiences across the UK and beyond.

For more information go to www.culturemixarts.co.uk by **Mary Genis.**