

## THE BIG DRUM IN THE BIG CITY

Creole Enculturation in the Pan  
West-Indian Community of Brooklyn, N.Y.

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The steel drums are mounted on a frame and wheeled through the streets.

In the summertime in New York, you don't have to wait for the airline commercials to hear the sounds of the West Indies. You can hear "Yellow Bird" being played on the steel drum during lunch hour down on Wall Street. If you're only visiting New York, hear the "pan" being played near Rockefeller Center and Times Square. And if you are strolling through Central Park on a Sunday look for the pan men near the bandshell. They may be even better than in the islands. You can find a steel drum musician almost anywhere in Manhattan drawing a crowd. He was driven in from Brooklyn with his metal pan and a metal stand and he'll play until a policeman chases him away.

The soloists on the street are the virtuosi. They almost seem to be dancing

as they beat out their tunes with two pans, and four sticks, playing chords, their arms crossing over between the two instruments, the rubber-tipped sticks circling over the pans to strike the notes. They are most often Trinidadians but some are from islands that share in Trinidad's culture—St. Kitts, Barbados, Grenada. (Barbados, called "Little England," whose people are called Bajans, would certainly object to being classed with Trinidadians, and vice versa. Inter-island rivalry prevails and "West Indian" is an identity used only in reference to the non-Caribbean world. Many West Indians are more concerned with politics back home than who is elected mayor of New York.)

The professional, the street soloist, is only the proverbial tip of the iceberg. On

Labor Day dozens of bands are out celebrating Carnival on Eastern Parkway, including the U.S. Navy's band. None of these performers are professional, but some are practicing their music all year long, performing at social functions, playing in more than one band. Some of the organized bands try to sell island culture and incorporate bottle and limbo dancing in their show. The same musicians are also students, hospital workers, and house-

tinue playing on their own. The bass player is a supervisor in an EKG lab. He's been in America for ten years, and regrets never having played the pan or being active in Carnival at home. The youths are high school and college students. This group, not all represented at practice, is called the Vince Satisfiers and it won the Panorama competition at the Brooklyn Carnival as the best steel band. (See the accompanying diagrams for Mr. Hernandez' designs of the



2 Old fashioned tympani and the steel drum are mixed in this Carnival scene from Carriacou, West Indies.

3 The Big Drum ceremony, an ancestor cult found in Carriacou, is generically antecedent to the steel drum. Both are elaborated forms of slave celebrations from plantation days, rebellious, and a syncretic dialectic with the Colonial established system. Today, a Big Drum troupe of expatriates performs this rite as an entertainment in Brooklyn, N.Y. The elders are honored and lead the ceremony as seen here in Carriacou.

wives. The more skilled ones play the tenor pan, which has a score of notes and is the lead drum. The beginner can start on the bass or cello pans, with just a few notes to strike.

Most pan players don't read music. Watching the practice session of the Silhouettes, whose pan tuner is Conrad Jordan, one sees that most of the instruction involves one teenaged boy going over the sequence of notes with another. Over in Vincent Hernandez' basement, the pan tuner is rehearsing his band. At an early session, two women were playing cello, a man of 29 years was learning bass, and three or four youths were playing tenor pans. All were Trinidadian and almost all knew Vincent prior to joining the band. He instructs them and they instruct each other. When Vincent steps out they con-

four major drums in the steel band and orchestra.)

All this music now present in New York reflects the change in immigration law in 1965, and the subsequent immigration facilitated by jet travel. Illegal entry also became more possible after a community was established and newcomers could be helped, "placed" in the American setting. And the music is also here because, as Trinidadians say, given only a stick and a bit of tin they will find a way to make music.

The British colonists who were so inimical to the sounds of Creole percussion, gave their subjects many unwanted opportunities to display a persistent ingenuity and attachment to drumming. Historically the core of Trinidad culture is the affirmation against the metropolitan

outsiders that Carnival (and the drumming) must never die, whatever the obstacles.

In colonial days, drumming brought the slaves together from neighboring plantations and runaways would come from hiding to incite rebellion. The British were imperially intolerant, and respectable colonial journals inveighed against the drums and African-derived Creole celebrations. Carnival was completely suspended during World War II. The steel drum,

and carnival is the West Indian Island of Brooklyn, New York.

The three forms of expression are Trinidadian in that their development can be traced on that island; it is primary in description, although other islands were linked through different institutions at different times. Jamaicans have a tradition of *mocha jumbie* (stilt walking) and Christmas mumming that has contributed to the Carnival tradition. But Jamaica's



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which was invented near the end of the war, radiated into a cultural vacuum and the backyards of Port of Spain filled with youths beating the "pan." The Empire ebbed and this form was never suppressed.

Eleven years ago the recognized inventor of the steel drum came to New York City and now Ellie Mannette is living in Hollis, Queens, the original and still acknowledged as the best "pan tuner" in the business. He is only a part of a cultural and ethnic "pipeline" that leads to New York and London and Montreal and the cities of the east coast and begins in Trinidad, off the coast of Venezuela. Trinidad shares a tripartite tradition—the calypso, the carnival, and the steel drum—with other culturally affiliated islands of the Lesser Antilles. Another island linked in the cultural pipeline through the pan, calypso

Carnival is dormant, and it has no special enthusiasm for the steel drum. Of course, Jamaica has the popular new form called "reggae" which is both musical and an ideological counterpart of "rasta," (Rastafarianism, partly a cult, partly a sociopolitical movement).

British suppression of Creole forms was also a response to their inherent violence. Slave and Creole festival included instituted community-based rivalries. Conflict was ceremonialized in the *paywoe*, *speech mas* and *kalinda*. The *kalinda* was a stick fight in which men battled on a challenger-champion basis. Blood was usually drawn while singers and musicians played. The combatants kept up a dance rhythm while exchanging blows. The practice continues only in the more rural areas and preserves the original fighting content of Carnival.

"Paywoe" and "speech mas" pitted spokesmen for communities in verbal challenges that led to confrontation. The calypsonian at Carnival still has a partisan and combative following and he often insults his rival in song.

Before the war the British had suppressed a timpanic marching band, the *bamboo tamboo* that used hollow bamboo tubes for rhythm and tone. These bands were also rivalrous, and at times fought each other. With this form gone, marchers took to stick and pan, striking anything that could produce a satisfactory clank. In the '30's, Winston Spree Simon put a few notes on a tin cover, hardly enough for a melody, and used it with the marching timpani. Simon's pan was the precursor to the steel drum developed by Ellie Mannette from a 55-gallon oil drum.

Even if there was no drumming and no Carnival in the war years, there were American bases and discarded oil drums. Mr. Manette experimented with the large drum until his instrument was ready for public performance, but he is perfecting it even now. His main concern is that the steel must retain its resiliency after the notes have been grooved into it, and the notes must be on pitch, and they must be separated so that only part of the concave drum is reverberating when struck while the rest is resonating overtones.

Ellie produces most of his pans in the basement of his Hollis home. Here the higher pitched tenor, violin or soprano pans (as they are variously called) are cut from the barrel. They may have more than twenty notes. Each pan is fired to temper the steel. Then the pan tuner hammers out a groove to separate each note on the pan. The placement of notes to reduce conflict and maintain separate pitch is important as are the size and shape of the groove. The bass and the cello pans with two to six notes are simpler and the barrel is not cut off. The cut-off pan was an adaptation to marching, but now pans are rolled along mounted on frames. The steel drum that identifies the West Indies for tourists and in the airline commercials is also a serious art form. Those who, like its inventor, see it as the latest important innovation in music, feel that one day it should be recognized as an instrument with the potential of a guitar or fiddle.

Ellie won notice when he first competed in a pan contest with a 14-note drum. He played in the 1946 Carnival and was hailed nationally, appeared on radio playing the "Brahms Lullaby" and "Laura" and

was awarded a scholarship to study music in London. The next development was to make the pan acceptable to the British. A Lieutenant Griffith from Antigua was called upon to arrange the notes in conformity with the chromatic scale. This allowed a band to play up to 5½ octaves of music scored as any instrument would be. Ellie joined Griffith with a group that toured England. He has also performed in Philharmonic (now Avery Fisher) Hall at Lincoln Center, and Town Hall in New York City.

After leading his Invaders in the Carnival contingent from Woodbrook—a professional and middle-class neighborhood of Port of Spain—Ellie was recruited by a public relations man from the Grace Lines, Mr. Murray Narrell, to come to New York. He left Trinidad in 1967 to work with youths in the ghettos of Brooklyn and Harlem. The steel drum has since been picked up by other schools and youth programs. Today, the composition of bands in New York has changed substantially from the rough days in the pan yards of Trinidad.

Vincent Hernandez remembers telling Mr. Narrell to see Ellie Mannette. Vincent makes instruments in Manhattan, lives in Brooklyn, is the director of the Vince Satisfiers who won the 1978 Panorama. He is also the owner of Vince Candy Store, of a van used for his band, and homes in Brooklyn and Trinidad. He can remember the days of the steel band "riots," when bands were like youth gangs, fighting for trade and reputation, trying to drive each other off the streets. To "society" people steelbandmen were outcasts. Ellie Mannette, with his Woodbrook connection may have made the bands more "social" but apparently it was government action that brought the steel drum into respectability. The government demanded that international firms like Shell sponsor bands, like Ellie's "Shell Invaders." Money controlled the bands, restrained their competition. It was partly contest money that had caused the physical clashes and disorderliness from the beginning.

Respectability in the Creole world disallows riotous behavior, but "bacchanal" disallows respectability in Carnival. On the other hand, riot can disrupt even Carnival. Carnival without bacchanal is, in the Creole lexicon, merely a fete, and many would agree that there is no bacchanal in Brooklyn, but Labor Day is still a huge fete with a million or more celebrants on Eastern Parkway. That is a surprisingly

# STEEL DRUMS

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Vincent Hernandez, a "pan tuner," makes drums professionally and directs his own band. He is one of less than a dozen pan tuners who have brought their skills to New York from Trinidad.

large number attending what has been a rather obscure event, and the vast majority appear to be West Indians. So far, the media have not covered and the public has not been adequately exposed to the Carnival.

Calvin Ford of the West Indian Day Carnival Association says that before they had oil, Trinidad's major exports were steelband, Carnival and calypso. But Mr. Ford, who has been here long enough to sound like a native New Yorker, overlooked the most important export of all—the huge migration of people. Brooklyn must have more than a half-million expatriates of Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, Grenada, and the smaller islands (plus French and patois speakers from Haiti).

Some have tried to settle elsewhere in the States like Mr. Ford who found life in California very uncomfortable and Mr. Hernandez who felt isolated in New Jersey. But here in Crown Heights, parts of Flatbush, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Bushwick, there is a less than monolithic, rarely corporate, but nevertheless cohesive West Indian black community. You can hear and see a bit of the islands wherever you go: the people on the street, the restaurants, the bakeries that sell Jamaican patties, the record stores in the shopping areas on streets named Fulton, Nostrand and Utica. Eastern Parkway is the marching grounds for Labor Day; it cuts across the community. Large, decaying Prospect Park also serves the revellers. The back of the Brooklyn Museum substitutes for the Queens Park Savannah in Port of Spain, where the formal events of Carnival are held. On the Saturday night before Labor Day, 1978, Vincent Hernandez and the Vince Satisfiers won the Panorama, or steel band competition, in the parking lot behind the Museum.

Trinidad Creole culture presents two opposing images, two ethos. One is the image of a multi-racial society "bringing the people together," unity, in a Carnival that knows no race. The tourist is welcome and the steel band plays for him (or her), pan virtuosi reproducing classical strains on metal drum with a sound sometimes like a tinny xylophone, sometimes like an organ, that makes people happy, that can be enchanting and sentimental as a string section. Trinidadians still admire Britain as a standard of excellence and in America, they often seem to approve of white culture rather than black.

The other image faces the African past and carries the imprint of a short but

exceedingly harsh slavery. Carnival in this image is "bacchanal," riotous, orgiastic, the only time of the year that people really live, when everyone is the same. Even the tourist lady, as the calypso lyrics say, is likely to join the bacchanal, everyone the same. It is the Carnival that also incorporated the kalinda, and the sanguinary rivalries in which the steel bands once participated.

From its original setting to its present ones, the steel drum has participated in several pairs of opposing contexts. It is a pan-West Indian symbol and also particular to the culture of Trinidad. The pan carries on a folk tradition that has also been developed commercially for tourism, and for post-colonial metropolitan consumption. Ethnohistorically, pan playing is in a continuous context with revelry and Carnival from French plantation slavery. Creole is used to label the outcome of folk, African, French and British cultures. The academic context of Creole is British, at times as an opposition, at times a resolution (as in the incorporation of chromatic scale in pan tuning). The opposition is manifest in so much of the traditional Carnival masquerade that mocks the British. There is a dialectic of opposition and resolution that may be seen on both a territorial and a cultural basis, in which people are identified by their communities or by their cultures. Rivalry that once bore territorial significance for the drummer now is commercial, motivated by monetary reward. Money creates its own contexts.

When Vincent Hernandez was playing for the Vigilantes, steel bands were running their rivals off the streets of Port of Spain. The players were outcasts, and were probably unemployed youth. Today's bands in Brooklyn have players of both sexes, youths and married adults. Ellie Mannette makes pans for youth programs in schools and neighborhood centers. The pan is respectable, and even has academic pretensions. Ellie Mannette looked into mass production, but found it impracticable. Pan tuning is laborious, requires technical and musical skill and many hours of work for a single instrument. Mr. Mannette would like to have more apprentices, and his craft may remain limited to Trinidadians. A tuner is also needed to maintain the pan, which will stay tuned for only about two years. But it doesn't take a Trinidadian to play the steel drum, only someone dedicated enough to learn to play well enough to make it worth listening to.

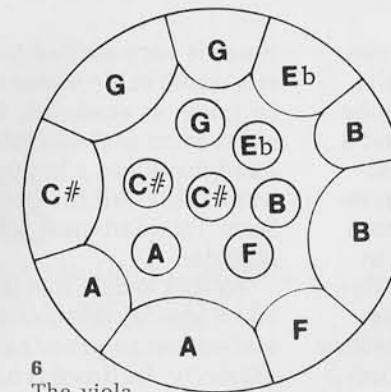
To say that the pan is part of Trinidadian culture abroad, is to say the life of the

expatriate is its social context. The expatriate in Brooklyn is interested in maintaining the cultural life of his home. Trinidadians are generally loyal to their island, sending home remittances and supporting homes and shops there. They are conscientiously trying to preserve an ethnic heritage, witness unremunerated efforts and sacrifices made for Brooklyn Carnival. How this culture defines Trinidadian vis-à-vis New Yorker becomes less clear as New York takes up the island culture, as Jamaican patties sell in Manhattan and reggae plays on top-40 radio stations, and if the Carnival gets more media coverage and the steel drum is used in more schools, the contexts will be more obscured.

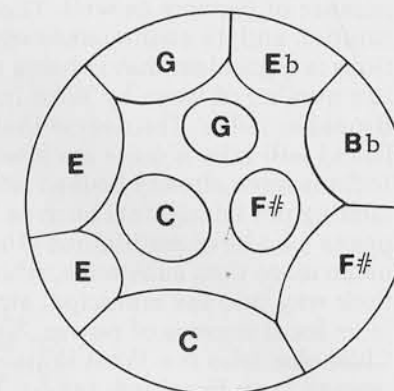
However, acculturation may be attenuated because New York may not require that much adaption on the part of Trinidadians, perhaps no more than it did of Eastern Europeans. People from the land of oil refineries and sugar cane are normally employable, being both educated and industrious, and having skills needed on the U.S. labor market. They frequently work in hospitals as nurses, technicians and aides, some families have several wage earners and there is a strong bourgeois ethic that favors home ownership. While many West Indian adults will discount the role of their father, marriages and household seem stable in Brooklyn. Now that Trinidad is relatively prosperous, there is also the possibility of returning home, as well as maintaining interests simultaneously there and in Brooklyn. Many seem pleased with life in Brooklyn, perhaps there is more to do, more diversity and more street life. But few people become citizens and most are more interested in island politics than politics here. What may be happening in Brooklyn is the establishment of a cultural enclave, an evolving and attractive West Indian way of life that may resist assimilation yet maintain compatibility with New York, its municipal functions and its varied life styles as well as the resources it provides. Although second generation Brooklyn islanders may go their own way, it is apparent from the power struggles and confrontations with Lubavitchers (ultra-orthodox Jews) that their parents are committed to this community.

Older immigrants never had the jet, and the Europeans of the turn of the century could not maintain dual interests as the West Indians do. The latter, however, are distinguished as well as mis-identified by their skin, and are identified by their

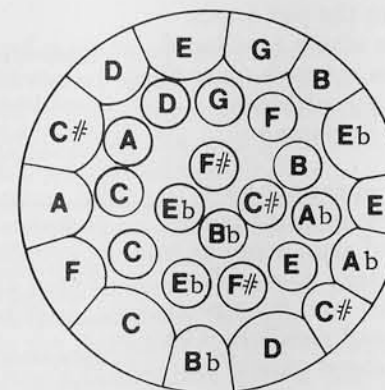
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Below are represented the placement of notes on the drum according to Mr. Hernandez' design.



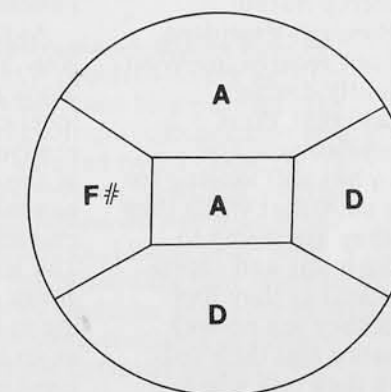
6 The viola



7 The cello



#### SOLO-LEAD Steel-Drum



8 The bass

9 Dancing to the drums.

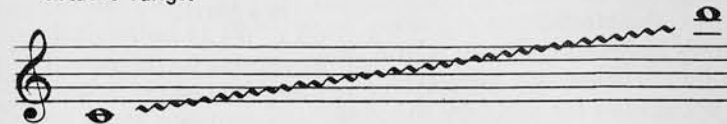
The solo lead is the melody drum, highest in pitch and tone and comparable to the violin in its melodic dominance.

It is played upon similar to a Xylophone. You should use both hands but you may start by playing one note at a time. As on a Xylophone, you can obtain an enriched harmony sound in double notes.

The instrument is played upon with short dowel sticks that are wrapped on one end with a good quality of heavy rubber tape or bands.

You will note that the notes on the lead drum are arranged in an harmonically pattern, rather than chromatically. This is because there is an 'overhang' of vibrations while playing from one note to another and because of this, dissonant notes are not placed next to each other.

The Solo-Lead drum generally has a two and half chromatic octaves range.

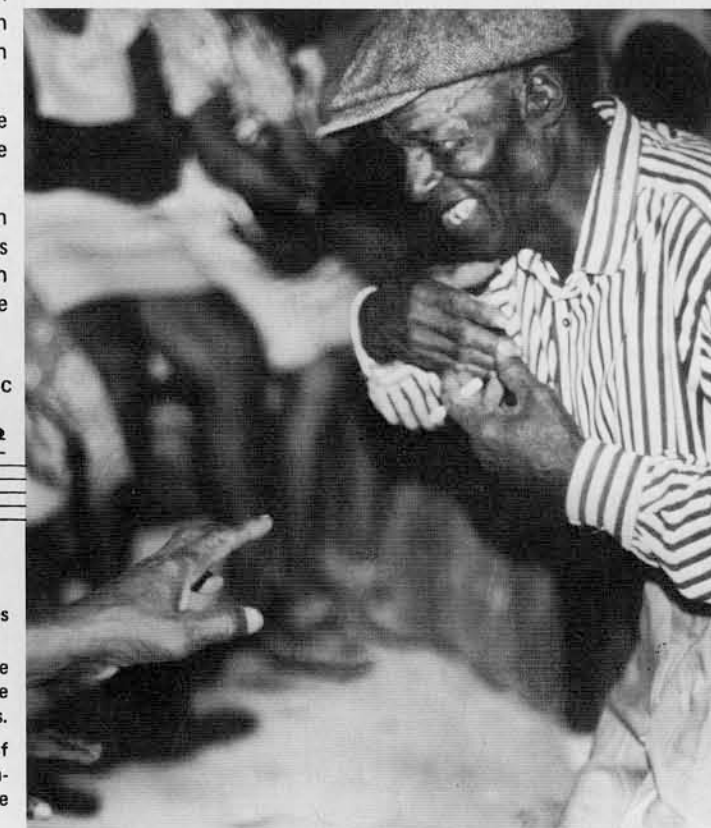


#### NOTE

The normal musical range of the SOLO-LEAD Steel Drum encompasses a range of twenty-eight notes.

However, during the hammering and tuning out of these notes on the pan at certain times, some additional space remains at the center of the drum; sometimes enough to fill in one or two more high range notes.

Such additional notes are not necessarily the basic established pattern of this Steel Drum. They become optional to the craftsman during manufacture of such Solo Lead Pan steel drums and to those who purchase such drums it should be construed as an added attraction.



speech, creolized English which they can easily modify to be understood by white Americans. Obviously, there are a number of directions for their acculturation and a number of barriers as well. Their enculturation and its maintenance over generations is a problem that is being answered in a number of ways by West Indians in Brooklyn today. The course that Brooklyn island will take is quite uncertain. West Indians have already broken with previous melting pot immigrants such as the Europeans who have maintained ethnicity in name more than substance, who pushed their way into the municipal structure from local sources of power. Shirley Chisholm, who is a West Indian congresswoman from Brooklyn, ran for President but never for Mayor. Percy Sutton, formerly Manhattan Borough President, ran for Mayor but did not receive the West Indian support he ardently desired.

So then, it may be said that West Indians, especially Trinidadians, are committed to Brooklyn but still longing for home. And it might be said, that while they are longing for home they are trying to make Brooklyn just like home and create their own enclave. But still as they live and work in New York they are no way confirmed in their identity and their culture except by the way they talk when they hear each other speak and by their institutions, from the most autonomous to the completely municipally interdependent (e.g. WLIB, the Caribbean focused radio station). Somewhere in this range lie the steel drum and its devoted practitioners.

For its manufacture and much of its performance, the drum is purely "folk" and autonomous. But it is a recent cultural acquisition and one wonders how deeply it has penetrated as ethnic identity, or how much of its practice lies outside the determinants of a commercial context. It remains an important means of enculturation for the devoted musician. It also mediates acculturation, making the West Indian favorably known in the metropolitan contact culture. But its significance in preserving Trinidadian identity is probably less crucial to Brooklyn Carnival, or all the carnivals that are accessible to New Yorkers and are a focus for the working and playing year. Island music—Calypso, reggae, spouge (Barbados)—carry ideology that is lacking in the non-vocal timpani of the pan. Contrarily, the pan

tuner is very skilled technically, the soloist is a remarkable virtuoso, and the drum can be taken as academic but non-metropolitan expression and discipline. And a good steel band produces a happy sound that can be irresistible. All the best players are still from Trinidad and culturally affiliated islands.

As this article has illustrated, steel drum has a special relationship to Carnival, the institution so prominent in Trinidadian ethnicity. In Brooklyn, the Carnival committee is headed by Carlos Lezama, who once played and fought in the pan yards of Port of Spain. There is also a Steelband Association that has been inactive recently. But Mr. Lezama apparently wishes to develop and support the drum and Panorama.

As Carnival in Brooklyn resembles a New York street fair, a community-wide block party, the steelband also responds to local culture. Mayor Lindsay opened Eastern Parkway to the revelry and the streets of the city to musicians and peddlers. The pan man belongs on the street only if the municipality and the public accept him. The metropolitan and the Creole, the ethnic group and the metropolis, are not conflicting in this case. The steel drum is secure as an input into Carnival and entertainment in the community, and has a pan-West Indian acceptance as well. In effect, no longer do there seem to be the contextual and cultural structuring evident in recent ethnohistory. Advantages and limitations of the pan for commercial exploitation may be the primary determinants, but the primary market is still entertainment within the West Indian community. The rewards of steel drumming are not likely to adequately compensate any but the devoted, and this also tends to fix the form as part of Trinidad expression. In other words, the steel drum is folk dependent, supported by Creole customs of celebration more than by its commercialized propagation of "happy" music.

In New York, the steel drum should prosper as long as Brooklyn is an island in the West Indian archipelago. However, its use may be accounted for more by the way Trinidadians work and play, their stoic perseverance and their love of revelry, rather than by its role in Trinidadian ethnicity. That is to say, the culture is affirmed by the pan but the pan is confirmed by Carnival.

#### Acknowledgments

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#### Reference

For a detailed ethnohistory that includes the steel drum in Trinidad up to 1962, *Evolution of the Traditional Calypso of Trinidad and Tobago: A socio-historical analysis of song change*, by **Jacob Delworth Elder**: A dissertation on folklore, University of Pennsylvania doctoral thesis, 1966.

**Bob Abramson** was born in Queens, New York, studied anthropology at Hunter and Cornell and now at the University of Pennsylvania. He agrees with the Calypsonian who said "Brooklyn is my home" and he will return to research there in a hurry.