

LifeStyle

Current Affairs

Four weeks of fashion shows

—Page 8



Ray Funk

From Trinidad to Alaska:

How far pan reach

ON SATURDAY, April 24, a high school stage in Fairbanks, Alaska, had the greatest ensemble of pans ever seen so close to the Arctic Circle. There were close to 50 sets of pans and the halls were ringing with tunes by Boogie Sharpe and Lord Kitchener.

The concert featured both of West Valley High School's pan sides as well as the small ensemble Pantheon and the local steel orchestra Cold Steel. The occasion was the culmination of four days of workshops with Dr Chris Tanner, associate professor of music at Miami University of Ohio.

Having learned at the feet of Ellie Mannette, Chris Tanner has built his programme at Miami University into one of the strongest university pan programmes in the US. Their regular concerts have featured many great artists from Ray Holman and Andy Narell to Tom Miller and Liam Teague.

He wrote the first how-to book for music educators on starting a school steelband programme in the United States and has written a number of original compositions for pan. The Miami University steelband has recorded a series of excellent CDs including their latest release *Three Wishes* (2009) and has just recently completed a short joint tour with the Oberlin University steelband.

Tanner got his start in pan a couple decades ago and has never looked back. He was going to college at West Virginia University just at the time Ellie Mannette was hired as an artist in residence. Tanner caught the bug. "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." Part of the reason he got the jumbie was the presence of the master.

Having Ellie Mannette working in a room in the basement... was nothing short of amazing. Here was a genius, a living legend, a



PAN LOVERS: Members of Cold Steel with Chris Tanner.

major innovator in pan, right in our midst! It was nothing to go down to his workroom during your lunchtime, for example, and sit and watch him work. While there, invariably Ellie would chat with you, or show/explain what he was doing in tuning a pitch, or in shaping a pan. It was incredible.

Tanner was hooked. He got his bachelor's degree and then began seeking a master's degree programme. He started at Miami University (Oxford, Ohio) and helped them to develop a steel drum programme with a set of Mannette pans. He's run the programme ever since, becoming one of the few tenured professors of music in the United States whose primary responsibility is directing a steelband programme. He has been a faculty member at the Mannette workshop's summer Festival of Steel for several years.

On his first trip to Alaska, he was pleasantly surprised with the interest and devotion of Alaskans to pan. "It is gratifying to know that pan inhabits yet another corner of the world, and is flourishing through the efforts of true pan enthusiasts," said Tanner. He worked with all four groups throughout his stay to polish tunes that they had already been

working on for weeks. . Dr. Tanner drew high praise from the participants. Cold Steel member Andy Reynolds noted that Tanner "very quickly and accurately assessed our abilities and needs, and gave us very detailed and specific feedback about how to improve our performance. He is the rare combination of very talented musician and teacher, and he helped us as a group in all the ways I had hoped he would. His attitude was relaxed and all about enjoying what we were doing, while still being rigorous about achieving excellence."

The West Valley steelband programme was started over six years ago by Christopher Lubken who got the pan jumbie himself from the Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival where Tom Miller has come up every year to teach pan. At Miller's suggestion, Lubken attended the Mannette Festival of Steel and decided to form a steelband at West Valley. He obtained a grant to buy the instruments and quickly got kids in Alaska excited about pan. Within a few years they managed to take a first place in the Alaska state music competition with their performance of Mark Loquan's "The Challenge Is Minor". The school programme

also brought both Ray Holman and Jeff Narell to Alaska for the first time.

Two years ago Lubken moved on to Gillette, Wyoming where he has already started another steelband programme in his new school district. His place at Alaska's West Valley was taken by Liesl Wietgreffe, who in the last two years has brought new energy and enthusiasm to the school's pan programme. She noted that Dr Tanner focused on the "right touch" to bring out the best sound from the pans.

The small pan ensemble Pantheon, which had been led by Lubken prior to his departure from Alaska, performed three varied compositions by Chris Tanner. One of those was a beautiful ballad entitled "Sweet Delilah". Pantheon has been going for several years and used to save all their gig money for the cost of sending the band to the Mannette workshop where they enjoyed working with Chris Tanner before. "We had attended Chris's master classes and workshops at the Mannette Festival for years, but had never had the chance to work with him directly on music, and it has been a delight to receive his input and perform with him

this week," said Rhonda Gilbertson, bassist with Pantheon. Cold Steel member Mary Wyatt went with Pantheon to the 2008 Mannette workshop and first approached Tanner then about coming to Alaska and started the long process of coordinating with all three groups to bring him up.

Tanner performed two memorable solos during the concert. The first was Lord Kitchener's "Miss Tourist" performed on a rare 1950s Invader pan made by Ellie Mannette from the collection of Cold Steel's music director Mason Damrau. The second was on a modern Invaders' style tenor pan that Ellie Mannette had built for Tanner when he graduated from West Virginia University. With sharp contrast from the sound of the earlier instrument, he played a stunning solo rendition of "Pan in Meh System", by his friend and mentor Ray Holman.

Cold Steel, an outgrowth of the now defunct University of Alaska Steel Drum Band, has been presenting concerts in Fairbanks for several years, most recently at the Alaska Day of Percussion. The group sponsors classes for beginners and has a growing and diverse repertoire. Several of the members of the band have been to Trinidad and the pan couple Andy Reynolds and Wendy Warnick make a yearly trek to the beaches and panyards for Carnival.

For this programme, Cold Steel performed Chris Tanner's arrangement of Kitch's "London Is the Place for Me", his arrangement of the Romantics pop tune "What I Like About You" with a harmonica solo by Andy Reynolds and a very rousing version of Gypsy's "Sing Ram Bam".

The finale was a first ever Fairbanks mass band of high school students and members of Cold Steel and Pantheon doing Tanner's Panorama-styled tune "I Say So". Liesl Wietgreffe commented afterwards that her students thought it was a blast to play in such a big group with the community members on the last song. The audience too was delighted and went away with everyone having had a fine time as the number of pan fans and performers in Alaska continues to grow every year.

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