

# The Steel Times

Vol. 2, No. 2 August 2019

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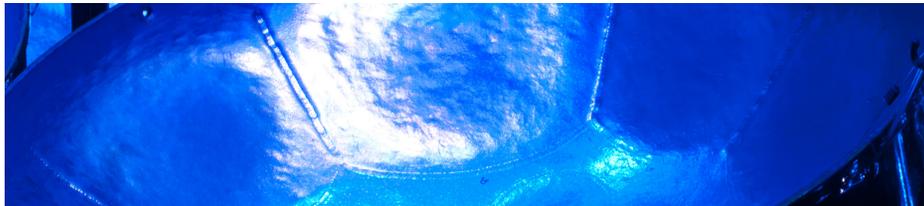
Clifford Alexis  
1937-2019

# The Steel Times

Vol. 2, No. 2 August 2019

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### Join NSSBE!

NSSBE members are passionate about pan. Become a member today and join people across the nation who love the steelband art form, and who are dedicated to its success and growth. To become a member, please visit the NSSBE website at [www.weteachpan.org](http://www.weteachpan.org)

**National Society of Steelband Educators**  
PO Box 181493  
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### NSSBE Steering Committee Welcomes New Members

The NSSBE Steering Committee has two new members, Dr. Anthony Hailey, and Kendall Williams. Dr. Hailey is the founder and artistic director of Mosaic Steel Orchestra in the Hampton Roads, VA area. Kendall Williams is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Composition at Princeton University, and is an active arranger in both Brooklyn and Trinidad. We welcome both of these outstanding pan educators to our team, and look forward to their contributions. At the same time, we thank Richard Rudolph and Sherwin Thwaites for their service on the Committee, as they end their terms.

## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Eugene Novotney



Photo—Kelly Jo Brown

**EUGENE NOVOTNEY** is a percussionist, composer, and scholar who has been involved in the steelpan movement in the United States since 1982. He is Professor of Music and Director of Percussion Studies at Humboldt State University in Arcata, California, where he directs the Humboldt State Calypso Band. He has received the Humboldt State University Outstanding Professor Award and the California State University Wang Family Excellence Award for his lifetime commitment to music education.

**W**elcome to *The Steel Times*, Volume 2, Number 2. We are now well into our second year of publishing *The Steel Times*, and we are very proud of the archive of scholarship and resources that we are creating. *The Steel Times* serves the membership of the NSSBE, and we welcome your comments and your criticisms. We also welcome your ideas and your contributions. If you have an idea for a feature article, or something that you would like us to consider for publication, you can contact us directly through the NSSBE website. We value the wisdom and experience of the steelband community, and we would love to hear from you.

Our last issue of *The Steel Times* paid homage to the legacy of one of the most important figures in steelpan history, Ellie Mannette. This issue of *The Steel Times* features tributes to

another steelpan giant, Clifford Alexis, who passed away last January. Cliff's obituary, written by Dr. Andrew Martin, provides the historic context of Cliff's life, from his emergence into the steelpan scene in the United States to his legendary work at Northern Illinois University. The tributes that follow are heartfelt and moving, and provide a deep insight into Cliff's passion and humanity. Contributors include Yuko Asada, Mia Gormandy-Benjamin, Rich Holly, Akua Leith, Jeannine Remy, Larry Snider, and Liam Teague. Their words reveal Cliff's immense influence in the steelband community worldwide as a builder, tuner, arranger and performer, but even more, detail his profound influence as a mentor, teacher, father figure, and friend.

This issue also features an excellent article by CJ Menge entitled, "Strength in Numbers: Mass Steelband Performances." CJ shares his experiences and insights, and offers practical and useful information that is invaluable for anyone considering organizing and staging a mass steelband. This issue also introduces a recurring column by the newest member of our NSSBE editorial team, Emily Lemmerman. Emily's new column, "Shop Talk," will feature in-depth interviews and conversations with a wide range of artists in the steelpan field. In this issue, Emily interviews Michael Mizma and Kendall Williams, and her interviews are excellent. I am extremely excited to have Emily on the editorial staff of *The Steel Times*.

This issue ends with the obituary of yet another United States steelband pioneer, G. Allan O'Connor, who passed away in June. Al O'Connor's work at Northern Illinois University is legendary, and as Al's name will be forever linked to NIU, his name will also be forever linked to his friend and colleague, Clifford Alexis. Al was a true visionary and leader and in the world of the steelpan education in the United States, and his influence was strong and profound. When I first began to contact people to compose tributes to Cliff for this issue of *The Steel Times*, Al O'Connor was on the top of my list. Unfortunately, Al passed away before that tribute could be completed.

In closing, it is my honor to serve as the editor of *The Steel Times*, and it is my promise to bring you a journal that is practical, useful, and vital.

Please enjoy this latest edition of *The Steel Times*.

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Chris Tanner



**CHRIS TANNER** is the founder and Director of the Miami University Steel Band in Oxford, Ohio, and the Chair of the Miami University Department of Music. He is the author of *The Steel Band Game Plan*, and serves as President and founding member of the National Society of Steel Band Educators (NSSBE).

**S**ummer continues to roll on as this edition of *The Steel Times* hits the proverbial street. Soon enough, the respite will end, and many of us will be back to the routine of the academic year—an exciting time filled with possibility and promise. A new year always brings opportunity, and a spirit of renewal.

At the same time, this edition looks back on the life and work of Clifford Alexis, an important and influential figure in the realm of pan. Thanks to those who contributed their thoughts and reflections in these pages. As with our previous issue focusing on Ellie Mannette, this issue's remembrances of Cliff are moving, and offer much to consider. It will be some time before we fully comprehend the absence of these two men from our world, as they did much to shape the current state of affairs in pan that we enjoy.

*The Steel Times* continues to present useful information to those involved in the steelband idiom. For this edition, CJ Menge has contributed an excellent article on mass band events. Such events are regular occurrences across the country, and so many of us are familiar with the format. CJ's advice is helpful to all of us, regardless of our level of experience. Emily Lemmerman has also contributed to this edition through her profiles of Mike Mizma and Kendall Williams.

In addition to this publication, our annual meeting is an important means for connecting us, and for the sharing of information and best practices. Plans are underway for our third annual Professional Conference, to be held on March 13-14, 2020. Hold those dates for now, and watch the NSSBE website for details to be forthcoming. Our featured artists in 2020 will be the Britain Moore duo. Mat Britain and Dan Moore have been making music together for over 30 years, and they will bring a wealth of expertise and experience to our conference. If you have not yet been able to attend the annual conference, I want to encourage you to make the commitment next year. You won't be disappointed.



Cliff Alexis.

## CLIFFORD ALEXIS

(B. JANUARY 15, 1937, D. JANUARY 29, 2019)

*Andrew Martin, Ph.D Inver Hills College*

The hammer of Thor has been set down, passed, and is awaiting the next worthy recipient. The boundless and effervescent Cliff Alexis has passed away. Best known for his pioneering work playing steelpan, arranging and composing for steelbands, building and tuning steel-pans, teaching and mentoring students, Alexis leaves behind a vast legacy of musical excellence, technical innovation, and pedagogy. Alexis is a pioneering figure in the global steelband movement and his broad shoulders cast a long shadow across the Caribbean and the United States.

### “Whatever success I have in pan, I heard it in my mother’s womb.”<sup>1</sup>

Clifford Pierre was born January 15, 1937 in Port of Spain, Trinidad. He would later change his last name to Alexis after his mother’s surname while still a teenager. The oldest of five siblings, Alexis grew up in a neighborhood called Clifton Hill—sometimes referred to as one of several geographical neighborhoods situated “Behind the Bridge”—on the north-east side of Port of Spain. The young Alexis was exposed to the good and bad of urban life. Despite the somewhat depressed conditions, he remained proud of his childhood neighborhood and made sharing stories of growing up there with his students an integral part of his daily teaching repertoire. “Cliff always used to roll up his shirt sleeve and show us a cutlass scar he had from a brawl he had as a kid in Trinidad” noted Paulette Fraiser.<sup>2</sup> Alexis bled for his education and this dedication and sacrifice impressed and inspired his students, for better or worse, to do the same.

Alexis’s early childhood was marked with tragedy as his mother died in 1942 during childbirth, and his father died in a tragic factory accident in 1948, orphaning Cliff at the age of eleven. Following the death of his father, Alexis would go on to live with family in the Port of Spain suburb of Diego Martin until adulthood. Alexis attended the respected Catholic schools of Rosary Boys R.C., Belmont Intermediate School, and Ideal High School. The discipline and rigor of a

Catholic education was an important developmental milestone for Alexis and he credits this experience with driving many of his ambitions later in life, including his embrace of steelpan. Alexis steadfastly believed from a young age that the steelpan was his ticket to a better life. “I saw this as something real big and I always dreamt one day I would be able to earn my living by this instrument.”<sup>3</sup> Alexis continued to study long into adulthood, including courses in piano tuning, instrument building, acoustics, music theory, and education.

As a child, the gregarious Alexis snuck his way into the panyard of the Clifton Hill-based Hill 60 Steelband whenever he got the chance, and following his relocation to Diego Martin at age eleven, he regularly slipped away from the prodding eyes of his family and made his way to Woodbrook in order to visit the Hit Paraders Steelband. Alexis soon became a regular in this panyard, later playing his first Carnival with the Hit Paraders in 1952. Alexis never received formal musical training; however, there is a Trinidadian credo which claims “the panyard is the university” and his unofficial apprenticeship in the panyards slowly filled in the gaps of formal musical training. His capacity to understand music on this visceral level would foreshadow Alexis’s later work as an educator in Saint Paul, Minnesota and Northern Illinois University.

Over the course of a few short years, Alexis moved on from Hit Paraders Steelband to playing in the Tripoli Steelband of St. James, then to Stereophonics Steelband of Petit Valley, and Joyland Steelband of Laventille. Now in his early twenties, he began arranging music, and Stereophonics Steelband was the first to perform one of his arrangements. Throughout all of this, Alexis was also playing with Invaders Steel Orchestra in Woodbrook and often referred to his time with the Invaders as his “real education.”

By 1964, Alexis’s reputation as an arranger and player had grown exponentially and he was selected as a member of the National Steelband Orchestra of Trinidad and Tobago (NSOTT) which embarked on several international tours, including a three-month tour of the United States.<sup>4</sup> It was

<sup>1</sup> Cliff Alexis, Interview with Kim Johnson, Barataria, Trinidad, 2010.  
<sup>2</sup> Paulette Fraiser, Interview with Author, October 13, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>4</sup> For more information on the tour, see George Goddard, *Forty Years in the Steelbands 1939 to 1979*, p. 130-140. The National Steelband went on tour to England in 1965 and Canada in 1967.

during this tour that Alexis surmised steelpan could be more than simply a thing to occupy one's time, and that he could shape its message of triumph, joy, and inclusiveness to an American audience. The American tour was a smashing success, and Alexis, having experienced the connection steelpan made with people across the United States, was determined to explore the corners of the vast nation.

Upon returning to Trinidad from the NSOTT tour, Alexis began plotting his future, and on Carnival Tuesday of 1965 he bought a plane ticket with his last \$213 TT-dollars and

**“It was during this tour that Alexis surmised steelpan could be more than simply a thing to occupy one’s time, and that he could shape its message of triumph, joy, and inclusiveness to an American audience.”**

moved to New York with only \$5 USD in his pocket. There he joined the BWIA Sunjets Steelband as a pannist/arranger and began performing in New York, including at Carnegie Hall and in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, and he recorded the album “Steelband Spectacular—The Sound of the Caribbean” with the Sunjet Serenaders Steelband for Columbia Records in 1966. Although he returned to Trinidad for Carnival and other assorted brief visits, Alexis lived exclusively in the United States from this point until his death. While in New York, he relied on friends such as Patrick Arnold for mentorship, and it was Arnold who encouraged Alexis to study the art of steelpan tuning. Alexis learned the value of mentorship from Arnold and when the time came for him to mentor students in Saint Paul, NIU, and elsewhere, Alexis was ready.

In 1967, Alexis was hired by the famed pianist Liberace and toured America coast to coast with the entertainer for five years, playing pre-concert shows first with the Tripoli Steelband led by Hugh Borde, and later with his own steelband “Cliff Alexis and the Trinidad Troubadours.” According to Alexis, “People loved us and thought we was real exotic. I thought we were nothing compared to the elephant he had

on stage in Reno once.”<sup>5</sup> The longevity of this steelband was much greater than anything Alexis previously experienced and kept him performing almost continuously from 1967 to 1972. The years touring with Liberace were grueling; however, through this experience Alexis gained firsthand insight into being a professional musician and he later used this experience to mentor and teach students in Saint Paul and NIU.

In 1972, an exhausted Alexis quit the Liberace show and settled down in the Rondo neighborhood of Saint Paul, Minnesota, a historically African-American enclave of the city where his first wife had family. During this time, national sentiments in American education embracing multiculturalism and world cultures were a topic of serious consideration amongst educators on both the state and local level in Minnesota. Alexis was exactly what school administrators were looking for and he quickly parlayed his skills as a panman into a job at Saint Paul Central High School teaching steelpan to inner-city kids as part of a curricular school music program. A natural teacher, Alexis impressed everyone with his ability to relate to even the toughest of disadvantaged youths. He cared deeply for his students and was involved in mentoring several gifted individuals including a group that would later form the nationally successful soul/R&B band Mint Condition, whose 1992 hit “Breakin’ My Heart (Pretty Brown Eyes)” rose to #6 on the Billboard Hot 100. Alexis himself was also busy performing and arranging with three other bands: the reggae/pop band Shangoya, the COMPAS Steelband,<sup>6</sup> and a small steelband comprised of his students, The Cliff Alexis Experience, that performed regularly throughout the Midwest.

Through his continued work in Saint Paul, Alexis became a renowned tuner and builder of steelpans, and landed on the radar of the US Navy Steelband. The band's Chief William Gannaway was impressed with Alexis's work. “I'd never heard the pans tuned so well. From that point on we used Cliff to tune and make pans whenever possible.”<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, it was Cliff's work producing quality instruments for the US Navy Steelband that brought him to the attention of Al O'Connor at NIU. O'Connor first met Alexis in 1980 while searching for help acquiring new steelpans and tuning old ones. The pair quickly became friends, recalls O'Connor, “The two of us just clicked.”<sup>8</sup> O'Connor knew that Alexis's steelpans were of the highest quality, and O'Connor became equally impressed with the panman's sharp wit, musical

<sup>5</sup> Cliff Alexis, interview by Andrew Martin, April 6, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> COMPAS (Community Programs in the Arts) began in 1968 as a program created to connect high school classes with living, breathing, professional poets and would later broaden its repertoire of arts to include theatre, music, drama, visual art, and spoken word among others. For more information, see [www.compas.org](http://www.compas.org)

<sup>7</sup> Bill Gannaway, interview with author, August 13, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Shannon Dudley, Press Release, Office of Public Information, Northern Illinois University, undated (1986)



(Top) Cliff Alexis conducting the National Steel Orchestra (1965), (Bottom) Cliff Alexis (front row—far left) and the Trinidad Troubadours on Tour with Liberace.





Clifford Alexis and Al O'Connor at Birch Creek.

ability, arranging skills, and natural ease as an educator. "It was obvious to me that the guy was a musical genius, no matter what amount of formal musical training he may have had."<sup>9</sup>

O'Connor spent the better part of the five years trying to convince Alexis to leave Minnesota and come to NIU. Finally, after spending spring semester 1985 in DeKalb as a visiting faculty member, Alexis left Saint Paul to take a job at NIU—the first permanent steelpan tuning position in the United States. Alexis's arrival forged and then cemented a direct connection between Trinidad and NIU. Through this con-

nection, a steady stream of Trinidadian guest artists such as Ray Holman, Robert Greenidge, and Len "Boogsie" Sharpe as well as countless undergraduate and graduate students flowed back and forth in a meaningful exchange of ideas and culture. Alexis's arranging and steelpan building/tuning skills were also an integral part of the NIU steelband program's curriculum and international success. Alexis co-directed the NIU program with O'Connor, and together the pair led the NIU steelband to major performances around the world, including at the Percussive Arts Society International Convention (PASIC), and tours to Taiwan (1992, 1998), Trinidad (2000), and South Korea (2002). Alexis was also a key contributor to NIU establishing a dedicated degree program in steelpan in 1992, which was the first of its kind.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



(Top) NIU Steelband, (Bottom) Cliff Alexis in his workshop.



From 1985 until his retirement in 2017, Alexis mentored hundreds of students at NIU, both steelpan majors and non-majors, and his second-floor office was a focal point of student life in the Music Building.

## “Far from dying with a hammer in his hand, Cliff Alexis passed his tools on to the next generation to carry forward.”

Modesty notwithstanding, Cliff Alexis was no stranger to awards and accolades. He was recognized with the “Minnesota Black Musician of the Year” award (1983,1984), Award of Excellence by Pan Trinbago (1997), Pan Legend Award from the Trinidad and Tobago Folk Arts Institute (2001), and Sunshine Hall of Fame Award (2002). In 2006, the 1964 Trinidad and Tobago National Steel Orchestra (Alexis included) was honored by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago<sup>10</sup> who additionally bestowed him the Chaconia Silver National Award (2018). In 2009, Alexis was honored with an outstanding service award from NIU.<sup>11</sup> In 2012, he received two Emmy nominations for his work on the documentary *Hammer on Steel* (which featured the University of Akron steelband) and he was inducted into the Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame in 2013.<sup>12</sup> In 2017, Alexis was bestowed an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters (L.H.D.) by NIU.

Despite his impressive achievements, Cliff Alexis cared first and foremost about the development of his students whom he proudly boasted “keep me young.” Alexis always carried a piece of Trinidad with him and was quick to tell a story, give advice, or offer a glimmer of insight into the homeland that gave to Alexis what he shared with the students for nearly fifty years. Alexis spent the formative parts of his childhood in one of Port of Spain’s roughest neighborhoods and one of its middle-class suburbs, and understanding this path is to understand precisely how he was able to expertly connect with the racially and socioeconomically diverse youth of the United States. Alexis believed strongly in the cultivation of young talent, and Liam Teague notes

that Alexis constantly honored the “contributions of the forefathers of the steelpan, while also making it a priority to simultaneously cast a light on the younger generation of steelpan musicians. He is uncompromising in his progressive vision.”<sup>13</sup>

A student of Alexis was a student for life, and many former students recall a lifelong mentorship with the panman. Alexis’s mentorship was not merely for musical endeavors and his life lessons in humanity were perhaps his greatest gift. “Cliff always stressed the importance of relationships, be it in a steelband or in life,” notes Eugene Novotny. “When my father died a few years ago, Cliff called me every day for a month, just to check in. He somehow knew I needed that support.”<sup>14</sup> The legacy of Cliff Alexis lives on in the innovative steelpans he built, his tuning work and methodology, and the countless students he taught and mentored over the years. Alexis believed to his core in the importance of educating the next generation of pannists, sharing his knowledge of steelpan when others hoarded it. Liam Teague often quotes the African proverb “we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us” when describing his indebtedness to his mentor and best friend Cliff. The shoulders of Teague, Yuko Asada, NIU, and the steelband community around the globe, are now a bit broader. Far from dying with a hammer in his hand, Cliff Alexis passed his tools on to the next generation to carry forward. Thor has returned to Valhalla, and not a moment too soon as the celestial steelband is having rehearsal and there’s a bad F# in the tenor bass that needs work. ■

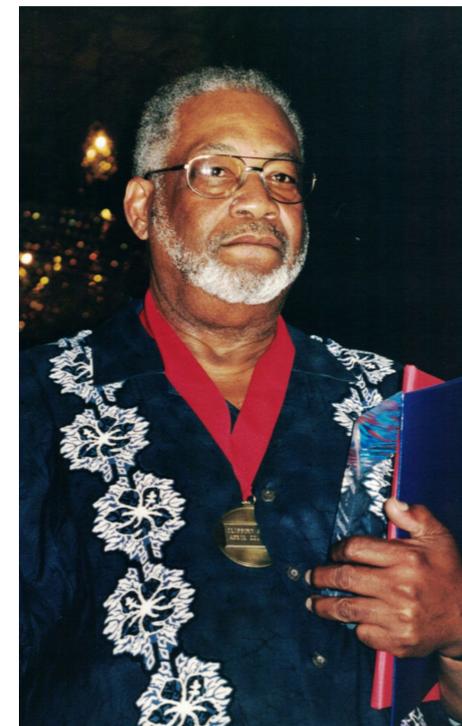
<sup>13</sup> Liam Teague, e-mail message to Andrew Martin, March 25, 2017.  
<sup>14</sup> Eugene Novotny, personal conversation with the Author, March 9, 2019.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Andrew Martin, Ph.D.**, is Professor of Music at Inver Hills College where he teaches courses in music history, music analysis, percussion, and Caribbean studies. He is the author of the books *Steelpan Ambassadors: The US Navy Steelband 1957-1999* and *Steelpan in Education: A History of the Northern Illinois University Steelband*. Since 2011, Martin has written a semi-regular newspaper column “Pan Worldwide” in the *Trinidad Guardian*.



(Top Left) Cliff Alexis receiving the Government of Trinidad & Tobago Chaconia Silver National Award (2018), (Middle Left) Recipients of the Pan Legend Award from the Trinidad and Tobago Folk Arts Institute in 2001 (Cliff Alexis standing in the second row—second from the right), (Bottom Left) Cliff Alexis and his Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters Diploma from NIU, (Top Right) Cliff Alexis at the Trinidad & Tobago Folk Arts Institute Awards (April 22, 2001), (Bottom Right) Cliff Alexis at the Emmy Awards.



<sup>10</sup> Sean Nero, “Panguard Honored,” *Trinidad Guardian*, November 24, 2006.  
<sup>11</sup> “Outstanding Service Award,” Northern Illinois University Operating Staff Council, accessed April 20, 2013, [www.niu.edu/osc/serviceaward/2009/CAlexis.shtml](http://www.niu.edu/osc/serviceaward/2009/CAlexis.shtml).  
<sup>12</sup> “NIU Steelpan Maker, Artist Cliff Alexis Selected for 2013 Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame,” *NIU Today*, June 24, 2013, [www.niutoday.info/2013/06/24/niu-steelpan-maker-artist-cliff-alexis-selected-for-2013-percussive-arts-society-hall-of-fame/](http://www.niutoday.info/2013/06/24/niu-steelpan-maker-artist-cliff-alexis-selected-for-2013-percussive-arts-society-hall-of-fame/).

## CLIFF ALEXIS: A COLLECTION OF TRIBUTES

*Yuko Asada, Mia Gormandy-Benjamin, Rich Holly, Akua Leith, Eugene Novotney, Jeannine Remy, Larry Snider, and Liam Teague*

### Yuko Asada

Who would've thought that Cliff and I were to share our professional and private life together? For 15 years? We certainly didn't at first. I first met Cliff as a teacher in 2002. Then, he became my mentor, friend, husband, partner, and, believe it or not, like a son towards the end of his life.

Cliff impacted my life significantly. He taught me how to construct steelpan and arrange music for steelband. He taught me about his home country of Trinidad and Tobago and many aspects of steelpan. He took me to places where I gained invaluable experiences and met people who I wouldn't have met on my own. But more than all, he taught me so much about life.

Cliff was a compassionate man who was always there for people. Especially the underdogs. He often shared stories of those who had gone through hard times in life, and later, turned their lives around. I'm certainly one of the people who was guided by him to turn my life around. I'm stronger and wiser. I have more understanding on the culture, music, and people of Trinidad and Tobago, and I can create steelpan and arrange music for steelband. All because of him.

Even though I only got to spend the last 15 years of his life with Cliff, I've been so fortunate to have learned about his long-lived life through his friends and written documents. I'm blessed to have friends who are happy to share with me the memories that they shared with Cliff. It was such a blessing to have multiple conversations with the late Al O'Connor on the life he had shared with Cliff before they passed. It makes my heart warm to find out how many lives Cliff had touched, and I hope that their memories will never diminish.

There's so much more that I can write about Cliff. He was a wonderful man and a mentor. And his passion for the steelpan was immense. Many of his former students, friends,

colleagues, and I are committed to continue to honor his life and carry on his legacy.

We'll make you proud, Cliff!

I love you.

*Yuko Asada is an accomplished steelpan artist, and currently serves as a Musical Instrument Technician at Northern Illinois University.*

### Mia Gormandy-Benjamin

"Don't worry! I will take care of her! I am de Village Maco!" These were words uttered to my parents when they were preparing to leave their 16-year-old daughter in DeKalb, Illinois. I remember feeling relief and comfort knowing that there was someone looking out for me in a country that wasn't my own—someone with a familiar accent who knew my customs and cultural affiliations. At that moment, Cliff was not joking. He made it his business to ensure that I was well taken care of. Little did I know that this moment will become the start of a long, loving, father-daughter relationship that I will cherish until the day I die. Expressing the depth of Cliff's personality and the impact he has made on so many lives seems near impossible. However, I will do my best to share the impact he has made on my life as an individual and showcase a small part of his legacy.

I studied under Cliff at NIU for 6 years. On my first day of classes, I called out "Mr. Alexis!" He responded, "Who is Mr. Alexis? Girl, call me Cliff!" I ignored his request and later in the day called him "Mr. Alexis" one more time because I was not accustomed to calling any of my teachers by their first names. He reminded me again that he should be referred to as "Cliff." I did not want to be reminded a third time so I



(Top) Cliff Alexis and Yuko Asada, (Bottom) Yuko Asada, Cliff Alexis, and Liam Teague.



(Top) Cliff Alexis and Mia Gormandy-Benjamin, (Bottom) Cliff Alexis, Rich Holly, and members of the NIU Steelband (2015).



finally gave in and started calling him Cliff. He was straightforward in that way and he was not afraid to tell you how he felt. As a mentor and friend, Cliff knew how to guide without taking control, he knew what to say and how to say it, and most importantly he knew how to show passion and support for his mentees when they needed it most. Cliff was a unique individual and I doubt that I will meet anyone else like him in my lifetime.

The most important aspect of our relationship was the natural and passionate need he felt to share information with me that he deemed necessary. He shared a myriad of stories about his life, including those from his childhood, young adulthood, and even those that resulted in life lessons for other people. I was always eager to hear him talk about what parts of steelpan history were accurately and inaccurately documented, and at times I even tried to simply understand why he enjoyed the winter so much. I can only imagine what someone might think about Dr. Clifford Alexis after reading his biography and understanding his trajectory from a humble background to becoming an exceptional steelpan pioneer. What that person will not be able to fully understand is the extraordinarily genuine man he was, one full of compassion and candor.

Cliff's genuine personality stood out most to me when he lectured to the pan and percussion studios at the University of Trinidad and Tobago. This occurred when he visited Trinidad to receive a National Award in September 2018. He sat in front of 50 of our pan and percussion majors and spoke about his life. Each person in the room was attentive and wide-eyed as he jovially reminisced about his first trip to the United States with the National Steelband of Trinidad and Tobago. Bursts of laughter filled the room at sudden moments when he remembered names and personalities. Cliff had a way about him. He made you want to be on his side as he vividly told you stories that made you feel like you were there! His personality demanded the attention of the students, many of whom shared how impactful he was to their lives in just under 90 minutes.

Cliff's legacy is one that can never be forgotten. Many of his past students now hold essential and influential roles that will dictate the future of the national instrument of Trinidad and Tobago. NIU, UTT, the University of the West Indies, the University of Akron, Humboldt State University, the University of North Carolina, Washington State University, the steelpan education system in Japan, Antigua, and Jamaica are all superb examples of the tiniest portion of Cliff's legacy. It is our responsibility to ensure that he lives on in our music, our lectures, and even our professional decision-making. Cliff meant a great deal to me and I know that I am one of many who share these sentiments.

Thank you, Cliff, for the many contributions and sacrifices you have made for us all. It was not in vain.

**Dr. Mia Gormandy-Benjamin** is Assistant Professor of Music at the University of Trinidad and Tobago and works with Trinidad All Stars Steel Orchestra.

#### Rich Holly

Cliff Alexis: Friend, Mentor, Brother.

Cliff was always ready with a compliment. Even when he had terrific ideas of his own, he never hesitated asking me for advice. We spent mealtimes together, filled with enthusiastic conversation, and all of which went by too quickly. He was always open to me hanging out in his tuning studio, and I was always open to him hanging out in my office—in fact, I looked forward to it. When the facility where his pan building and tuning workshop existed was condemned (!) it was a great pleasure for me to find him a suitable replacement workshop, which turned out to be next door to a world-class mandolin luthier (and the two of them developed a strong friendship). We often sat together at concerts and other functions. Hallway chats were an event to be cherished, no matter how brief or how long. He was a kind soul, a gentle giant. He genuinely cared about a lot of people, about a lot of things. Cliff was my friend.

Cliff and I had 30 years working together. We spent countless hours discussing music, in particular music theory. Sometimes we would sit in his car, listening to a recording he'd discovered recently and was really digging (even though we both had better stereo systems in our offices not more than a 30 second walk away). He introduced me to numerous calypso and steel pan icons. When I needed it, he pushed me to practice steel pan more diligently (read: NIU Steelband Taiwan tour 1992!) His beautiful arranging was a process that I was fortunate enough to witness time and time again. His manner of rehearsing a large steelband rubbed off on me for my own rehearsal approach. His playing was always musical. Always. His dedication to his craft was second to none—he loved asking questions of people who knew things about physics and acoustics that he didn't already know, loved learning so his pans could keep getting better. I could watch him tune for hours. I so enjoyed watching him hold court with the students, schooling them in any number of subjects. I spent the last 20 years of our working together as one of his bosses. Yet none of that mattered—regardless of either of our titles, Cliff was always my mentor.

Cliff was blessed with a sixth sense, and knew when to ask if everything was okay. He sought me out when things were not okay for him. He sought me out when things were great

for him. We celebrated together, and (most sadly) we had occasion to mourn together. We had a secret handshake, usually followed by a hug, even if we had already seen each other earlier that same day. I loved checking in on him during and after his cardio rehab sessions at the local hospital, which he was extremely dedicated to. Neither of us had a tolerance for gossip. We shared in the joy of our students' successes, and we shared a curiosity for music. We shared the "if nobody else will do it, I'll do it" attitude. After my move to North Carolina, we spoke on the phone every week. EVERY week. In the truest sense of the word, Cliff was my brother, and I miss him terribly each and every day.

**Rich Holly** is the Executive Director for the Arts at NC State University. Prior to this, he enjoyed a 32-year career as percussion professor and dean at Northern Illinois University.

### Akua Leith

Some "conversations" with Dr. Clifford Alexis:

"The steelpan is a real musical instrument. Treat it as how someone will treat their traditional musical instrument. Don't put it on the ground!"

"The steelpan fraternity is now full of educated people. It is time to come together and take the instrument to the next level."

"We need to have an entire ministry for the steelpan to properly realize its truest potential."

"Respect the instrument, and the instrument will respect you."

"I came to America with only five dollars in my pocket."

"Nothing was handed to me. I had to work for it."

"My head got buss for this instrument."

"I had no parents, but I persevered."

And the common recurring question, "Akua—You eat?"

And: "How is your family back home?"

I was blessed to see life through the eyes of Cliff. He was a lover of people and a lover of the steelpan instrument. He cared. His caring moved him from being a mere stranger to

me, into a father figure with whom I was able to experience unconditional genuine love. Whether it was him scolding me for not calling him or checking in on him late, or a bonus trip out of town, or a meal at his favorite eating place ("The Junction") Cliff made me feel like I was a part of his immediate family.

In looking back, Cliff had a burning desire to achieve, and also to help others succeed. His contributions toward the development of the national instrument of Trinidad and Tobago are as diverse as it can be. Through performing, composing, arranging, building, tuning, and lecturing, his quiet footprints were printed. Yes, he showed up with a mere five dollars in his pocket, however: he was able to make professional singers out of high school kids, and Doctors of Music out of college freshmen. Many renowned steelpan arrangers and composers were under his tutelage, and many master steelpan performers around the world were born through his vision, taking every word of his advice. He crafted band leaders and artistic directors across North America and the Caribbean. His journey showed that his wealth wasn't in his pocket, but instead, lived in his mind and his heart.

To many, he will be remembered as a good storyteller, an educator, a PAS Hall of Famer, the Stradivarius of the steelpan, an NIU Honorary Doctorate holder, and even, a Trinidad & Tobago National Award winner. However, to me, he will be remembered as Cliff: A humble servant and a lover of people that walked this earth carrying a genuine heart and a burning desire to achieve for himself and for others.

Love you, Cliff!

**Akua Leith** is a Fulbright Fellow who works as the Artistic Director and Conductor of the National Steel Symphony Orchestra of Trinidad and Tobago.

### Eugene Novotney

Our hero is gone.

It is impossible to express the powerful effect that one person can have on your life, to inspire you to reach beyond your own expectations of yourself, to believe in a cause that you value, and to dedicate your whole life to it. For me, Clifford Alexis was that one man.

We met in 1982 when I was 21 years old, and my life was forever changed. And I will never forget that first meeting. I was a graduate assistant at the University of Illinois, and I was tasked with picking up our steelpan tuner from the train station. When I approached Cliff at the station, I introduced



(Top) Al O'Connor, Clifford Alexis, and Rich Holly at the Percussive Arts Society International Convention (2014), (Bottom) Akua Leith and Cliff Alexis share a light-hearted moment.

myself and asked him if he wanted me to take him straight to his hotel room, or out to get some food first. He shook his head and said, "just take me to the pans!" I tried to make small talk with him as we drove back to the school, but he was not having it. When we arrived at the school and I took him to the room where we had all of the steelpans set up waiting for him, and I made my last attempt at trying to start a conversation with him. I asked him what I thought was a simple question: "What instrument are you going to tune first?" He looked at me as if I were the most annoying person on the planet, and he gestured to the entire room and said, "Dis one man." To him, the entire steelband was just one instrument and he was going to tune "it." That was a revelation for me. I almost left out of fear that he was going to throw me out of the room anyway, but instead, I just nodded, and took a seat in the corner and kept my mouth shut. That was the beginning of a lifelong friendship.

I never realized at that time the impact that he would have on my life, or the true depth of the person that he was, but I soon realized that my life was on a new course, and that I had a new mission. In many ways, the most powerful function that Cliff had in my life through those early years was an uncanny ability to keep me honest, and to never let me fool myself into thinking that anything could, or should, come to me easily. And anyone who has ever worked with Cliff over any period of time knows that there was always one prime goal, and that goal was to advance the steelpan artform. And if Cliff thought I was ever slipping anywhere below that goal of advancing the steelpan artform, I knew about it—loudly and quickly. I credit everything that I have ever achieved as a musician in the steelband artform to Cliff's profound influence. He opened every door for me.

Many years later, even after I knew Cliff very well, he still amazed me with his unyielding dedication and his genuine compassion for people, especially people in need. When Cliff said he was there for someone, he was actually there. Unquestioned. And I witnessed it time after time, person after person. And then I experienced it myself. When my Dad died suddenly in 2005, Cliff phoned to check up on me every day for a month. No one else did. Some of those conversations were long and deep, and some of those conversations were just a couple of words, but he was serving notice to me that I still had someone in my life that I could count on—no matter what—and that he would always be there for me. I feel honored to have been his friend.

It is with both sadness and joy that I write this tribute to Clifford Alexis. And I also write with a deep sense of responsibility, knowing that even though Cliff is gone from this life, his life's goal still remains with us: to advance the steelpan artform. Cliff pursued that goal right up until his dying day. Now, it is our turn to honor his vision through our own perseverance.

See you on the other side Cliff... Love you brother.

*Eugene Novotney is the Senior Editor of The Steel Times, and serves as Professor of Music and Director of Percussion Studies at Humboldt State University in Arcata, California.*

### Jeannine Remy

My tribute to Dr. Clifford Alexis is derived from knowing him for the past 35 years as a mentor, performer, composer, arranger, historian, builder and tuner of the steelpan. Alexis touched the hearts and minds of everyone he encountered; he encouraged his students to pursue their passions through his humble interactions. He was a kind, loving person who made time to listen. Besides his musical talent and exquisite building and tuning skills, he was able to communicate and express his joy for life and for the steelpan through his everyday activities. Cliff was a special person: a natural born teacher, who brought out the best in each person. His personality and great talent earned him respect. He was a father figure to many of his students who looked up to him with admiration. He often preferred to sit on the sidelines, not wanting to be noticed, or even acknowledged. His infectious smile and stories were great. His legacy will continue through all who knew him and through his contributions to every aspect of the steelpan.

Cliff became a builder and tuner because he needed instruments to teach his students. He always credited Patrick Arnold for teaching him the basics of building and tuning. "Patrick came to Minnesota while I was there. Basically, he



and I worked together... Arnold convinced me to start learning to tune my own pans." Alexis went on to become one of the world's best steelpan builders and tuners. Cliff explained that because he was a performer first, he knew exactly the kind of tone quality he wanted to create.

As an undergraduate at NIU, I heard stories about Cliff Alexis who lived in St. Paul Minnesota and had tuned for the Navy Steelband. I first encountered him in 1984 when G. Allan O'Connor, the Assistant Chairman of the Music Department, sent me to Chicago to pick up Cliff at the O'Hare Airport. Cliff was coming to tune NIU's steelpans. I had never seen him before, and I was a bit apprehensive about what he would say when he found out that Al wasn't picking him up. I didn't know what he looked like, but Al assured me that I would know when I saw him. He was a man of few words when I found him and explained that Al asked me to pick him up. As we made our way to the car, Cliff, wearing a black captain's hat, grudgingly started opening up to me in a Trini accent that I had never heard before in my life, "Take meh straight to Al, doh stop for nothin', NOTHIN', Ah



*(Top Left) Eugene Novotney and Cliff Alexis, Arcata, California (1993), (Top Right) Mia Gormandy-Benjamin, Cliff Alexis, Eugene Novotney, and Liam Teague performing with the Humboldt State Calypso Band, Arcata, California (2011), (Bottom Right) Liam Teague, Ray Holman, Cliff Alexis, and Eugene Novotney, Arcata, California (2006).*



ain't come here to sightsee, Ah ain't come here to lime, Ah ain't come here fuh none ah dat, I come here to wuk. Take me straight to Al, straight dey." On the drive to DeKalb, he boasted about his inner-city students at St. Paul Central High School, explaining that while others may have given up on these students, he knew what they needed: dedication, success, and a feeling of belonging.

I recall Al O'Connor asking me if I wanted to go to Akron, Ohio to a "building and tuning workshop" organized by Dr. Larry Snider in the summer of 1985. We decided to take my vehicle, a Ford Bronco named "Lurch." It was here that I got to know Cliff even better. The hours in the car with O'Connor's heavy foot on the accelerator and Cliff's storytelling made the trip seem shorter than it actually was. It was on this trip that Al suggested that Cliff should apply for a year-long absence from St. Paul and to teach college students at NIU.

Cliff took Al's advice and in the fall semester of 1985, I was called into Al's office. He knew I was serious about augmenting my collection of percussion instruments. He said, "Cliff is coming to NIU and he needs money for a security deposit on his apartment." I asked, "How can I help?" Al told me that he wanted me to purchase a set of pans, and that Cliff would build them one at a time. I agreed to advance him the payment for the drums. Al assigned me a large practice room where I could store the instruments and practice.

Al devised a clever plan to keep Cliff at NIU, and by the end of the year, Cliff became an Adjunct Lecturer and Instrument Repair Technician 2. When Cliff settled in and began teaching at NIU, the whole repertoire changed, and so did the manner of learning it. For this reason, the students quickly warmed up to Cliff and followed him around like a celebrity. Despite his intimidating appearance, he was a big teddy bear with a heart of gold. All of Al's charts were gradually replaced with original music from Cliff Alexis. "Yellow Bird out de Window" was an expression Cliff used to describe music that made pan appear to be backward. Unlike O'Connor, Alexis taught by rote. Ecstatic, Al beamed with delight as the NIU steelband turned into a mini Trinidadian-style ensemble.

From the start, Cliff not only arranged for the band but also performed at the gigs and soloed over the chord changes. If he didn't like someone else's solo he would exclaim, "solo graveyard," making everyone laugh. Even without formal training, he could hear every aspect of music. We all had a taste of transcribing the music he would teach us.

When Cliff came to NIU, one of the drumset practice rooms was repurposed as his workshop. It was perfect for him.

Cliff's workshop became a place where anyone could knock on the door and have long-running conversations about pan making, tuning, and history. When it came to the pan, Cliff was a living history book. One knock in between hammer blows, and a simple response, "COME!" The sound of sinking and tuning became normal for the music building. Pan had no curfew as late-night conversations and tuning happened into the midnight hours. Suddenly it would be 3 a.m. and you would find yourself still talking and watching Cliff tune. His workshop walls were filled with papers: orders for instruments, and posters and programs of concerts where he was featured as a guest artist. He would tune while explaining what each hammer blow would do on the strobe tuner. Often, the workshop phone rang and it would be some famous steelpan person.

During my time at NIU, one of the most memorable guests that came to the campus was the three-time president of the governing body of steelband activities, George "Sonny" Goddard. When Cliff introduced us to Goddard he said, "I woulda never believe dis' man be standing in dis' room here in de middle of ah cornfield." This would be the start of many other guests sharing and representing the culture and steelband movement of Trinidad and Tobago. Many other Trinidadians came to NIU as a result of Cliff being at the school; the NIU steelband became an epicenter of cultural diversity.

As part of my doctoral research, I went to Trinidad in 1989. Cliff was there at the same time and he ensured that I was safe and under the protection of Birdie Mannette and Ray Holman. One day, I noticed him visiting the panyard and I pretended that I didn't see him pointing, but under his breath he was telling Ray Holman, "See dat woman over dere, take care of she." For many years after, I would receive random phone calls from Cliff. He would loudly yell out my name, scold me for not calling him first, and then carry on a normal conversation, just like we used to do in his workshop. Once you became friends with Cliff, you were friends for life.

The University of Arizona hosted some building and tuning workshops in the Chiricahua Mountains. During the first workshop in 1988, Cliff had a compositional epiphany whereby he was inspired to compose a piece which he entitled "Song to Chiricahua." The song took 3 hours to compose and is still played by steelbands today. Another memory of the U of A was a pan "Shootout" concert between Ray Holman and Clifford Alexis. I will never forget dropping the two of them off at the motel after rehearsal and hearing Cliff jokingly, but firmly warning Ray that 7 p.m. meant *be in the lobby*, "not upstairs putting on yuh shirt!...Trini time doh wuk in the United States."



(Top) Ray Holman, Jeannine Remy, and Cliff Alexis (1989), (Bottom) Jeannine Remy, Liam Teague, and Cliff Alexis (mid 1990's).





(Top) Larry Snider and Cliff Alexis, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad (2010), Cliff Alexis, Al O'Connor, Yuko Asada, Les Trilla, Rich Holly, and members of the NIU Steelband at a post-concert reception (2015).

My last encounter with Alexis was in the summer of 2018. It had been 15 years since my instruments were tuned, and I asked Cliff to come to Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin to check them for future use. Much to our astonishment, the drums were still very much in tune, despite the fact that they hadn't seen Cliff's hammer in 15 years. After striking one and checking it on the strobe tuner he said, "WOW! Put dat one 'way... it good!" Boastingly, he often told me my pans belonged in the Smithsonian. I never thought that would be the last time I would ever see Cliff.

Cliff touched the lives of many. He made an everlasting impact on generations of students, professional musicians, friends, colleagues, and admirers. He was an awesome human being who was well-loved by everyone he encountered. He is missed.

*Dr. Jeannine Remy is a senior lecturer at the University of the West Indies (Trinidad) where she instructs students in percussion and steelpan.*

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#### Larry Snider

Forty years ago, I knew that I wanted to start a steel drum band as part of the percussion program at The University of Akron.

Needing advice on purchasing drums, I reached out to two friends who were also experts: Thomas Siwe at the University of Illinois and Al O'Connor at NIU. "Call Cliff Alexis" was the immediate response from both.

I learned quickly that Cliff was respected worldwide as a builder, tuner, and blender, as well as a composer, arranger, and performer.

Cliff and I were not close at the beginning. In fact, he hung up on me every time I called. Finally, hoping to discourage me from ever calling again, he spoke words I will never forget: "You are just another white guy that wants steel drums as a novelty. You know nothing about our history."

Yet, somehow, I eventually convinced him that all of my students would learn about the powerful history of pan. And, eventually, he built our drums.

Every year after that, he came to Akron for a week to tune those drums. Did he really need an entire week? No, but he was a student magnet, always willing to share his passion and knowledge.

A natural as an educator, Cliff was a catalyst for learning. Students loved him. Benjamin Toth (now a Hartt School professor) slept in a practice room night after night while Cliff tuned, just to be there when Cliff wanted to talk or just needed food. Tom Miller (now a steelband publisher, teacher and soloist) spent days transcribing a panorama tune from a fuzzy cassette tape after Cliff explained what a panorama tune was. Josh Quillen (now a member of So Percussion who integrates pan into many of the quartet's pieces) insisted on driving Cliff to and from the airport and hotel.

A perfectionist as a tuner, Cliff would labor for hours on a single note to get it right. Students always wanted to watch, and his work ethic rubbed off them. He was a big reason why so many of my students have made pan a vital part of their professional and personal lives.

Despite our rocky start, Cliff inspired me and my students (now numbering 150 alumni) to become passionate advocates for the powerful past and promising future of pan.

He was my dear friend, my brother from another mother, and I miss him terribly.

*Dr. Larry Snider is a Distinguished Professor of Music and the Director of Percussion Studies at The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio.*

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#### Liam Teague

Life is full of unpredictability.

When Cliff and G. Allan O'Connor picked me up at Chicago O'Hare's International Airport as I was about to embark upon my freshman year at NIU, I certainly could not have imagined the long-lasting impact that they would have on my life.

Truth be told, during my early tenure at NIU, I thought that I was a thorn in Cliff's side. After classes, I would often visit Cliff during his tuning sessions, but he would barely say a word to me—as a matter of fact, it seemed that the closer he noticed me getting to his office door, the more forceful his strikes to the instrument became. Was he sending me a subtle message? Nonetheless, over time, those fortissimo strokes to the pan eventually morphed into mezzo piano. I took that as a sign of his acceptance.

Cliff Alexis was my teacher, a father figure and best friend, and he exemplified what true love, friendship, loyalty and selflessness were. He was a constant source of support

during the most tumultuous and brightest periods of my life. He helped me to better appreciate the rich and storied history of the steelband, and enlightened me on the importance of embracing and supporting carriers of the torch.

Whether it was that Cliff relinquished his role as the main improviser in the NIU Steelband so that I could be featured at concerts, that he would call to find out how I was doing no matter where I was in the world, that he called me immediately, while I was in Trinidad, to deliver the news that I had passed my math course (which was a constant source of worry), that he came over to my house during the wee hours of the morning when my basement flooded to assist, that he accompanied me to and from the airport when my then fiancé (now wife), Lorena, visited from Panama, or that he was at the hospital to congratulate Lorena and me on the birth of our daughter, Jeida: the love and loyalty that Cliff exemplified was unconditional and uncompromising.

Cliff always had a special place in his heart for the underdog and the less fortunate, and never forgot his Trinidadian roots. There are numerous accounts of him encouraging young students who were lacking in self-confidence; when he offered suggestions (not “advice” as he would say), the sincerity of his message resonated deeply. On every visit to Trinidad, Cliff would be sure to travel with cash to lend a helping hand to some of the friends that he grew up with who may have been seeing rough times, or he would purchase tickets for them to attend the Panorama steelband competition.

His selfless acts have been monumental, and they have positively influenced the lives of scores of people, including my own. During my freshman year at NIU, I was running out of funds, and the chance of being able to complete my studies looked grim. When Les Trilla (Chicago businessman and CEO of the Trilla Cooperation, which produced the barrels that Cliff fashioned into steelpans) attended one of the NIU Steelband’s concerts, he was awed by what the band played, and asked Cliff and Al O’Connor what assistance the ensemble was in need of. Without hesitation, Cliff said “that young man, Liam Teague, needs to finish school.” Those words were all that Mr. Trilla needed, and they became the impetus for him founding the Les Trilla Graduate Assistantship at NIU, which allowed me and many future NIU recipients to realize our educational goals. Today, because of the generosity of Cliff, Al and Les, NIU steelpan majors from all over the world now have rewarding and sustainable careers in music, and are paying it forward to the next generation.

Cliff Alexis was indeed an extremely unique individual. On the surface, he often projected an image of uncompromising seriousness, but he was also quirky and funny. I can vividly remember him breaking into spontaneous dances during

steelband rehearsals which had the members in uncontrollable laughter; he’d also play the piano in an “avant-garde” fashion while the band loaded instruments onto the truck—Thelonius Monk he was not. For many years, I marveled at his NIU office “phone book”—a plethora of post-it notes which he affixed to the wall in an order which, to mere mortals, was seemingly random, but was entirely logical to him.

His answering machine voicemail would simply state “Cliff Alexis, leave a message,” and when he took the time to leave one a message, it usually was minimalist in nature—“Cliff”; or, on a good day, “Cliff Alexis.” He often emphasized to students the importance of using their “auditory nerve” (which most of us would describe as “ears”) and the eloquence with which he used profanity in his sentences was almost Shakespearean. After a while, I came to consider these colorful utterances as Cliff Alexis-styled verbs and adjectives. One day, I was driving him around in Trinidad, and upon asking Cliff for directions, he said, matter of fact, “either turn left or right” (scary at the time, but I can now laugh at it.)

The passion that Cliff had for his art, and the brilliance that he displayed, could never be questioned. When the NIU Steelband participated in the 2000 World Steelband Music Festival in Trinidad, Cliff needed to travel to the country several weeks prior to build basses for the ensemble as shipping the band’s instruments from and to the USA would have been cost prohibitive. One occasion, after he had just completed many hours of hard labor in the blistering heat at Phase II Pan Groove’s panyard, he asked me to transcribe a new passage of music to be included in his Pan 2000 composition which the band was going to play at the festival. Cliff barely had a voice and was exhausted; nevertheless, he kept singing these inspired phrases all while in obvious discomfort. While I was not so excited to be the transcriber at that particular point (I could barely figure out some of those notes he elicited), I marveled at his dedication and strength as he was determined for the band to do well at the competition. NIU Steelband eventually placed 2nd, which was an amazing accomplishment for a collegiate steelband.

The impact he had on me as a musician was profound. Having won several championships as a steelpan soloist at a relatively young age in Trinidad, I was somewhat opinionated. This came to a shocking and crashing halt during one of Professor Robert Chappell’s improvisation courses when none of my classmates seemed to be the slightest bit impressed with my solos. So, following the end of class, filled with anger and venom, I immediately set sail for Cliff Alexis’ office to vent and to have my ego propped up—after all, Cliff and Al were the ones who recruited me to NIU. To my surprise, Cliff, in no uncertain terms told me that improvisation is not just about playing a bunch of scales

with no regard to the underlying chord progression. From that day on, he and I would meet constantly in his office to “take a jam” and I can still hear his scolding but nurturing voice counseling, “Teague, yuh not playing over de changes.” These jam sessions turned out to be some of the most meaningful lessons that I ever had.

Cliff led a monumental life, and had indeed experienced it all. He was there almost from the very embryonic stages of the steelpan’s evolution, and felt the physical and verbal wrath of a society that was ill-prepared to come to terms with the true magnitude of the steelpan and its brilliant pioneers. He showed many of us the scars that remained from blows he took from the police in Trinidad, and also described, in explicit terms, the hurt that he still carried from the tongue-lashings which he and his contemporaries received from naysayers. Conversely, he also highlighted the joy and pride that came from his many experiences as a steelpan musician.

One of the most lasting and cherished memories that I have of Cliff was when he visited the Panama Canal. His reaction to seeing this wonder of the world was almost trance-like, and he was so transfixed that it took several attempts before Cliff could be coaxed into leaving. Perhaps the enormity of the moment became overwhelming as he simply couldn’t believe all the places that he was able to visit, in large part, because of the steelpan.

For me, and many others, Cliff Alexis was one of the great wonders of the world, and that will never change!!!

*Liam Teague is Professor of Music and Head of Steelpan studies at Northern Illinois University, and a recent recipient of the NIU Presidential Research, Scholarship and Artistry Professor Award.*



*Cliff Alexis, Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin (2018).*



*Cliff Alexis and alumni of the NIU Steelband at his retirement celebration at NIU (2017).*

## STRENGTH IN NUMBERS: MASS STEELBAND PERFORMANCES

CJ Menge



**CJ Menge** is the founder and Executive Director of *Inside Out Steelband*, a nonprofit organization based in Austin, Texas. He is active nationally as steel pan educator, performer and composer. His compositions for both solo steel pan and full steelband are published by *Boxfish Music Publishing, Inc.*

**T**he mass steelband performance, where two or more separate programs present a concert as a single, unified band, is now a common occurrence amongst school and community groups throughout the United States. Each year, especially in the spring, you will see event listings promoting mass steelband concerts from coast to coast, highlighting the value of this unique collaborative effort.

*Inside Out Steelband*, the nonprofit organization I direct in Austin, Texas, has a simple mission statement: to create community through music. This has also been an ongoing personal priority that inspired me to develop steelband programs beginning in 1997. Music is a unifying force in the world, and I try to emphasize this aspect of music making for both my students and our audience members. I mention this first because it is something I think about every day in my work. The mass band format has always been a powerful way to bring different communities together.

Knowing that many directors reading this article are already very experienced with the mass band format, I will try to serve a couple of different purposes. For more experienced directors, I will offer some practical suggestions that have helped to streamline the mass band performances I coordinate. Hopefully these suggestions will either reinforce what you have found to work well with your programs, or motivate you to try some different ideas. For steelband directors that have not yet participated in a mass band performance, I will highlight some of the many benefits for you, your students, and your community of supporters and audience members. These benefits can reap great rewards, especially if you are willing to program a mass steelband event on an annual basis.

### New to the Format?

For directors who are new to the mass steelband concept, participating in a joint concert can help to strengthen and grow your program in several ways. Most importantly, a shared performance will build community for both your band members and your audience. Especially in Texas,

**“A mass steelband concert gives students a chance to participate in a musical event that is focused on collaboration rather than competition, which can broaden the horizons of their music education.”**

programs at the middle and high school levels spend the majority of their time preparing for various competitions including marching band, concert band and solo and ensemble competitions. A mass steelband concert gives students a chance to participate in a musical event that is focused on collaboration rather than competition, which can broaden the horizons of their music education.

Mass steelband concerts illustrate the value of strength in numbers. Performing in a steelband that is at least twice as large as your program, and sometimes several times the size of your group, gives your students a taste of the larger band experience that is common in Trinidad and Tobago. Combining forces for a mass band concert allows smaller programs the unique opportunity to be surrounded by the supportive sound of a large band, which often helps less experienced players to begin to develop more confidence as performing musicians. If you are fortunate enough to be a part of a school district that has steelband programs at different age levels, a mass band concert that brings together elementary, middle, and high school students on one stage is a powerful form of inspiration for younger students who look up to the older players.

For less experienced directors, participating in a mass band concert gives you direct access to the institutional knowledge of more experienced steelband directors and programs. We have had many first time steelband directors leading curricular programs in Austin ISD schools that have initially been able to shape the direction of their rehearsals by committing to participating in a mass band concert. This in turn helps their students to perceive that there is a clear goal to work towards and can lead to more focused rehearsals. A hallmark of the greater steel pan community is the

willingness to share ideas and support those who are new to the field. You and your students will benefit greatly from this type of exchange.

Assuming you are sold on the idea of programming a mass steelband concert, I encourage you to build at least one mass performance into your calendar each year. By committing to an annual event, you will give your students a unique concert to look forward to, and you will also begin to grow a community of supporters outside of your program's normal audience.

One of our most successful annual mass steelband performances in Austin is the *Inside Out Steelband Carnival Concert*, usually held in late February or early March. This concert has been a part of *Inside Out* programming for twenty years. The Carnival theme highlights the important connection to be made between our groups in Austin and the historical and cultural context of steel pan in Trinidad and Tobago. The timing of this concert also fits well into most area school performance calendars. The event features multiple steelbands from three (sometimes more) different programs (two Austin ISD high school programs and the *Inside Out Community Steelbands*), and also includes a Brazilian samba drum and dance set. In the interest of building community, *Austin Samba*, another outstanding community music organization, has been a part of the Carnival concert since the beginning in 2001. More recently, the *McCallum High School Samba Knights* have been performing as a combined group with *Austin Samba* on the concert as well. All told, the event involves 100-125 performers. This is a free show that we hold on the campus of one of the participating high schools, and is always well attended.

## Practical Considerations

There are many successful mass band events that include shorter sets of music performed by individual steelbands in addition to the combined pieces on the concert. The benefit of this format is that each band has a chance to showcase the individual personality of its ensemble before getting to share in the experience of being part of a much larger collective sound with the mass band. This is the model that we used for the first several years of mass band concerts in Austin, and still use on occasion today. As our school and community steelband programs grew in size and scope in this area, we began to move away from individual band performances on combined concerts. We found that the length of our concerts became more of an endurance test than an enjoyable experience for participating bands and the audience. Our Carnival concert this year, for instance, included seven different sections of steelbands from three programs. In order to keep the total length of the concert reasonable and to maximize the impact of the show, we have since moved to the format of having the entire concert consist of mass band performances, with at least two groups from the different participating steelbands performing together on every piece.

With this truly combined format in mind, here are a few suggestions that I have found to help present a successful concert:

Plan for the show early, ideally several months in advance. Once you have confirmed the venue, which often is a school theater or gym, decide how many bands you can include on the performance, and then confirm the concert date with all parties involved. Select your pieces for the program and make sure all of the participating groups have the scores and parts they need to properly prepare the music. This especially helps when involving steelbands that have less rehearsal time than a curricular steelband does, or for programs that primarily use the rote teaching method.

Program 10-12 pieces for a full combined concert. I aim for 50-70 minutes of music, which when allowing for transition time between pieces and extended guest artist solos (more on that later) usually results in the total performance length running about 1 hour 30 minutes. Regarding the difficulty level of the music, I generally program four to five beginner level charts, four to five intermediate level pieces, and two to three pieces that highlight our most advanced groups. I believe it is important to include advanced material so that more experienced players have the opportunity to showcase their talents. The advanced pieces also often inspire less experienced players and motivates them to realize their future potential as musicians.



Austin ISD Mass Steelband Concert (2016).

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Challenge yourself to program new and diverse selections in addition to your usual mass band standards. Every program has a collection of frequently played tunes that show up on their concerts. This is certainly the case with Inside Out. For a mass band concert, these standard pieces work well in the beginner level slots, which allows space to present newer compositions and arrangements with the more advanced players. This helps to keep the more skilled students excited to be a part of their steelband, and ensures that they will continue to develop their music reading skills and expand their musical vocabulary by playing new pieces. I believe it is vital to create and perform new music composed specifically for steelband, written by a diverse group of composers, on every concert.

Use only one drum set player on each song, located in the center of the band, with all of the engine room and auxiliary percussion players set up behind the drum set. Send out a rhythm sheet to all of the participating directors prior to the event, with specific suggestions for standard engine room parts on calypso and soca tunes, and specify important percussion parts and unison stops on charts that require extra attention. This will help your rehearsal and performance to run more efficiently. We normally present our *Inside Out Carnival Concert* with only about one hour of combined rehearsal time, so this level of prior communication is necessary to guarantee that we put on the best show possible.

Actively seek opportunities to partner with new steelbands on future concerts. If you are a school steelband director, explore the prospect of joining forces with a local community steelband. If you do not have a community group in your area, consider inviting individual pan players to participate on a mass concert. It's all about building new relationships.

When possible, include guest professional soloists and/or out-of-town guest steel pan artists. Given the proper preparation and coordination prior to the event, the inclusion of a guest artist quickly elevates the quality of a performance, exposes players and the audience to a different kind of musical excellence, and provides participating students with direct inspiration that can push them forward in their development. In addition to hosting many well-known and outstanding guest steel pan artists over the years, Inside Out has featured a wide range of soloists, including several percussionists (congas, tabla, Brazilian and others), drum set artists, horn players (saxophone and trumpet), guitarists, violinists, vocalists and an accordion player.

There are of course financial and logistical considerations when hosting an out-of-town guest artist. If budget constraints currently prevent you from bringing someone in, I encourage you to collaborate with locally available musicians. Regardless of the geographic area of the country your program resides in, there is undoubtedly a pool of excellent musicians who would welcome the opportunity to perform with a steelband.

My sincere thanks to NSSBE for the opportunity to contribute something to this issue of *The Steel Times*. It is an exciting time to be a part of the vibrant steel pan scene in the United States and beyond. I am constantly impressed by the high quality and creative work that I see produced by groups of all ages and ability levels, and I look forward to seeing many of you at future pan events. ■

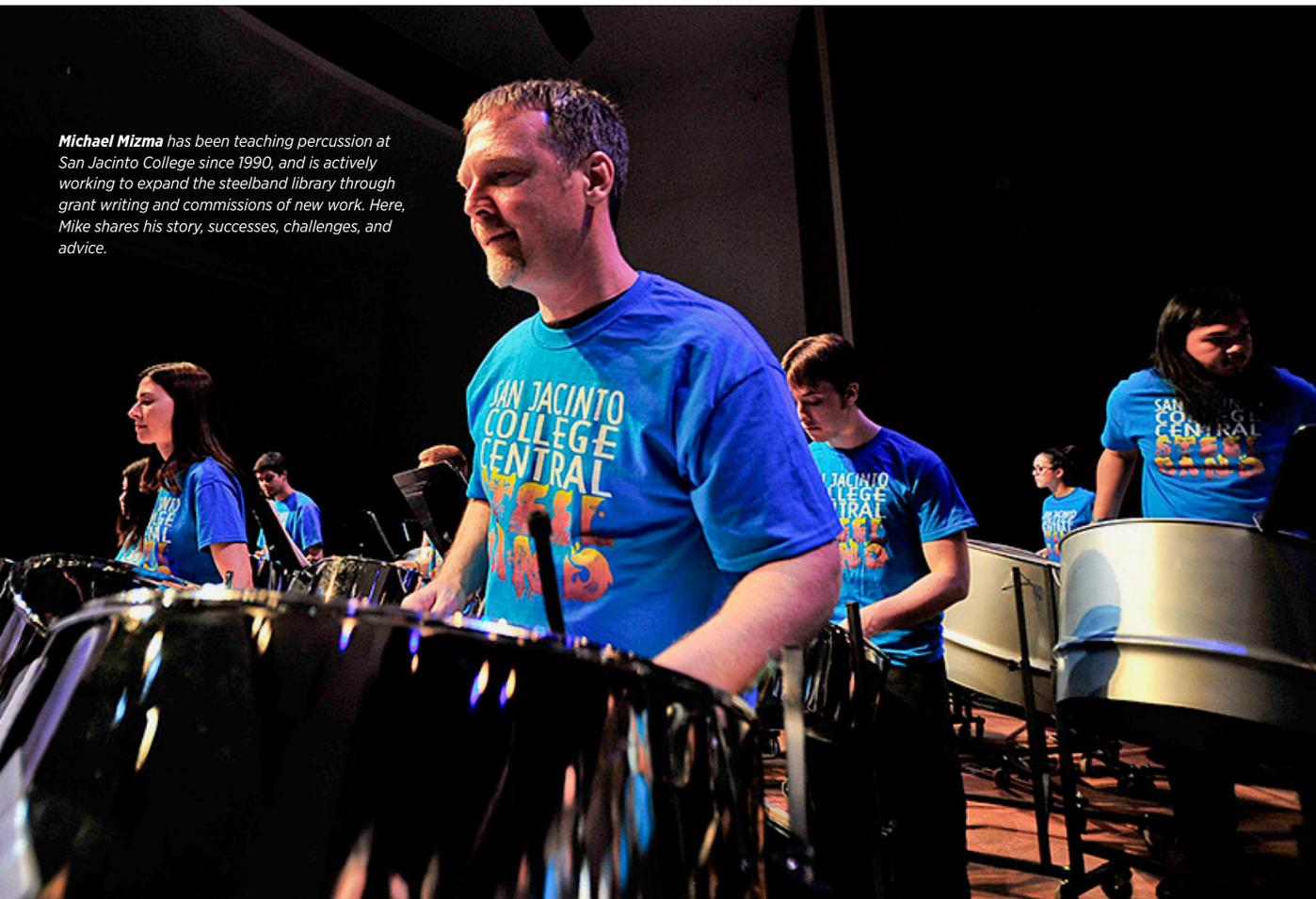


*Inside Out Community Steelband in concert with KIPP Austin Collegiate Steelband, Dave Longfellow and Eddie Dickerson (2018).*

## SHOP TALK: MICHAEL MIZMA

Emily Lemmerman

**Michael Mizma** has been teaching percussion at San Jacinto College since 1990, and is actively working to expand the steelband library through grant writing and commissions of new work. Here, Mike shares his story, successes, challenges, and advice.



Michael Mizma and the San Jacinto Steelband.

**Emily Lemmerman:** Please tell me about your background in percussion, how you got into steelband, and your tenure at [San Jacinto College Central](#). How have you built and shaped the steelband program there?

**Michael Mizma:** I got a BM in percussion performance from SUNY Potsdam with Jim "JP" Petercsak in 1987 and an MM in percussion performance at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with Tom Siwe in 1989. I remember hearing a steelband for the first time when I went to audition at U of I. They were rehearsing "Für Elise" and my brain could not grasp what I was hearing. Even though I was standing next to a set of triple cellos, I couldn't for the life of me figure out where the sound was coming from—it was a magical sound, and in that moment, I was bit by the pan jumbie!

Later that same year I went to Toronto to study tabla with Bob Becker and Pandit Sharda Sahai. Once when I was riding my bike through town, I heard a strange sound coming from a grassy area next to an old church near the University. I rode up and was introduced to Earl LaPierre, the musical director for the steelband "Afropan." Within five minutes, he gave me a lead pan and mallets, and proceeded to teach me parts for their Caribana show. I remember playing things back; I'd look at him for approval, but he'd just shake his head "no!" This whole Caribbean groove concept was just too new to me! All summer, I'd go to this panyard every day for rehearsals. We competed and won first place that year in the Caribana Festival parade.

That fall I entered the U of I to work on my Master's Degree. Steelband became one of my most anticipated and exciting moments of each week. I was surrounded by this amazing steelband sound, and I learned to play all the different instruments. I never understood why the other percussionists didn't enjoy it—I thought they were completely crazy! Also, that first year at U of I, we performed in the mass steelband at PASIC in St. Louis with Boogsie Sharpe and Lennard Moses. When Boogsie soloed, I was blown away by the artistry that flowed from him so effortlessly.

I began teaching at San Jacinto College Central in Pasadena, TX in 1990, and have been there ever since. That summer, I went back to Toronto to buy some pans from Earle Wong. In his basement he had about fifteen leads and five sets of double seconds. I tried them all and picked out my first two pans. For a few years, I used these personal pans at school to form a hybrid percussion ensemble/steelband, playing some of my favorite tunes from U of I.

San Jacinto purchased their first set of pans in 1996 from a local Trinidadian steelband called the Caribbean Steeltones. They were about to buy a new set of Ellie Mannette pans and asked if I was interested in buying their old drums at a price that was beyond fair. I rushed back to my boss and told her that we just couldn't pass up this offer, and she agreed. Then, to sup-

plement the drums from the Steeltones, we also bought five more pans from Earle Wong. We even recorded our first CD, "Departure," in the spring of 1997. The San Jacinto Central Steelband currently performs with about sixteen pans.

**EL:** I'm always impressed with the scale and scope of your ambitions. You regularly bring in two guest artists every year, and you actively commission new music. Can you describe how you are able to do that? Both financially, and in what you demand of the band? Why is this important to you?

**MM:** For many years I had been thinking about how to commission works specifically for my band. I really liked the combination of steel pans and choir, and I knew that by joining with a choir we could double or triple our audience.

I applied for a grant to commission Gary Gibson to write a concert length work for my steelband and choir. I was awarded the grant, and Gary wrote *In the Shadows of the Forest*, a nine-movement work highlighting different aspects of Trinidadian folklore. We staged our first world premiere in the spring of 2010.

Since then, I have been able to garner numerous internal grants at the college for commissioning new works, bringing in guest artists, and purchasing instruments. My band has staged five steelband and choir premieres, three written by Phil Hawkins, a world premiere of the multi-movement work *History of the Steelband* by Dave Longfellow, individual pieces like "Kimber" by Emily Lemmerman, "Mistaken Identity" and other works by Victor Provost, and most recently the six movement *Concerto for Jonathan Scales Fourchestra and Steelband*. I anticipate having both Duvone Stewart and Etienne Charles as guests over this next school year.

My ability to bring in guest artists and commission new works is because my college sees the importance of what I am doing, they see the quality of my band, and they see the amount of community engagement at my concerts, which are attended by more people than any other ensemble at my school by far. It really helps to have immediate bosses and an administration that are interested in cultivating the arts and willing to fund my grand endeavors. Since the grants are never guaranteed, I usually try to get my boss to agree to cover the costs of bringing in the guest artist without any commissions. So far, I've managed to secure this "backup plan" money from my music department. The San Jacinto College Foundation has also been extremely generous with their financial support. Talking with other colleagues that are far less fortunate, I am truly grateful for my situation.

These ventures are important to me because I love showing students that they are capable of far more than they ever dreamed. The guest artists and world premiere projects have a powerful effect on student success. Having a special event to look forward to changes the dynamic of the rehearsals, the need for higher musical achievement, and gives me the ability to have a little more pressure/leverage within the rehearsals to motivate students to better prepare their parts. Often, the music that we are trying to tackle is way harder than anything they've ever tried to do. A very common response after a successful show is "Wow! I never thought I could do anything like this!"

I want to use this art form as a vehicle to perform things that no one has ever heard before. I find it very important to expand the literature for steelband beyond what has already been done.

I want to push the art of pan into new directions. I want to create a larger pan culture in my community. Part of my vision is that other directors will then hire these commissioned composers as guests, and perform the works that we commissioned around the country and the world. My hope is that these composers will gain more employment and exposure out of our initial effort.

Much of what I achieve is purely through sheer force of will! I have been accused of being too intense—I take that as a compliment!

**EL:** You run a two-year program. What are some of the specific challenges or advantages of that? What are the goals for your percussion students individually? How is your steelband so much stronger than many four-year schools?

**MM:** The biggest challenge at a two-year school is that the students leave just when they are becoming really productive. It can be frustrating, and it feels like starting over almost every year. You have no idea what kind of band you will have until you're standing in the room. The majority of my students have never played a pan before college. I'm just now starting to get students that have gone through one or two of my community bands, which is very exciting!

My goal for my percussion students: be as diverse as possible, but teach the core percussion fundamentals with excellence so they can successfully transfer to a four-year school. Even though the orchestral and rudimental snare, two mallets, and four mallets are primary, I want them to do it all: hand percussion, orchestral percussion, drumset, timpani, steelpan, jazz vibes, world music. It's really tough to try to get to all of these things in their short time with me. My steelband is made of about fifty percent percussionists.



(Top) San Jacinto Steelband with Andy Narell and Lord Relator, (Bottom) Andy Narell, Lord Relator, and Michael Mizma.

Of the non-percussionists, many have never played a musical instrument in their life. I throw them into the fire and push, push, push!

I think the strength of the band stems from the fact that I do not have a percussion ensemble—the steelband is the primary group for percussionists. Also, we rehearse three days a week as a registered class. While I have hopes to form a percussion ensemble in the future, I will always require my percussion majors to be in steelband. Furthermore, I treat the ensemble very seriously—I do my best to pick music that is high art, not fluff or novelty. I push my students to achieve more than they think they can. I try to instill a desire for excellence in all my band members.

I set this goal to the students: Become the premiere ensemble of the College. When people talk about San Jacinto Music, we want them talking about the steelband!

**EL: You've been seeding local middle-school and high-school steelbands with instruments as you upgrade your own band. Please talk about that and your vision for your broader steelband community.**

**MM:** Over my first ten years at San Jacinto, the band size stabilized around 13-15 members, so as we required more drums, we were able to start upgrading. We purchased more Wong doubles and triples, and two Mannette 6-bass. The old Steeltones pans went on a shelf in a closet.

I eventually began getting funding from my Music Department to bring in guest artists, which really improved the quality of the band. Most of these charts needed low C leads, so we purchased five new tenors. The old drums went onto a shelf in a closet.

Since the old drums were taking up so much space, I got approval from the administration to take them to a local school to start a steelband. I was also then awarded two grants to upgrade our instruments. Included in the language of the grants was a plan to use the older drums to seed new bands at local schools. I was able to purchase enough pans to start three community groups. Each program got a 6-bass, triple, one or two doubles, and at least two leads. I am hopeful to continue upgrading my school's instruments and form more community groups in the future.

I always include our community groups on our concerts. Throughout the semester, I visit the area steelbands to check their progress, give feedback, and assist if necessary. I used to have to do this more—now, the area directors have become more self-sufficient, and I typically spend an average of two hours weekly visiting these schools. In performance, I usually start the show with the junior and

high schools each playing one or two songs on their own, then my band plays our set with the guest artist. The last songs of the concert are simple enough that all the bands can join for a mass band concert finale. It's so fun and exciting for everyone to have so many people playing together!

This is important to me because I want to increase the size of the pan community in my area and create a pan culture here, and I hope to develop a P-16 pipeline of pan players, to have a recruiting tool to connect to my immediate community.

**EL: Tell me about your amazing storage containers!**

**MM:** Pannist Jeff Gleason contracted *Hafer Case*, with John Anderson in particular, to come up with ATA [Air Transport Association] pan case designs, which can be used as a coffin or a refrigerator case. Each can accommodate four leads, two sets of doubles, or one set of triples. We can have the band packed in less than ten minutes, ready to load out. This is so much better than individual pan cases littering a room, and the reality is that one of these ATA cases costs less than four individual hardshell pan cases—worth every penny.

The other type of "case" that I designed was a bass pan tray. These are foam covered dollys; each one accommodates three bass pans. These also save time moving—no cases, lids, or boxes to deal with. The other benefit: when not in use, we stand up the four trays (for two 6-bass sets) and they take up about a 2 ft x 2.5 ft footprint. I also have two smaller trays to accommodate the tenor bass. The rough plans for these are available and I made the prototype for less than \$100.

**EL: Any specific advice for other teachers that hope to build their program?**

**MM:** Ask for money early and often. Whenever there is even a hint of extra money that is available ask for it. Don't wait. The first day the budget opens ask for all the funding you might need for the year, and be specific as possible with justifications for your ask. Keep asking for money. Look for internal grant opportunities, which are usually less rigorous and less time consuming than external grants, and keep applying for them. To me, funding is the only thing that stops anyone from building a steelband program. Find the money! Having a vision of creating community groups within your plan can be a big swinging bat, too; adding that community outreach aspect gets the attention of people that would not normally consider funding a steelband.

And if you already own your own pans, take them to your

school and use them in a hybrid group. The mere presence of the pans will get a lot of attention from your higher-ups. Use that attention to get your foot in the door for funding. My steelband started with my personal lead and double second.

Did I say ask for money early and often?

**EL: Mike Mizma, thanks so much for your time and insights, and we look forward to your future good works! ■**

*Hafer Case ATA [Air Transport Association] pan case designs.*



## SHOP TALK: KENDALL WILLIAMS

Emily Lemmerman

*Kendall Williams is a lifelong musician, renowned Panorama arranger, Musical Director of CASYM Steel Orchestra, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Music Composition at Princeton University.*



**Emily Lemmerman:** Please tell me about your background in music and your relationship with pan throughout your life.

**Kendall Williams:** I started learning pan at the age of four in Miami, mostly from watching my father play his tenor pan daily at home. My family is from Trinidad; they came to the US well before I was born. My parents met playing pan in New York for a band called “Exhibits.” I believe my mother was the first woman on the bass in NY, and my father was on the tenor.

Eventually, I started going to the panyard with both my parents to watch them play with the Miami South Stars. My father, who although not heavily musically literate, was able to teach me all the major scales and quite a few other things that involved using my ears when learning music, including attention to patterns and good playing technique.

I believe one of my first major performances was a Christmas Concert at the age of seven—I was able to perform alongside my parents with the Miami South Stars and was the only child in that band. But I did play “on the road” for Carnival in Miami when I was five. The first panorama I performed was in Miami when I was seven. In Trinidad, I was eleven when I played in my first Junior Panorama, and then performed in my first [adult] New York Panorama at the age of thirteen with “Pan Rebels.” In 2000, at the age of thirteen, I joined Phase II for my first conventional panorama in Trinidad.

When I entered high school, I started taking piano lessons with encouragement from both of my parents. I must say that it took me a while to appreciate those classes since I was still only interested in playing pan and not yet what music theory and piano could do for me. Is it safe to say there is some regret there in not taking it a lot more seriously and moving forward with it? YES.

By senior year in high school, I decided to take a concert band class in which I learned a little more music theory, mostly through application and circumstance.

**EL:** You’ve gone through a lot of schooling! Talk about the different programs you’ve been in, your professors, and the best things you’ve taken away from each school.

**KW:** I was an architecture major for my first year of college, though I did take a jazz and concert band class that year, in which I was able to perform and learn a bit more about the value of music theory. At the time, my understanding of theory and my reading skills were almost non-existent. Participating in both of those ensembles helped push me to adapt, as I was not yet comfortable performing with non-steelband groups. In jazz band I was encouraged to improvise, which was brand new to me, and while terrifying, it was an exhilarating experience to push myself beyond my normal boundaries. Concert band gave me more confidence.

After that year, I switched to a music degree and enrolled at Florida Memorial College (now University) specifically for their steelband program, under the leadership of **Dr. Dawn Batson**. I received a BA in Music Performance with a focus on steelpan. There, I was able to learn a tremendous amount in a short space of time, which set me up for the rest of my life. Dr. Batson was the single greatest take-away from that school. I left feeling prepared not just for a musical journey, but for my life. She challenged me in the greatest ways, and opened me up to a world of classical music and a whole different way of thinking, performing, and building. The program was pretty rigorous with lots of one-on-one time, in which I was able to elevate my playing skills, technique, vocabulary, and professionalism.

Dr. Batson became one of, if not the sole reason for me even applying to New York University. At NYU, I pursued a musical theory and composition degree while actively participating in the **NYU Steelband**. There, I learned all that I could from Josh Quillen—my colleague, friend, and flat-out family. I was eager to understand how to be a great leader, motivator, and instructor of a steelband. I always admired the way he was able to get through to his students, and I absorbed as much as I could.

In the steelband at NYU, I was able to push my sight-reading skills further as there was more pressure and just an overall need for it because of the intense schedule. Additionally, although I was on the classical side of the university, I was able to take a few jazz courses that impacted my creativity on the classical end and my arrangements for steelbands. I spent quite a bit of time with Michael Gordon—a very esteemed and accomplished music composer. Both he and

Quillen became driving forces behind me looking into Princeton University, where I am now currently pursuing my PhD in Music Composition.

I must say I'm still figuring out what I'm taking away from Princeton University. It has been a roller coaster of experiences and I wouldn't change that for the world.

I'm a work in progress.

**EL: You've been very active internationally as a Panorama arranger in New York and Trinidad. You've also worked quite a bit as part of an arranging triad. Talk about those experiences, and the bands you've worked with. Any particular benefits or pitfalls in working as part of an arranging team? How many Panoramas have you arranged on your own? What's is your own favorite arrangement?**

**KW:** In most of my experiences I try to take away all the positives I can, and working as part of a trio (alongside Marc Brooks and Odie Franklin) is no different. I think that our personalities and natural dynamics with each other are unique—we're just as much friends working together as we are when we compete against each other. It's almost like a brotherhood or a fraternity. We can lean on each other, we have grown with each other, and we are sharing the journey, so I'd say there are tons of benefits. We are able to learn from each other's arranging styles and help each other creatively. We're really open to ideas and we respect each other enough to allow things to be created. On my own, I've arranged one panorama in Trinidad and six in New York for a total of seven panoramas. A favorite arrangement of mine is *"Ah Feeling Ah Feeling"*—a panorama arrangement that was done with Marc and Odie. It was our very first panorama arrangement together. Where we started is not where we finished and the journey was filled with challenges, entertainment, and learning experiences that changed my life.

**EL: You've been hired to arrange for Pan Elders in Trinidad for 2020, on the heels of the great Duvone Stewart. (Congratulations!) Those are big shoes to fill. What are your ambitions for that band? Do you have a relationship established there already?**

**KW:** The reality sometimes doesn't always hit that I'm the arranger. Those are big shoes to fill for sure; coming off of six panorama wins out of seven overall appearances is no easy feat. Going into any band, my ambition is to build a family-like bond that can grow positively over time, and to take things to another level. Pan is love, pan is life, and pan is my career, so the future is where my head is at. Upon

receiving the offer to arrange there wasn't yet a relationship with the band, but I've already been able to begin building one.

**EL: There are relatively few Panorama arrangers that compose new music, and conversely, very few composers that arrange for Panorama. Why do you think this is? Do you find both pursuits equally important? What is the composition you're most proud of yourself?**

**KW:** I think that both composition and panorama arranging both take a tremendous amount of time, energy, and focus that sometimes requires undivided attention. I definitely find both equally important. Panorama arranging is what got me into composition in the first place, again thanks to Dr. Batson. I think that not only do they work hand in hand, but individually they provide opportunities for creativity. The composition I'd be most proud of is possibly a composition that I call *M.U.S.I.C.* which involves five percussionists and is based on rules and not an actual written score. I'm most proud of it because it took me so far out of my comfort zone.

**EL: How active are you as an educator? Do you have a band you work with year-round? Do you have private students, either as players, or in composition or arranging?**

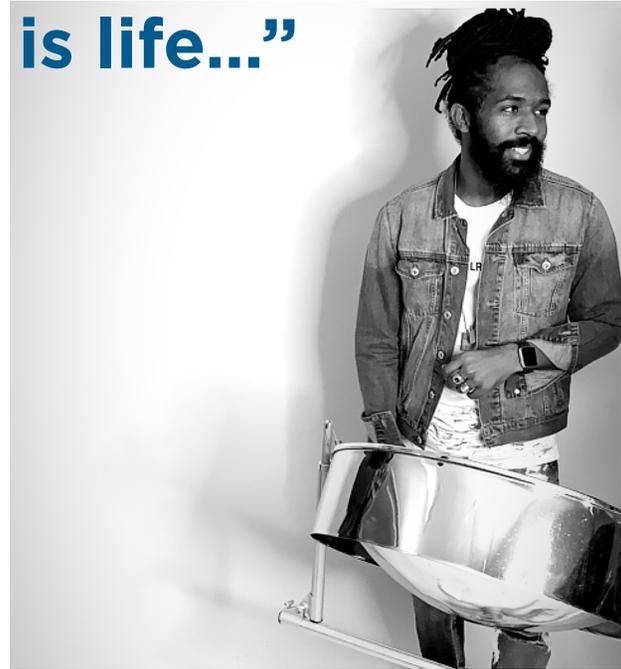
**KW:** I've been a bit more active in the past year, but I've worked as an educator for some time. I'm currently settling into the role of Musical Director of *CASYM Steel Orchestra*—it hasn't been a full year yet. I'm excited about the process as it unfolds. I do offer private lessons in steelpan but not in composition or arranging.

**EL: Do you have any specific advice for anyone that would like to follow in your footsteps? Anything different you wish you had done when you were younger?**

**KW:** One of the most important things would be to never stop believing in yourself. Don't depend on others to believe in you or push you to get to where you need. You may receive that help along the way but help or not you have to rely on you first. Taking leaps of faith will become a norm but it's a part of the ride and nothing is perfect or promised. I wish I understood earlier that my dreams can be a reality, and that I understood better what groundwork was needed in order to achieve them. I didn't officially start learning music theory until my college years and I constantly felt as though I was further behind than I needed to be.

**EL: Kendall Williams, thanks so much for your time and insights, and we look forward to your future good works! ■**

## “Pan is love, pan is life...”



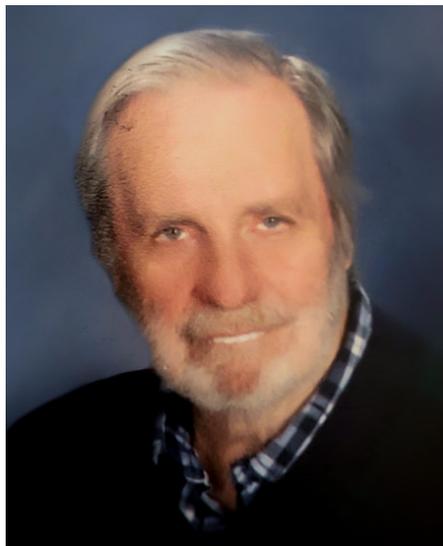
### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Emily Lemmerman** builds and tunes pans for her company, *Barracuda Steel Drums*, based in Austin, Texas, and is the only woman working full-time as a professional steelpan craftsman and tuner. She travels to work with bands around the world primarily as a tuner, but also as a clinician, adviser, songwriter and performer. Through her travels, Emily has gained uncommon access to and perspective on the global steelband landscape, and has cultivated relationships with many vibrant and interesting people in our worldwide steelband family. This column will feature some of their stories.



## AL O'CONNOR, FOUNDER OF THE NIU STEELBAND

*Dr. Andrew Martin*



**Al O'Connor**

In this year of lost legends, 2019 has called home another pioneer of the steelband movement in the United States with the passing this June of G. Allan O'Connor, founder of the Northern Illinois University Steelband program.<sup>1</sup> O'Connor was a beloved pedagogue and mentor to countless students from across the globe, and a stalwart of the arts in the greater Chicago and Midwest region. He was largely responsible for founding and fostering the steelband movement in the American university system, and his influence on the current steelband climate in the United States, though perhaps understated, is significant.

Originally from Long Island, New York, O'Connor earned a Bachelor's Degree in Music from SUNY Fredonia and later

a Master's Degree in Percussion Performance from the University of Illinois in 1967. A talented percussionist and New Music devotee, O'Connor was drawn to the famed center for experimental and electronic music at the University of Illinois. This interest in new and experimental music brought O'Connor in contact with the steelpan for the first time as he was charged with playing the steelpan as part of a found-objects collection of metal instruments. Written by U of I composition professor Salvatore Martirano, the work was called "Underworld" and was scored for four actors, four percussionists, two string basses, tenor sax, and two-channel tape. Among O'Connor's multi-percussion set was steelpan. The instrument was to be played as a found-sound object, not in its traditional context. O'Connor was intrigued by the steelpan, endeavoring to make more of this exotic instrument.

During the late summer of 1967, O'Connor and his wife, Judith, had saved money to take a proper honeymoon and, like many native New Yorkers, the pair was destined for the islands of St. Croix and St. Thomas in the US Virgin Islands. It was here that O'Connor saw live steelbands for the very first time, and he was entranced by what he saw and heard. After convincing a bartender at the Beachcomber Hotel to help, O'Connor acquired a tenor steelpan and upon returning home from the Caribbean promptly began teaching himself to play. With no steelbands near his home in Long Island, O'Connor focused his performing efforts on solo and mixed ensemble playing with jazz groups and choirs, many of which were directed by Judith, herself an accomplished musician.

In 1968, O'Connor took the first of many successive positions at NIU as professor of percussion. NIU was already known at this time for its explorations into world music, yet there were no steelpans at the university upon O'Connor's arrival. In spring of 1972, he acquired his first set of steelpans via a student on vacation in Aruba. The first NIU Steelband performance was two years later when the band performed as part of the percussion ensemble concert in the spring of 1974. From 1975-1980, the NIU Steelband

performed regularly with the NIU Percussion Ensemble and as part of the "Musica Exotica" World Music concert series at NIU. In 1980, the NIU Steelband joined forces with the NIU Marimba Ensemble and performed as part of the Rosewood-n-Steel concert series annually. In 1990, the NIU Steelband had grown to substantial size and acclaim, and the band began to hold its own annual concert. It was during this full concert format that the NIU Steelband further pushed the boundaries of steelband artistry and arranging to new levels.

The small set of Aruban steelpans acquired in 1972 were of varying quality and O'Connor's keen ear and irrepressible desire for musical quality led him on a quest to find better instruments and to learn how to build and tune steelpans himself. O'Connor set about replacing poor quality instruments and adding others to the collection with steelpans from Grenadian George Richards as early as 1975, and he also took a sabbatical to study tuning with Richards. These studies, rather than bolstering his confidence to tune steelpans, took him in a different direction. "My attempts to learn tuning may earn plaudits from various academics and respect from West Indians" noted O'Connor, "But for me, it pointed to the fact that I began to understand how little I actually knew about tuning pan." O'Connor highly respected the art and craft of steelpan tuning, building, arranging, and playing, and he looked to the Caribbean for help in realizing his vision of fostering a world class steelband program at NIU.

Under O'Connor's direction, the NIU Steelband recorded their first album in New York, titled "The N.I.U. Steelband Plays Calypso-Pop-Classics." The NIU Steelband, led by O'Connor, was also the first steelband to present a clinic at the Percussive Arts Society International Convention (PASIC) in 1977 in Knoxville, Tennessee. After the PASIC clinic, two influential professors of percussion approached O'Connor and offered congratulations, but warned the talented young O'Connor, "You shouldn't be messing with this [steelband]. It's never going anyplace." Luckily, he did not heed their advice; instead he sought to learn more about

**"You shouldn't be messing with this [steelband]. It's never going anyplace." Luckily, he did not heed their advice, instead seeking to learn more about the music, history, and culture of steelband and Trinidad..."**

the music, history, and culture of steelband and Trinidad as well as to achieve the highest musical standards for his steelband at NIU. In order to reach this goal, O'Connor was the driving force in NIU becoming the first college/university worldwide to employ a steelpan tuner/builder as full-time staff when Cliff Alexis was hired in 1985. The pair went on to co-direct the NIU Steelband until O'Connor's retirement in 2003, in the process establishing the gold-standard for university-based steelband programs.

Prior to Alexis's arrival, O'Connor had, with the exception of a few gifted students and guest artists, created all the arrangements for the NIU Steelband. He was accustomed to leading the rehearsals, which met five days a week for one hour. However, with the arrival of Alexis, O'Connor quickly deferred to the Trinidadian and the NIU Steelband quickly rose to a new level of artistic achievement. Setting his humility aside, O'Connor would later note, "This guy has been playing pan for thirty years, what am I going to tell him about playing a calypso?" By no means was O'Connor fin-

<sup>1</sup> For citations and an earlier version of this article, see Andrew Martin and Ray Funk, "Pan Patriarch Passes Away" (Trinidad Guardian, June 15, 2019, A20), and Andrew Martin, Ray Funk, Jeannine Remy, Steelpan in Education: A History of the Northern Illinois University Steelband (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2017).

ished directing though, as he was still arranging new pieces and directing the NIU Steelband through Western classical arrangements.

O'Connor was dedicated to spreading steelband across the globe and offering his students opportunities to perform and immerse in new cultures. To this end, O'Connor and Alexis organized and led the first mass steelband performance at PASIC in 1987 and presented several other clinics and performances at PASIC (1992, 1994) and numerous regional conventions and academic functions. The NIU Steelband was the first steelband of any kind to perform and tour in Taiwan (1992) and the band returned in 1998 for another heralded performance. In 2000, O'Connor brought the entire NIU Steelband to the instrument's birthplace, and the NIU Steelband placed second at the 2000 World Steelband Music Festival Steelband Competition in Trinidad. The NIU Steelband is the only foreign steelband to ever place in such an event in Trinidad and Tobago, no doubt a testament to their musicianship and dedication to the art form. In addition to tours in the Caribbean and across the United States, the NIU Steelband was selected to perform at the 2002 FIFA World Cup in Seoul, South Korea, where they also participated in the Seoul International Drum Festival.

Dating back to the 1970s, several students had graduated NIU with degrees in percussion performance, though they focused on steelpan, including Leonard Moses and Harold Headley, formerly of the University of the West Indies-St. Augustine. However, O'Connor envisioned a dedicated steelpan degree program, and NIU became the first American college or university to offer B.A., B.M., and M.M. degree tracks in steelpan. This began in 1992 as a partnership with UWI-St. Augustine. O'Connor believed that a proper steelpan education included a balance between academic rigor and traditional methodologies and pedagogies. To achieve this balance, O'Connor brought many Trinidadian guest artists to NIU, including Len "Boogise" Sharpe, Robert Greenidge, Ray Holman, David Rudder, and several other non-Trinidadian artists such as the US Navy Steelband and Andy Narell.

Over the years, O'Connor would go on to hold several other posts at the university, eventually retiring as Associate Dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts, and co-director of the NIU Steelband in 2003. O'Connor founded the NIU Steelband in 1973, and this group, now headed by Liam Teague, is the longest continuously running college/university steelband in the world. Each fall and spring their live concerts are livestreamed via the internet with viewership in the thousands.

A master educator and mentor to students young and old, O'Connor's legacy is alive today in his former students. More than five dozen NIU Steelband graduates are running steelbands in colleges, universities, and communities across the globe, including in Trinidad and Tobago, Antigua, Belize, Jamaica, Grenada, US Virgin Islands, Taiwan, Japan, and Europe. O'Connor's students hail from programs outside of NIU as well, as he was a sought-after clinician and mentor at schools and universities across the United States. Perhaps his most influential work outside of NIU was in Wisconsin where he founded the steelband and percussion program at the Birch Creek Summer Music Academy in 1982. O'Connor ran the steelband program at Birch Creek for nearly thirty years and taught hundreds of school-age students.

O'Connor was the recipient of several awards throughout his distinguished career, though none perhaps more noteworthy than his 2014 Lifetime Achievement in Education award by the Percussive Arts Society for his contributions to steelband and percussion education in the United States. For O'Connor, however, it was never about accolades, and his entire career was dedicated towards the achievement of his students and the progress of the steelpan art form.

G. Allan O'Connor's passing comes on the heels of the passing of his NIU colleague and beloved friend Cliff Alexis in January, and the passing of Ellie Mannette in August 2018. The trio were titans in the steelband movement in the United States and their presence is sorely missed. ■



(Top) Liam Teague, Clifford Alexis, and Al O'Connor, (Bottom) Clifford Alexis and Al O'Connor at NIU

**“A master educator and mentor to students young and old, O'Connor's legacy is alive today in his former students spread across the United States and the globe.”**

## A TOAST TO THREE LEGENDS

*Eugene Novotney*

I took this photo in November of 1994 in Atlanta, Georgia at the Percussive Arts Society International Convention at a reception honoring the joint performance of the Northern Illinois University and the West Virginia University steelbands. It was an epic period in time for the steelband movement in the United States, and everyone in attendance knew it. I could not stop smiling, and truly, I felt honored to be there. To see Ellie Mannette, Al O'Connor, and Clifford Alexis on stage together enjoying the moment was amazing. And now, to know that they all passed away within one year of each other makes this photo (and this moment) feel even more historic. So many people involved in the steelband movement in the United States can trace their lineage, either directly or indirectly, to one of these three giants. And this is one classic example of them all coming together to push the artform forward.

I know that there have been many toasts made in honor of these three legends already since their passing.

Let us all make one more...





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