



Celebrating the Culture & Instrument of Pan Music!

MY MUSICAL CULTURE AS A PANNIST



For those who don't know, what exactly is steel pan, Beverly Williams shares a little insight about this artform that has become an international instrument that many are playing worldwide. The steel pan, also known as the "steel drum", is a tuned percussion instrument created in the 1930s in the lovely twin island of Trinidad & Tobago. The pan is circular, looks like a bowl, that has "dents" in it that play different notes. You play it with wooden mallets, which us natives call "sticks" that have rubber ends. Before the steel pan, it was "Tamboo Bamboo" bands made of descendants of African slaves hitting the ground with bamboo, jamming with bottles with spoons and metal lids. It's sometimes played solo or with a whole band of different pans. You know... the entertainers on Caribbean cruise

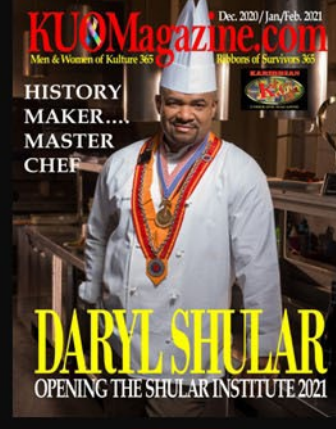
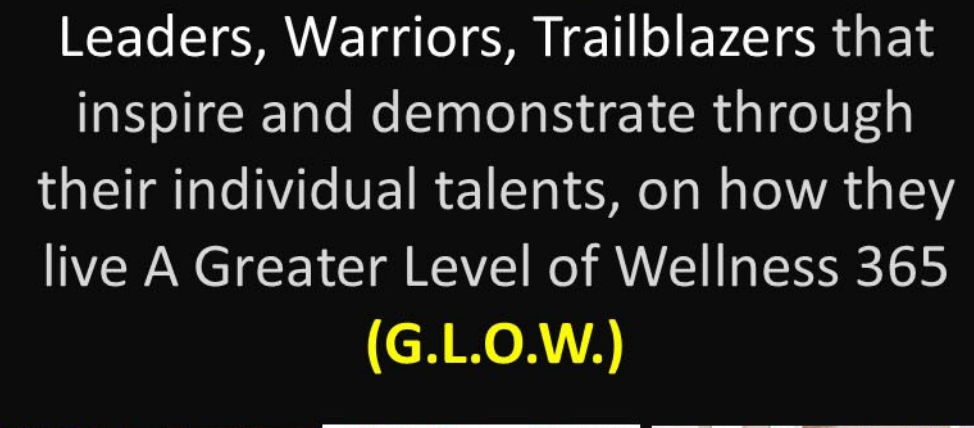
ships or that sound of music you hear in the background of travel commercials to "the islands"? Yep, that's the steel pan. Even though people play year-round, it is a Carnival staple to have pan players and masqueraders behind them in the parade. Now that we've gotten a little 411 on steelpan, let's chat a little more on your culture, passion, how you encourage young people to be a female pannist.

KUOM: What is your cultural heritage, and does it play a part in your passion for steel pan? I am Afro-Caribbean. My mother is from the St Croix, V.I. and my father is from TNT (Trinidad & Tobago). As the youngest and only girl of a single father, I learned SO much from my Dad, especially about my heritage. We bond the most thru our cultural experiences and traditions. I've been listening to steel pan music since I was in the womb. My father is still shocked when I can sing songs back to him that came out when I was a toddler. To be a Trini-baby, it is only natural for me to love the sound of the instrument. I mean who doesn't? It's happy music!!

KUOM: How old were you when you started playing, and what has the journey been like for you? I have been playing for 13 years old. It has been an amazing journey thus far! I am a member of the band, The New Generation Branches Steel Orchestra, located in my hometown of Orlando, Florida. Been playing with them since I started. Thru the love of the music and the camaraderie of a steel band, I've learned the dynamics of musical arrangement, teamwork and pride for my culture. And you don't need to have any special skills to learn and play well. When I play pan, I hear colors. I see music...moving people of all different ethnicity and ages, dancing full of joy and liberation. It is really freeing!

KUOM: Does your participation in this uniquely Caribbean music genre make you feel empowered as a woman, and how prevalent are women in this field? Absolutely! Back, back in the day, pan was associated with "the streets" and thugs. It was frowned upon by many to play pan or even be in a *pan yard*, fights would break out over rivalry and music, especially women because it wasn't safe. My father has told me many stories about how brawls would break out in a band, being that it had loyal members/fans like a gang would or sports team. Steel bands are related to the neighborhood it began in. If you're from St James, you're a "Phase II man". Don't get caught hanging around Casablanca. Still to this day, steel bands have prideful players and competition, but there's way more love than violence than there was 60 years ago. As a woman of the African diaspora, traditionally it is more common for women to dance than to play a drum, but not in the 21st century. Being that I can dance while playing sweet music, empowers my culture and sensuality at the same time. Sometimes you'll see more women pannists than men. There are all women bands. It's inspiring how things have evolved to include all the village. Everybody grabs something to play!

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Pannist Beverly Williams continues

KUOM: Steel pan is one of the cornerstones of the international carnival circuit, can you give the readers an idea of where and when people can catch Carnival, and watch you and your crew perform? Each carnival happens at different times during the year. Miami's carnival is at a different time than Trini's. In Orlando, Carnival is the Sunday before Memorial Day in May. You can catch New Generation Branches either on a truck in the parade or performing in the park, where the parade flows into.

KUOM: In your opinion, should we be encouraging our young people to get involved in carrying the rich history of steelpan forward into the future? Most definitely! Even though, Trinidad has shared the gift of steel pan with the world, at times I see many of the players not look like the indigenous creators of it and sometimes do not know or FEEL the cultural significance. Like all good things, the steel pan has been exploited for monetary gain, treated as a novelty and as leisure entertainment. It is imperative that young people, especially young people of African descent continue the art of steel pan music and its impact on the world. Sankofa, you must know where you come from in order to get where you are destined to go. We cannot let this beautiful instrument become a relic of the past!

KUOM: Finally, in your opinion is steel pan here to stay, and why? Pan is not going anywhere. There are bands all the way in Japan and they are GOOD. Pan is becoming a staple in hundreds, maybe thousands of high school percussion bands. Steel pan is used in music therapy as well. It is such a joy to know that many cherish the music and that it has and will continue to uplift the world.

A special thank you to Beverly Williams for this special interview with KUOMagazine.com and sharing her culture as a pannist with our community (Orlando, FL). Our readers can stay connected with Beverly on her media platforms links below.

Stay connected with Beverly on her social media on:

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