



About fifteen years ago, music centres were born in the UK. Run by the music services, they provide affordable musical tuition to people of all ages and abilities operating in schools, mostly on evenings and Saturdays. They are a godsend to those who slipped through the net when they were younger, those who want to learn an instrument that their school can't offer, and those who would like to learn as a family.

The rise of EAST STEEL

In 2000, I started the music centre steel pan class in the old Foxwood school building. I chose this venue and East Leeds to start music centre tuition because, when Foxwood School closed in 1996, there were many children on the Seacroft estate who lost their turn to be in the school steel band and the building had lots of room to store pans.

I didn't quite know what to expect from the class, but four years later, Sue, Tamanna and Bassem were on stage at the West Yorkshire Playhouse to packed houses for a five week stint. Six years on, we are averaging 25 gigs a year.

I was introduced to the steel pan in 1983, started gigging with Foxwood pupils in 1984 and entered my first GCSE students in 1987. In 2000, I was back with the Twelve Bar Blues in C, in the dirty little space at the back of the hall. Once, there were local children spitting over the balcony on the players, at which point I despaired. I didn't know why my pupils even came back.

It was too depressing in the end, three years later; being in this cubby hole they called backstage with all its memories of past concerts and successes. We decamped to the main host, Parklands School, where all the other instruments were taught thus severing my last links with my beloved Foxwood.

Pupils came and went but Sue, Tamanna, Karen, Alli, Emma and Stephen stayed. We played YAMSEN Specially Music Town Hall Christmas Concert, called ourselves East Steel with some Foxwood Steel Bandits players joining in to help out.

The next music centre, West Leeds Music Centre, was set up at a high school on the other side of town. It was back to the Twelve Bar Blues in C, and pans stacked in a dirty cupboard two doors down the corridor. We had to push the tables and chairs back, carry in and set up all the pans, and, an hour and a half later, put them all back.

Pupils came, pupils went, but Joan, Jennifer, Joe, Sarah and Cathy stayed. Each centre had a small band, but together they were a twelve-piece band and played the YAMSEN Specially Music Town Hall Christmas Concert.

We were getting a name for ourselves. I had beginners but now I also had a band. Demand increased. We set up the West Leeds Music satellite at the City of Leeds School. Here pans were set up all the time as I taught other classes from this venue. And now pupils came, and generally stayed. Ruth, Penny, Joyce, Isobel, Bryony, Ruby, Jasmine, Judy Anne, Lynne and Lizzie stayed and practised the same songs at all three centres and got together to play at gigs.

The next stage was to practice the same songs at the same time, and in the same place. A decision was made to allow all paid up members to rehearse at any centre making the smaller units feel less isolated.

By 2006, fifteen players had bought their own pans (all but the first made by Grafton Yearwood). This meant that they were able to practice every day enhancing their standard of performance. They also looked better after purchasing their own t-shirt with the band's logo designed by Anna-Marie.

The pressures of work (three music centres, teaching and writing music) took its toll on me but fortunately three of my Foxwood semi-professional players evolved into pan teachers. Xanthe, Bex, Natalie and I share classes with Joan in charge of the band's increasing amount of administration.

Every Christmas sees us at Leeds Town Hall, summer is Pudsey Civic Hall, Leeds Flower Show, Otley Carnival, etc and since 2005, East Steel has joined Leeds Silver Steel Sparrows and the Foxwood Steel Bandits to play at Leeds Carnival.

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