



# The rise and death of the Royal PARK STEEL pandas



In 1998, Rita Samuel, head teacher of the Royal Park Primary School where I had been a parent and governor for several years finally caved into my requests for pan tuition at her school. The primary school was housed in a dignified and beautiful Victorian building in an area of Leeds with a mixed population of university students, Mirapuri Asian families, ex-students, university lecturers, etc.

Originating in Trinidad, steel pans had no cultural association for the children of Royal Park but I knew that this was the instrument of social and academic inclusion. Using colour coding for the chords inside the Foxwood song sheets brought a halt to all language barriers.

We decided to target only Year 6 students and started an after-school club. I taught voluntarily and used my own pans, bringing them up the steep Victorian steps, setting them up, teaching the music, sorting out the fights and staggering back down the steps again.

By spring, we had a band and a repertoire. Having played in concerts at local special schools and the town centre festival, we were featured in the local newspapers.

The following year, we found a set of pans to lend to Royal Park. The pans were stacked in the corner of the hall between practices. We extended our repertoire, were asked to play for the Geographical Society's conference at Leeds University and learnt "St Lucia" to play for the outgoing President, in whose honour the song had been written. We never learnt anything so hard but played it very well.

Written By: Victoria Jaquiss

In the next school year, Royal Park found enough money for daytime tuition. Bill Winterbottom, the teacher of Year 6 and I decided on a set of rules that was the key to the following years of success. We charged 20 pence for every after-school session, and only the children who came after school could have free lessons in school time. But, in the autumn term everybody in Year 6 had lessons and the pans were now permanently set up in the AVA room.

We played at the first of the Kirkstall Festival concerts and from that time on, we got asked to play at the Festival even before the new students had played their first notes. Every year, we invited a drummer from a different local high school to support the band and got a

grant for our drum-kit and our first soprano steel pan. Having earned enough money and goodwill from our gigs, we got t-shirts printed and the pans painted. But, for me, the musical success of this band was as nothing compared to the trust that Bill and I gained with the Asian parents. In our first year, the band was made up of white and black children with just one Asian pupil. After four months he was not allowed to play pans anymore, although he was allowed to stay after school for sports.

By the sixth and last year of this band, the school itself had more Asian pupils, but significantly for me they were all in the band. And when we played our gigs, their parents videotaped the concerts.

In 2002, the TES featured my system of notation, the Foxwood song sheets, in its magazine and sent a photographer to Royal Park School. Not one parent refused permission for their child to be in the newspaper, which went all around

the world. And so it happened that Murtazar's picture was featured.

Sadly, at the beginning of this century, Leeds acquired a private education company, whose declared mission was to close down as many Leeds schools as possible in order to reduce "surplus places". Royal Park was one of those schools. In 2004, the Royal Park Steel Pandas played their last Kirkstall Festival gig.

Well, let me tell you, it was an emotional day. We took lots of photos, and later on I introduced the students to the head teacher of the nearby local school who was taking on many of the ex-Royal Park pupils. These pupils had been waiting for their chance to join the Pandas but because their school had closed it didn't happen. The head teacher said, "Wow, how did get all these Asian children to stay behind after school?" And I said, "It took eight years" but I didn't have the heart to start all over again.

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