

Andy NEILS

THE ART OF PAN TUNING IS ALIVE WITH ANDY 'MAD MAX' NEILS



One of the pan tuning greats Lincoln 'Delgado' Noel has passed, but the art of tuning is alive and the torch is passionately carried by some of the other greats of his generation, including Bertram 'Birch' Kelman, Wallace Austin and Bertie Marshall, to mention a few.

And then there are those of the 'next' generation - such as Andy 'Mad Max' Neils who is one of the most sought-after pan-tuners in the world; regularly declining jobs to tune entire orchestras and even individual pan instruments, both in Trinidad and abroad. The likes of Desperadoes, Exodus, Invaders, Skiffle Bunch and CASYM (New York) steel orchestras, and many more in the US Virgin Islands, Jamaica, Aruba and Antigua - all bear the mark and sounds of his expert skills.

In 1981, at age seventeen, after spending a short while with Blue Diamonds, he joined the South East Secondary School's steelband. Whilst at school he joined Renegades and spent fifteen years with their panorama and world-traveled stage side.

It was at Renegades that legendary arranger Dr. Jit Samaroo dubbed him 'Mad Max' because of his playing skills. Andy wanted to make pan his life. He set his sights on pan tuning and his first formal taste of it was during a six-week course run by Pan Development Unlimited at Belmont Junior Secondary School in Port-of-Spain. Desmond Waithe taught the music theory segment and played a pivotal role in Andy's initiation into arranging on the national scene.

It was the interaction with the late Clive Bradley, a music instructor at a Pan Trinbago's tuning workshop that gave Andy the confidence to explore the world of arranging. This boost of confidence saw him contact Desmond at the Belmont Intermediate School who agreed to have the school band participate in the Junior National Panorama with Andy as the arranger. Andy got Renegades to allow the students to use their pans and with this concession in place, took them to Panorama for two years. He then moved to traditional bands in the likes of Rhythm Rockers from Arima. Andy also worked with Nutones and Marsicans whilst perfecting his tuning skills. In fact, he acted as arranger and tuner for Hilarks in Belmont.

Andy's exposure to pan tuning marked the beginning of his music literacy experience. It instilled in him a desire to experiment and accomplish more on the instrument. From 1996, when he was employed at TTIL, he received his true education, gaining most of his experience and pan tuning skills. He initially joined TTIL and was assigned the task to prepare - but not tune - the 'souvenir' pans. His insatiable quest saw Andy using his spare time to tune pans that TTIL had cast aside as defective. The recognition he got whilst tuning a discarded tenor saw him finally land a job among the 'real' artisans, tuning conventional instruments. His appointment as the company's tuner for middle range instruments came after tuning a side of a triple guitar given to him by Lincoln Noel. He also worked on double seconds with Lincoln who shared his knowledge on working in octaves and balancing.

Reminiscing about some of his other TTIL experiences, Andy chuckled as he spoke about the hours spent tuning the pans that Gabriel 'Doyle' Robley was given responsibility for. Robley was not at all averse to this, as a result Andy's tuning prowess and experience grew immensely. He considers those experiences at TTIL an apt trade off for his expertise today. Later, when Lincoln Noel took Andy to tune Desperadoes' guitar pans, his popularity grew. He accompanied Nutones Steel

Orchestra to Kuala Lumpur as their tuner and sometime after tuned the T & T Defence Force Steel Orchestra's instruments for a World Steelband Festival, where they tied with Exodus Steel Orchestra for championship honors. It was around this time Andy left TTIL, and forged a path on his own.

Andy's ten years of pan tuning has fuelled a desire to pass on his own talents, teaching or apprenticing select individuals. His vision is to open his own pan tuning school in the next five years.

He has been the resident tuner for Invaders Steel Orchestra's frontline instruments and upon the death of tuner, Leo Coker, did the same range of pans for Exodus for their 2003 - 2006 panorama seasons. He also tuned for Skiffle Bunch and Desperadoes for the '2K6 Pan in the 21st Century' competition.



Andy said that although he has tuned entire orchestras his true preference is to produce individual instruments of all voices of steel pan for smaller ensembles. His tuning for the CASYM Steel Orchestra in New York of course played a vital role in their 2006 Panorama championship win. In fact, he has been requested to produce brand new instruments for the entire one hundred-player orchestra.

He maintains his reputation as a world-renowned and talented pan tuner, and nurtures a love for his craft and a respect for the instrument, coming from his many years as a pan player. He is very vocal in his gratitude and appreciation for the late, Lincoln Noel, whose confidence in Andy has paid off, not only for Andy himself, but also for those fortunate enough to avail themselves of his talents.

Website: www.panmaxstudios.com

By: **When Steel Talks**
www.Panonthenet.com