

steel bands

What they need to win Panorama contest

BY TREVOR JOHN
The grand event known as Panorama commences annually on the Saturday before Labor Day. Part show, part theater and part musical competition, Panorama is a critical part of the cultural fabric of the Caribbean carnival experience of New York.

Imagine 10 steel orchestras — each featuring more than 100 musicians — taking the stage and battling for musical supremacy. There is nothing like Panorama's enormity, spectacle, raw emotions and sheer investment of human will, drive and desire.

This year, thousands will once again descend on the Brooklyn Museum grounds to experience this musical phenomenon. But long before the intense musical rivalries — some of which decades-old — are renewed in musical warfare that night, there

are tons of critical details that must be sorted out.

The acquisition of adequate practice space is paramount to the fortunes of any ensemble wishing to have a chance of triumphing in Panorama. Unfortunately, practice space remains one of the greatest challenges the steel orchestras must face in New York.

The requirements of a large steel orchestra, with upwards of 100 players, are at direct odds with the shrinking landscape of available land for pan yards.

Bands do not actually own their pan yards. In fact, it is not uncommon for bands to go late into July or early August still trying to secure a yard. CASYM Steel Orchestra (long-time affiliate of Daily News) faced this very problem this year.

Once the pan yard is secured, it must be prepared, as musicians will remain almost glued to the yard for hours at

a time. The yard will become home away from home. And some of the fondest and most cherished memories of the pan players will be made there.

Beginning the first week of July, New York steel bands begin a round robin of sorts for band launches. In addition to providing the musicians with performance opportunities, the launches allow the community to see their bands perform next to the other bands. It is in a sense a sizing-up of the competition.

Bringing out a steel orchestra for Panorama is an extremely expensive feat — costs can run upwards of \$50,000 to \$75,000 — so launches are critical to the steelbands' raising financial support from the community.

In recent years, there has been an influx of students and players from other countries, states and



CASYM musicians prepare for Panorama performance last year.

colleges who join New York-area bands to experience Panorama. Pan Sonatas Steel Orchestra has a growing contingent of music majors from Oberlin College making this yearly trek. Panorama gives them the opportunity to be part of the music performance experience outside of the classroom.

The finals required for serious try for top Panorama honors are an essential trio — the tune, the arranger and the tuner.

The Arranger: The single most important individual in a Panorama venture is the arranger. Each band entrusts this person to put together a

musical story that will woo the judges as they execute and fulfill the judging criteria to score points.

A most sought-after position, the job of arranger is coveted and highly acclaimed — and New York Panorama has seen some of the best in the world. The current champion arranger is Yohan Popwell of Pan Sonatas (see a video interview with Popwell on the *When Steel Talks* website: www.panonthenet.com/spotlight/popwell/invue.htm). Other greats include the late, legendary Clive Bradley and bona-fide superstar Len (Boogsie) Sharpe.



Members of the Pan Sonatas steel orchestra in practice session for the 2009 Panorama competition.

The Tune: the song picked for the competition is next in importance to delivering a command performance on the big night. The song must not only be embraced by the band, but also jell with its attitude and personality.

A host of tunes have been written for this year's Panorama; "Pan Army" and "Battle Zone" are among this year's favorites. (To hear this year's songs, visit the *When Steel Talks* Web site at www.panonthenet.com/tnt/2010/tunes/contents.htm.)

The Tuner: Entrusted with preparing and tuning large numbers of instruments (literally hundreds of drums), the tuner is the "sound" of the orchestra. Some only need to listen to know which tuner has touched the pans of an orchestra. Such is the case, for example, when people say they are listening to "Birch pans," referring to one of the world's finest tuners, Bertram (Birch) Kelman (www.panonthenet.com/view/2004/kelman2004.htm). He not only tunes but also manufactures the instruments of the current champion, Pan Sonatas.

The tuner's job is a momentous task that can only be accomplished by a select few in the world; Roland Harrigin is one of them. The tuner holds

an esteemed position in the steelpan fraternity.

New York has a rich and vibrant history with the steelpan, beginning with Rudy King, the man who brought the instrument to America (see profile online at www.basementrecordings.com/news/cparticles/rdykg.htm).

The Panorama experience is now cross-generational, encompassing full family units and all nationalities.

Sonatas, Pantonic, CASYM and ADLIB have been the champions over the past five years, and are examples of best practitioners in the art form.

Their management teams are led by Macaulay Scott, Glenda Gamory, Williams Jones and Franklin Meyers, respectively.

Look for the 2010 Panorama to be as engaging and spirited as it ever has been in its almost 40-year history. The lineup is expected to include ADLIB, Boston Metro, CASYM, D'Radoes, Dem Stars, Despers USA, Harmony, NY Marsicans, Pan Sonatas, Pantonic and Sesame Flyers steel orchestras.

See more about the 2010 New York Panorama at the website www.panonthenet.com/results/NewYork/2010/ny-2010-panorama.htm.