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Shell Disowns Drums as Panmen Gather for World Cup (Update1)

(The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of Bloomberg.)

By A. Craig **Copetas**

March 27 (Bloomberg) -- Royal Dutch Shell Plc has one word to offer on the subject of its musical oil barrels.

``What?" says Shell spokeswoman Alexandra Wright in London.

The World Cup is about to change Shell's tune.

``Oil drum music is infectious," says Sepp Blatter, the president of Federation Internationale de Football Association, soccer's global governing body and organizer of the 2006 World Cup in Germany in June.

Blatter envisions the rum poured and a conga line ensuing around the 10,000 steel-drum ``panmen" expected to follow the Trinidad and Tobago Calypso

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Carnival Warriors team.

``Over a billion people will see this on television," Blatter says. ``Fantastic for Trinidad and the World Cup. The audience will go wild."

And therein lies the corporate dilemma of Gerard Mitchell, country head of Shell Trinidad Ltd.

More than a few thousand of those World Cup drummers will probably be beating Shell oil barrels.

``It's officially against corporate policy for us to hand out oil barrels," the 37-year-old Mitchell frets. ``We really don't know what to do about all this."

For many of the world's estimated 35,000 panmen, the sweetest-sounding music comes from the 55-gallon, 20-gauge red steel oil barrels made in Shell's lubricant mixing plant on Barracones Bay in Trinidad.

A few miles up the road in Port of Spain, beneath the shade of the big breadfruit tree at 147 Tragarete Road, a Shell executive in 1946 made history's first steel drum from an empty barrel of tractor lubricant bearing the company's distinctive clamshell insignia.

Stradivari Reputation

According to American jazz musician Andy Narrell, Shell oil-barrel pans made between 1946 and 1967 are as renowned and desirable as the Cremonese violins of Antonio Stradivari, Nicolo Amati and Giuseppe Guarneri. Even the barrels made today are in high demand among pan players.

``We kind of have a reputation," Mitchell says.

Adds William Rosales, Shell Trinidad's 36-year-old engineer charged with overseeing the manufacture of more than 42,000 Shell oil barrels annually: ``Let me state for the record that our used drums are disposed of properly and that Shell health and safety regulations prevent the use of empty drums for anything but Shell oil products."

That wasn't always the case. Sixty years ago, Shell bankrolled the invention of the modern pan drum, the only new acoustic instrument to hit the music scene since Adolph Sax came up with the saxophone in 1841.

`Mr. Alexis'

Shell's archivists in London and The Hague have no record of the pan or its inventor, Ellie Mannette. Shell executives in Trinidad suspect the company's documentation for both was lost when the government nationalized the oil industry in 1974, and Shell's presence was reduced from 4,000 employees to its current 55-member operation.

Old-timers on the island say Shell got into the music business in 1951, when a Shell Caribbean managing director they remember as ``Mr. Alexis" put Mannette on the payroll with an annual salary of \$2,000 to stop him and his pals -- Birdie, Puddin' and Cobo Jack -- from stealing the company's empty and toxic oil drums. Mannette remained with Shell until 1967, as a sales manager, steel-drum maker and leader of pan band the Shell Invaders.

``They called me Cairo," says Mannette, now 80 and the artist-in-residence and a professor of music at West Virginia University in Morgantown. ``We were teenage gang members, all viewed as social outcasts until Shell took an interest in us and our music. They gave us barrels and money and made the music happen."

The Barracuda

Mannette named the world's first 55-gallon Shell drum ``the barracuda." It was last seen in August 1946, stuck in the high branches of the breadfruit tree. ``The big kids beat me up and stole barracuda because it made a

better sound than their drums," Mannette says. ``They threw it up in that tree and I wasn't going up there for it."

By the early 1960s, Jeff Chandler, Shell Trinidad's British managing director, and fellow Englishman Michael Smallbone were spending their off hours as managers for the Shell Invaders. The group even played at New York's Madison Square Garden.

``They carried the beer and made sure it was cold," recalls 70-year-old George Martin, Shell's Caribbean public relations director from 1966 to 1996. ``Chandler and Smallbone loved hanging out at the Shell pan yard. They arranged scholarships and helped all the musicians study abroad."

Bonfire Treatment

One of the early Shell Invaders, Malcolm Weekes, received an annual \$2,000 scholarship to attend Howard University in Washington, where he played the double alto (two drums with 16 notes on each pan) for the school's Trinidad Steel Band and graduated with a degree in chemical engineering. Now retired after a career as a chemist at Bechtel Group Inc., Weekes remembers when he and Mannette forged pans out of toxic barrels.

``We built bonfires to burn out all the crap stuck inside the drums," Weekes, 65, says. ``It was dangerous work. We all inhaled the fumes. But what the barrel had contained also helped define the sound of the drum."

Mannette now builds about 100 pans annually from the unsoiled barrels that roll off the line at North Coast Container Corp. in Cleveland.

``Weird thing is, nobody's really sure why a 55-gallon oil drum can be crafted into a musical instrument or why my early Shells have a distinctive sound," Mannette says. ``I once made a drum out of a Shell barrel that had stored perfume. Now that was really exceptional."

It's the Solvent

Back in the lab at Shell Trinidad, chemist Saira Joseph says the sound is in the solvent.

``A lighter oil would lend itself to higher notes and a heavier oil to lower notes," Joseph explains. ``The gauge of the steel is the most critical factor. Shell stayed with the heavier 20-gauge, while the other oil companies mostly went to 15- and 18- gauge steel."

Panman Chanler Bailey, who spent six years at Mannette's side studying steel-drum construction, says the oil companies no longer know how to make an oil barrel. ``There's a lot of junk Japanese- made barrels out there," Bailey says. ``They don't hold the sound and the drumheads crack on impact."

Modern pan makers, called blenders or tuners, rigorously follow Mannette's system in constructing any of the nine drums that make up the pan family. The barrels are first sliced according to register, from soprano to bass. Then, using a selection of rubber and metal mallets, blenders stretch the thickness of the metal top to create a concave drumhead to produce anywhere from three to 30 notes.

Before Mannette's first nine-note barracuda, steel music makers could play only three notes on hubcaps and cookie-tin tops configured with convex drumheads. They went clunk.

The Fine-Tuning

In Trinidad, a blended barrel costs about \$600. And should the oil drums tumble from the Shell factory -- which they officially don't -- add perhaps a few hundred dollars to the sticker price.

Majudell Raham is a 37-year-old master oil-barrel maker at the Shell plant. With a sheet of rolled Columbian steel in his gloved hands, Raham heaves the metal into the ``drum rounder," the first of the assembler's four-step process. From there, the tubular sheet goes aboard the ``beader flanger" to create the two rims that give an oil drum its industrial musculature and musical resonance.

For panmen, what Raham does next is akin to the difference between a fiddle and a Stradivari, and his choice is clear. Raham can let a computer regulate the flow of the chalky substance that locks in the barrel lids, or he can tweak the stream to his taste.

The Logo Goes

``I don't play any musical instruments," Raham says, fine-tuning the surge of sealant. ``The barrel seam must fold together. For the sound, I think the solid seam is everything."

To ensure the finished product meets Shell's environmental standards, Raham checks for leaks and ruptures in the metal.

Back along the banks of the Monongalia River, in the workshop of Mannette Steel Drums Ltd., a set of the maestro's chrome-plated pans can fetch more than \$10,000. The result can be heard accompanying the tunes of Harry Belafonte, Alison Krauss, Jimmy Buffett, and the National Symphony Orchestra at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington.

``It's a lot different from the days when I'd go out every morning on my green bicycle to scout empty oil drums," Mannette says, pushing a finger through his crop of curly gray hair. ``My gang, the Oval Boys, would go back at night to steal them. We took everything, including garbage cans, but those Shell barrels were gold."

Vintage Mannette

During his early years in Trinidad, Mannette estimates he tuned 512 Shell oil pans.

``The sound is completely different," says Narrell, who counts a set of early 1960 Mannette pans among his collection. ``You'll occasionally spot a vintage Mannette, but the drums are so old that it's hard to find one with the original Shell logo."

Mannette says part of his deal with Mr. Alexis was a promise that the Shell Invaders would always play with the Shell logo on their drums.

``Can't do that anymore," Mitchell explains. ``Corporate policy prohibits us from putting the logo on our barrels. We don't know where it might show up."

The Shell Invaders no longer exist. Once first among the 150 bands and 3,000 drummers who practice in the pan yards along Tragarete Road in Port of Spain, Shell disbanded the group in 1974. They reappeared a few years ago as the BWIA Invaders, named for their new underwriter, British West Indian Airways Ltd.

Preferring the Clam

Along the musical thoroughfare, the hippest band these days is the Excellent Stores Silver Stars, named after a supermarket chain. On a recent evening, a few BP Renegades were spotted playing alongside Tony's Ice Cold Coconut Truck in the center of town. They wouldn't say where their barrels came from.

Weekes, the retired Shell Invader, says he knows.

``Cairo and I would blend the competition's pans on Shell barrels and then they'd paint BP, Texaco stars and Mobil flying horses over the Shell clam," Weekes says.

``The panmen still prefer the Shell barrel," adds 71-year-old Miky **Galera**, Shell Trinidad's aviation fuel manager during the 1960s.

Suppressing a grin, Rosales, Shell's barrel superintendent, says, ``I know we make the best musical oil drums in the world."

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