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Steel pan group to compete in world festival in Trinidad

By **Jeff Samoray**, *OU Web Writer*

After having performed at many campus events, such as the Oakland Center patio concerts, OC expansion dedication and Alumni Awards Banquet, Oakland University's **Student Steel Pan Organization** has built a solid reputation for providing high-quality musical entertainment. Now the organization wants to spread its reputation around the world.

The band, which has 14 members, is preparing to participate in the **World Steelband Music Festival** in Trinidad next October.

"We started the organization a little over a year ago with the idea of playing in Trinidad," said organization president and senior music major Lesley-Anne Graham. "It's an invitation-only competition held every two years. Hundreds of bands from around the world will be competing in different categories."

Members of the group learned to play their handcrafted steel instruments through classes in OU's **Department of Music, Theatre and Dance**. Organization adviser and Special Lecturer in Music Mark Stone teaches the courses, which focus on the study and performance of various Trinidadian and Caribbean styles.

"We perform very traditional arrangements," Graham said. "A lot of other bands use huge speakers and drum machines to play karaoke-style steel pan, but they lose a lot of authenticity. In our playing, we try to stay as close to the culture of Trinidad as we can."

Through Stone's friendship with Tommy Crichlow, a steel drum player and composer, the group received an invitation during the summer of 2002 to participate in Toronto's Caribbean Festival. The group performed with a larger ensemble and took fourth place in the festival competition. The reputation the band earned with its performance led to the World Steelband Music Festival invitation.

"We're hoping to adapt a piece written by (jazz trumpeter) Dizzy Gillespie called 'Mantinka' for our festival performance," Graham said. "We normally play calypso but also arrange mambo, African, jazz and classical pieces. Our idea for the festival is to perform pieces by American composers."

Travel to Trinidad with fragile instruments is an expensive endeavor. The group is trying to raise as much money as it can by late summer to fund the trip. So far, the funds the organization has raised through performances have gone toward cases for their instruments, which are highly susceptible to being "knocked" out of tune.

"Each case costs between \$200 and \$500," Graham said. "Steel pans are very delicate, and there just aren't people in the Michigan area who can tune them – it takes a specialist. Mark Stone is working as an apprentice to learn how to tune them, so we need to fly in a tuning specialist when necessary. Besides tuning notes, you also have to get the right harmonics and overtones."

The organization's goal is to raise enough money by playing as many gigs as possible to fund everyone in the group. Band members also may organize a steel drum summer camp similar to OU's other summer music camps, which would include lessons, a history of the instrument's evolution and a final camp performance.

"Last summer we played some high school graduation parties and nearly 30 gigs this fall covering every weekend," Graham said. "In addition to our campus appearances, we also performed at some Christmas concerts at churches in Birmingham and Lake Orion. We'll be playing at Mongolia Barbeque (on University Drive across from the main OU campus entrance) in February and will perform with the Macomb Symphony in May."

For more information on the band and its upcoming performances, visit the **Student Steel Pan Organization** Web site or contact Lesley-Anne Graham at (248) 980-5678 or sspo_OU@hotmail.com.

SUMMARY

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