



Friday, September 24, 2004

Steelband competes at world festival in Trinidad

By **Dawn Pauli**, contributing writer

Oakland University's **Student Steel Pan Organization** traveled to Trinidad to compete in the **World Steelband Music Festival** in August.

The only non-Caribbean band in the competition, the Southpaw Isle Steelband placed eighth in the Ensemble Category. A duet of Jennifer Roberts, OU alumna, and Justin Velich, junior music education major, finished in seventh place.

The invitation-only competition is held every two years and hundreds of bands from around the world compete in different categories.

The Southpaw Isle Steelband scored 509 out of 600 points, with the first place team scoring 553.

"It's sort of like the Olympics of steel drumming," said Mark Stone, organization adviser and special lecturer in music. "The other groups that finished higher had more experience, but we felt good about our performance and we placed well. Just going to the competition is winning since we had to qualify to go."

The band performed two pieces, a calypso and a classical. Stone arranged the classical piece, "Bachianas Brasileiras No 5" by Heitor Villa Lobos, and the group's tuner, Michael Kernahan, arranged "The Carnival is Over."

A Trinidad newspaper wrote of the group's performance, "The Queens Hall audience gave South Paw Isle a lusty applause for its musical efforts."

OU's Steel Pan organization includes students and alumni Lauren Brick, Ryan Cheney, Crystal Evans, David Fekel, Jocelyn Fekel, Lesley-Anne Graham, Roberts and Velic. Faculty members Stone and Kerro Knox, associate professor of theatre, also attended, along with Kernihan.

The organization raised about \$10,000 to fund the trip. It's costly to transport the fragile steel drums, which are susceptible to being knocked out of tune.

During the competition, the Southpaw Isle Steelband added a vocalist, Jocelyn Fekel, to its performance, something no other competitor had ever done.

"It was great because we really turned a few heads by doing this and got a lot of very positive comments from a lot of great pan players," said Evans, who is the president of the Student Steel Pan Organization and a senior music education major.

A highlight of the trip was a workshop with Len "Boogsie" Sharpe, considered to be the greatest pan player and steelband arranger alive today.

"It was such a great opportunity to have him listen to our group and give us some very positive feedback about what we can do with the music in the future," Evans said. "He wrote a piece for our group right there on the spot. And to be able to say that we were able to jam with Boogsie is a big deal for any pan player much less some small band from Michigan."

The students appreciated the time spent in Trinidad, the birthplace of the steel drum.

"It was absolutely a once-in-a-lifetime experience," Evans said. "It was a chance for us as students, who normally only learn about the steel pan in a classroom or ensemble setting, to experience the culture and music firsthand as it was

happening. We were able to meet so many great people and learn a lot about the music that you simply just can't read in a textbook.”

The group found time to explore Trinidad and it's sister island, Tobago.

“It's one of the most beautiful places I have ever been,” Evans said. “It's the exact picture that you see in your head when you think of a Caribbean island — sandy beaches, bright blue water, huge palm trees and the most beautiful plants and birds you would imagine. We were able to spend a few days there and relax after a week of rigorous rehearsals and competition.”

Stone teaches the steel pan drum through the **Department of Music, Theatre and Dance**. The class is open to all students, regardless of prior experience. Students in the class created the OU Steel Pan Organization. The organization is already raising funds for the next World Steelband Music Festival in 2006.

The OU Steel Pan Drum Band played at the 2004 convocation and its next performance will be the semester concert on Wednesday, Nov. 10, at 10 a.m. and 8 p.m. Tickets are available at the Varner Hall Box Office or by calling (248) 370-3018.

For more information about the band and its upcoming performances, visit the **Student Steel Pan Organization** Web site or contact Evans at (248) 705-0506 or clevans@oakland.edu.

SUMMARY

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