

The most popular musical style among the West Indies is called "calypso". This style of music, which started in this region in 1789, originates from African slaves who were brought on out to the islands over 200 years ago. Forbidden from speaking to one another, the slaves sang songs to communicate and often used the lyrics to mock their slave masters. Eventually, it evolved as a way to spread news and was considered by the people to be the most reliable news source. To this day, calypso lyrics include gossip, scandal, politics and local news.

The most widely known Calypso song has its origins as a traditional Jamaican folk tune and is called Day-O (the Banana Boat Song). It is a song which was originally sung by ship dock workers who worked through the night to load bananas onto ships. The song describes that Daylight is coming, so the workers want their bananas to be counted so they can all go home. In the 1950's Harry Belafonte, a singer with a Jamaican descent, made this song famous when it reached number five in the American pop charts and he was dubbed "The King of Calypso".

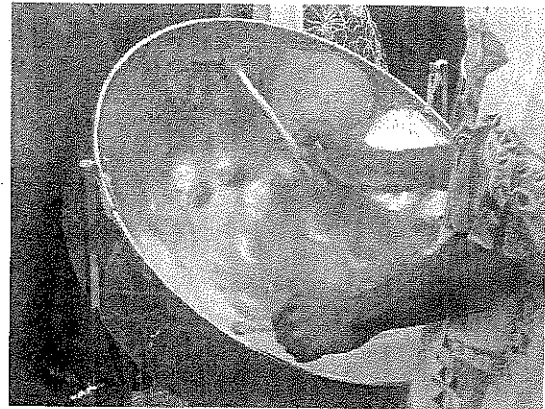
Just as songs in this style came from poor and humble beginnings, so did the instruments. The most intriguing and popular instrument of Calypso today is the **Steel Drum**, sometimes more correctly known as the **Steel Pan**. Between the 1930s and 1945 during the second world war, money was scarce so biscuit tins, hubcaps and empty oil drums became a new sort of drum where different sounds could be made on the lid by hammering the surface. Legend has it the first steel pan drum was made as a result of a cricket game on a street which caused a dent in an aluminum bin lid.

The dent in the lid was knocked out with a hammer and it was realized that each blow of the hammer caused a different sound. Dents of various shapes and sizes were continued to be made right around the lid so before long a scale emerged and tunes could be played on a garbage can!

Using a garbage can to make these instruments was not suitable at the time because the metal was too thin and they were hard to find. However, as the war came and went, many empty oil can's were left throughout the West Indies by the US forces plus this region produces oil, so it became easy to get hold of 55 gallon oil drums, and they became the ideal material for making a Steel Pan.

To make a steel pan, the bottom of the oil drum was pounded out with a sledge hammer which is a process still referred to as 'sinking'. The notes were then marked out with chalk and with several kinds of smaller hammers the notes were moulded into the surface of the pan. Today the process remains the same except sometimes sheet metal is used instead of a drum to achieve better note accuracy, however the notes are still often manually crafted. Musicians who play the steel pan play it with very soft ended mallets as any extra denting to the "pan" can damage the tuning of the instrument.

Over the years since the beginning of the steel pan, many different types and sizes have evolved. A group of steel pan musicians playing the various sizes and timbres is called a **steel band**. This type of ensemble has become popular in jazz and pop music fusion since the 1960s.



Playing on a steel pan

