

# The Laborie Steelpan Workshop

## The birth and growth of a new pan experience

By Kenyon Williams

Steelpan players around the world face a dilemma: the “traditional” pilgrimage to Trinidad and Tobago has become more and more difficult with each passing year. In November of 2022, the U.S. State Department moved Trinidad from a Level II travel advisory (“Exercise increased caution”) to a Level III advisory (“Reconsider travel”) due to increasing rates of criminal activity on the island. Due to many universities’ administrative travel-abroad regulations, this move makes it more difficult for university pan programs to bring students to the island and raises significant safety concerns for individual travelers seeking the chance to immerse themselves in the steelpan music of the Caribbean.

“I love Trinidad,” stated internationally renowned PAS Hall of Fame member Andy Narell, “but I know schools that have come down to the island, and they take the kids everywhere in a maxitaxi bus, and when they go out at night, they hire armed security. You’re taking everybody home by bus at the end of rehearsal because it’s dangerous to walk home at night, even if in walking distance to the panyard.”

As an internationally renowned pan performer, arranger, composer, and educator, Andy pioneered new approaches

to bringing non-Trinidadians into the vibrant pan culture of Trinidad when he was invited to work with the birdsong Steelband in Tunapuna, Trinidad over the course of four years beginning in 2013 [birdsong uses a lower-case spelling]. “The concept for birdsong was that I would compose music for them and recruit a lot of international players,” Narell explained. “We had around 40 international players come down that first year who had learned the music in advance.”

*Andy Narell teaching*

In the second year of the program, Dr. Jason Koontz, Director of Percussion Studies at Eastern Kentucky University, joined birdsong for Panorama and was approached by Dennis Philip (one of the founding members and director of the birdsong Steel Orchestra) with the idea that it could expand into something even more impactful for the participants. “Instead of just coming down and playing Panorama, we could have masterclasses and outings and trips, and do something



PHOTO BY KENYON WILLIAMS

more like the things Jason was doing on his university trips to Brazil,” reflected Andy. “And so he started helping organize with me for that, and we did that for the next two years in Trinidad. At the same time I was doing that at birdsong, Anita [Andy’s wife] and I were coming to Laborie in Saint Lucia before and after my six weeks in Trinidad, and we just fell in love with the place.”

Andy first visited the island in 1993 to play at the St. Lucia Jazz Festival on the northern, more developed side of the small island. He returned in 1995 as a member of the Caribbean Jazz Project and again in 1997. That year, as an outreach effort by the Festival, Andy was joined by fellow pan legends Ray Holman and Robert Greenidge to present a free public performance in the small southern village of Laborie. Soon after, a trio of Laborie-based community organizers – Yves Renard, Len Leonce, and Augustin Barthelmy, calling themselves “Labowi Promotions” (using the traditional Creole spelling of the village) – began a focused effort to impact the culture and economy of the village. Yves, a French native raised in Guadeloupe who had settled in Laborie, soon befriended Andy and Anita. “Yves was an extraordinary person,” remembered Andy. “His ‘real’ job was to go to countries with the most intractable environmental and social issues. He’d go to places like Haiti, Botswana, and Madagascar and write up reports to start getting governmental and non-governmental organizations to work together. His real passion, however, was community service. He was involved in virtually everything here in Laborie. Any cultural or environmental project, he was involved.”

Through their extraordinary efforts and assistance from local sponsors and Alliance Francaise, they were able to create an annual event titled “Jazz in the South” that brought Caribbean and Afro-centric artists to the small village. “Yves approached me in 2010 and asked if I would be a patron of the Festival,” Andy said. “Of course I said yes. It was a perfect fit.”

Through their voluntary efforts, Labowi Promotions had established a small community steelband in Laborie in 2006. With the help of some funding from the government of St. Lucia, the Laborie Steelband was born under the direction of Quill Barthelmy with the goal of “youth empowerment through music.”

“In the winter of 2011,” Andy recalled, “Anita and I spent a couple months here. My kids joined us for a couple of weeks, and I did some publicity events with Labowi Promotions, and I started teaching the kids in this small local steelband. I told Yves that if I’m going to be the patron of this festival, I should be teaching the kids in Laborie, and he said if I’d do that then he’d put me up for two months in his bungalow. We began to fall in love with Laborie, and we just kept coming back every year.”

The next turning point for the Laborie Steelband was in 2016. “We were doing just soca and calypso before Mr. Narell came,” remembers Quill. “The problem was that the kids at this time could not understand Andy’s music – jazz. It took the band four years to understand his music. I was the main person helping the kids and encouraging them to have patience to learn and understand it.”

*Jason Koontz with Triple Guitars*

In the summer of 2016, Jason Koontz came to the island for the first time. “I had some experience running a percussion workshop in Brazil with Frank Oddis from Morehead State University in Kentucky, so I was kind of used to the work,” Jason said. “Andy proposed that we should move the steelband workshop from birdsong in Trinidad to Laborie. I brought the idea of bringing some Brazilian drums to Laborie so I could teach a component of Brazilian music along with the pan. Seemed like a nice complement. So the summer before the workshop in 2016, I got some money from Yves and the Foundation and bought some samba gear, and I flew it down with three of my ECU students. We played Panorama with the Laborie Steelband and won that summer [Panorama and Carnival in St. Lucia take place in July]. We put the Brazilian drums in the steelband, and it provided some extra flavor.”

“That first-place win in 2016 put a huge target on our back,” stated Sachin Charles, a member of the band. “No one had ever won from the south before!” They proceeded to place second in the St. Lucian Panorama for the next three years until Covid disrupted the competition.

The following winter of 2017, the first



PHOTO BY KENNON WILLIAMS

Laborie Steelband Workshop began. With the Brazilian instrument collection introduced by Jason as well as a major investment of time and effort for pan building and tuning by American pan tuner Glenn Rowsey, the workshop began with a strong collection of instruments and a solid contingent of international musicians who were excited to participate in a steel band experience with Andy Narell in St. Lucia. Walter De Bie, a Dutch pan player based out of southern France, who has attended the workshop for many years, recalls hearing about the workshop and his excitement to attend: "I discovered steel band the last term of my last year at university many, many years ago. It always stuck with me. I traveled, started my own business, raised a family, and I was always interested in jazz fusion. I came across Andy Narell and the Caribbean Jazz Project and loved it. I got a pan and started to play by myself, because in that part of France there was no one playing steel drums. I'd learn a song or two here and there. For my 60th birthday, my wife organized a group present for me to attend the workshop in Laborie. It has been wonderful! I've made so much progress playing with a full band!"

Justin Matthews, a public-school percussion educator in Prosper, Texas and

assistant director of the University of North Texas Steelband, has also been involved in the workshop since that first year. "It's been pretty consistent every year," he said. "The vision of the workshop has stayed the same: a totally holistic approach to bring together international pan players from all different skill levels and understandings of the steelpan to this beautiful backdrop of St. Lucia, and to have us interact with the Laborie Steelband and play public events. You get to see how pan education can be different from what we might teach in the States or what people might experience somewhere else. Even experienced steel band directors can get a different perspective on how to run a rehearsal, new repertoire, and that sort of thing."

Vance Umphrey, a master's student in Jazz and Pan Performance from George Mason University who has also been attending the workshop since its inception, agrees. "The event brings together different groups of participants. There's the university student participants, university professors, there's an older generation of community-based pan player participants, and then there's the local Laborie steel pan players who all come together for this workshop. The international element of the participants, getting partic-

ipants from France, Australia, Sweden, the U.K., the United States, the Caribbean, and countries around the world, has been a real hallmark of the workshop."

That feeling of international camaraderie between players of all backgrounds has become an important reason why many players return year after year. "You build these really in-depth connections," states Justin. "Right off the bat, you're best friends with the people here, you're friends with the St. Lucians who are in the band, hanging around after and before rehearsal, at the restaurants. You're best friends with the people who show up at the festival, with Andy and Anita... There's such a deep, deep connection here when you're learning pan and celebrating this art form."

"Absolutely," concurs Vance. "A huge part is the relationships and the connection to the community here in the village. With musical projects, that kind of chemistry really enhances the entire musical experience."

Porter Walston, a high school senior from Arcata, California and the youngest American participant in the 2023 Workshop, concurred. "I've been surprised by my ability to step up and play all of these parts. It's like the training wheels are being taken off. You just get immersed in pan. You feel it around you. The most striking part for me has been how the music has come alive. I'm always paying attention to Andy. At any moment, he'll drop some incredible wisdom from all his years of playing. Playing in that close of proximity to a master is just incredible." Porter was also inspired by the chance to play side-by-side with students his own age from St. Lucia. "They're just so good. Playing with band members from Laborie has been amazing. They've really internalized it. People my age playing music at that level is so inspiring."

Andy and Jason have been very pleased with the musical growth of the workshop. "Musically speaking, we've expanded what we were doing in Trinidad at birdsong," stated Andy. "What we're doing here is musically unique, because

Laborie Junior Band



PHOTO BY KENYON WILLIAMS

people are learning a whole repertoire before they come, studying it, coming, and rehearsing for more than 12 days – learning music by rote and a huge repertoire. The music is very, very challenging. It's for advanced players. Just to play the repertoire is plenty difficult. Even one tune would be difficult. That's what we did at birdsong – just one tune, basically. That's a challenge in and of itself. But this year here in Laborie we played 'Coffee Street,' 'Blue Mazooka,' 'Izo's Mood,' 'Ya Rayah,' plus two old-time calypsos I taught by rote. We learn almost an hour of music in 12 days!"

Vance Umphrey, who has played in Panorama numerous times as a member of Phase II Steel Band, emphasizes the unique qualities of the Laborie Workshop. "I would encourage people to go play in Trinidad as well, but some of the benefits of this workshop are having the structure that is in place. The housing accommodations and the schedule are all very well organized. It's a whole different experience. In Trinidad, a lot of times, you're figuring all of that out for yourself, making connections, and the environment is very different. It's very urban in Port of Spain. The environment here is like a village community vibe, and one of the biggest points I really admire about how this workshop is set up is how they include the local community as much as possible in terms of catering meals, patronizing businesses, and providing housing through local accommodations instead of through hotels and resorts. If traveling in music education is one of your goals, this is a phenomenal opportunity and example of tourism that is rooted in benefiting and respecting the local community rather than exploiting it. The Laborie Steelpan Workshop is a great model of how we can travel and learn through cultural immersion in ways that benefit both parties."

The Laborie Pan Workshop, like the Laborie Steelband itself, was formed with a deeper purpose than just the opportunity for foreign tourists to learn the artform of pan abroad. Carla Chiquot, a Laborie

native who serves as the logistics coordinator of the workshop and also works for the National Cultural Development Foundation, strives to make the workshop a model of international exchange, a culturally sensitive educational tourist opportunity for international participants that builds into the local community. "One of our initiatives is to curb generational poverty," Chiquot says. "Families we notice in the community that are struggling, we put them under our wing and help them with medical assistance, food, and socialization. This is all a part of the Foundation, and that is ultimately impacted by the workshop. We come together as a community, discuss, and make the workshop happen. The social impact is great. When it's close to the workshop time, people are asking, 'Oh, are we going to see the musicians again?' Everyone is looking forward to it. Laborie is really welcoming. Economic-wise for the village, Laborie community members provide food, transportation, and rooms for the participants. Participants are able to be independent, because Laborie is your hotel. The rooms can be across the road from the panyard or in the rural side of the community. Independence is something individuals ask for. Can I be in the

village? Can I walk to the beach on my own? That is something they value. They will find friends on the way to the panyard. The ability to walk the community freely and independently is important to many. In Laborie, we have a culture where everything is safe. You can leave the front porch open and come back four hours later and you'll find everything is fine. In some parts of the Caribbean, that is not the case."

Walter De Bie has loved coming back year after year to the workshop in Laborie. "My favorite thing is the village and the people. We arrived here the first time and had no clue what was going to happen, and it's like you come into a little fishing village in the south of St. Lucia. After the workshop, my wife and I went to the north and tried to find a nice hotel. There you see the north is very touristy with resorts and all-inclusives, and it just couldn't compare with two weeks in Laborie – very easy, laid-back, simple life. You just keep coming back. You're part of the village, and you meet people from the workshop from all over. It's just a good vibe. And you're playing and hanging out with Andy, your idol!"

Brooks Gornto, an American retiree who has attended the workshop for many

*Workshop players*



PHOTO BY KENNON WILLIAMS

years, agrees. “My favorite part is playing Andy’s music. I play in some community bands in Virginia Beach, Virginia and I’m lucky enough to play in some really good bands, and their music is interesting, but it’s Andy’s music that makes me want to play the steel pan. It just captivates me. And then I get to be in a panyard and play it with HIM there. I just can’t believe it. If someone were to ask me, ‘Why should I come to this workshop?’ Just listen to Andy Narell’s music. Listen to ‘Coffee Street’ and realize that you can come and play *that* music with the guy who wrote it! I don’t know what other reason you’d need to come here!”

The Laborie Steelpan Workshop continues to change and evolve. Beginning in 2023, the workshop began hosting an “intermediate level” pan workshop experience. “One of the things we’re doing is opening this experience up to groups to come down,” states Andy. “Oakland University has come down twice for weeklong workshops, Jim Munzenrider brought his high school steelband students, and last year Matt Britain proposed to bring his community band down from Nashville for a beginner/intermediate older people’s workshop. We’re going to do another one this year in March. I’ll be teaching simpler music by rote and just trying to get people to play pan. I plan to teach it the old way. That’s the way I grew up, you know? We didn’t use charts, we were playing like people in the Caribbean, learning by ear. I started teaching other people to play by rote by the time I was about nine years old, so I’ve been doing that my whole life.”

“We’ve changed the focus of the workshop a bit over the years,” reflects Jason Koontz. “We’ve dialed the samba thing back a little bit from where we were at the beginning. We used to have Brazilian drumming as a class; now it’s just a small part. The schedule is a little lighter now. We had more classes in the first couple of years. By eliminating those, and just touching on some of the Brazilian stuff in the engine room context, it’s opened the schedule up a little more. We have more

time in between the masterclass and the evening rehearsals to enjoy the island and get to know the locals and each other and practice if you want.”

Andy takes great pride in the continued growth of the workshop. “When I go to the universities and teach, the kids are so excited about it. They’ve been working on all of this music, and now the composer comes to work with them and play the concert with them, and they play like the best concert they’ve ever played in their life. It’s like a super ‘high.’ And the energy I get off that is great. Then I go to the next school and do it again. But you can feel that in our final concert here, too. It’s like, ‘Wow. We just worked really hard for two weeks, and we played a really good concert.’ We played a really good steelband concert last night, and that’s not something you can hear every day. I’m really proud of that – a concert of original music for steelband beautifully played, and all the vibes of the kids playing together and even the Laborie Junior Band members, those little kids opening the concert, too. The whole thing is just perfect for me. Why would I want to do anything else? This is what we can contribute to making the world a better place: playing music and enjoying ourselves.”

*To find out more about the Laborie Steelpan Workshop including future workshop opportunities, visit: <https://laboriesteel-brasil.squarespace.com>*

All interviews were conducted between Jan. 9-15 at the 2024 Laborie Steelpan Workshop, Laborie, St. Lucia by Kenyon Williams

U.S. Travel Advisory, Trinidad and Tobago (accessed 2/12/24): <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/trinidad-and-tobago-travel-advisory.html>

Laborie Workshop Youtube Link: HTS News4orce St. Lucia news report: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxjUig45SME>

Dr. Kenyon Williams has worked throughout the United States as a professional performer, educator, arranger, and clinician. He has performed as a guest artist at festivals and events around the world, including PASIC, SEAMUS, and TEDx, as well as at numerous state music education and percussion conferences. Dr. Williams has served as a section member for orchestras throughout the country and is currently Principal Percussionist with the Fargo-Moorhead Symphony as well as Professor of Percussion at Minnesota State University Moorhead. His interests have taken him abroad for extended studies in Ghana, Cuba, Brazil, Indonesia, St. Lucia, and Trinidad, leading him to found and direct three professional ensembles in Minnesota: Poco Fuego steel drum quintet, Soulsa de Fargo salsa band, and the Varying Degrees percussion trio, while also directing the Fuego Tropical World Percussion Ensemble, Western Percussion Ensemble, and Dragon Drumline at MSUM. He was a past chair of the PAS World Percussion Committee and recently completed a term of service as a member of the PAS Board of Advisors.