

cover design by Irwin Rosenhouse

KIM LOY WONG

and his **WILTWYCK STEEL BAND**

FOLKWAYS FS 3834

Notes by Pete Seeger

Gun Slingers
Happy Wanderer
Brown Skin Girl

Blue Moon
La Paloma
Michael

Sweet Tibesy
Heart and Soul
Mama, Look, a Bubu!

John B. Sails
Saints Go Marching In
This Land Is My Land





WILTWYCK STEEL BAND

Descriptive notes are inside pocket

WILTWICK STEEL BAND



Under the direction of Kim Loy Wong

Recording Supervisor: Peter Seeger

Recording Engineer : Peter Bartok

SIDE ONE

- Band 1: Gun Slinger
- Band 2: Happy Wanderer
- Band 3: Brown Skin Girl
- Band 4: My Sweet Tibisay
- Band 5: Heart and Soul
- Band 6: Boo Boo Calypso

SIDE TWO

- Band 1: John B. Sails
- Band 2: Saints Go Marching In
- Band 3: This Land is My Land
- Band 4: Blue Moon
- Band 5: La Paloma
- Band 6: Michael

In June, 1959, Folkways was fortunate to be able to help arrange for Mr. Kim Loy Wong to come to the United States. In Trinidad Mr. Wong had been the leader of the Hi-Landers, a large steel band which had won the distinction of being the Carnival Prize Band several years in a row, in competition with several hundred other bands.

In July he started rehearsing with the twelve year old boys at Wiltwyck School, ninety miles north of New York City. In August they were giving their first performances before enthusiastic audiences. This LP was recorded in the gymnasium of Wiltwyck School in October, 1959.

The sound of the band has amazed everyone who hears it, much as steel bands always amaze those who hear them for the first time. No loud-speaker, not even the most elaborate hi-fi set, can do justice to it. Close by, the tone of any steel drum seems to be full of dissonant overtones. In a large band these seem to cancel each other out. And in a large and noisy crowd, such as a street parade, they are quite unnoticed. What is impressive is the huge soft sound which overwhelms all petty noises.

For this reason, Folkways Records believes the instrument has a great future in United States, not so much as a concert or recording instrument, but for groups of teen-agers in schools and camps, settlement houses and community centers. Steel bands could not only be used for dancing or marching, but between the halves of football games, or basketball or any outdoor affair where loud volume is needed.

The second LP being issued for Folkways Records by Kim Loy Wong, will be a complete instruction record, giving detailed directions for making and tuning the drums, and with exact notations for all the parts of a typical steel band ensemble.

The following article, written in 1956, gives additional information on steel bands in general. There are a few slight additions or corrections which might be noted here:

- 1) The original ban on bamboo stick bands was in 1937. The first steel bands were heard during World War II. First recordings made in the late forties.
- 2) The patterns given for steel drums are not exactly the same as those used by the Wiltwyck Steel Band. They have two tall barrels placed side by side, and the one boy playing them has an octave and a half of chromatic scale in the Tenor range to work with.

- 3) The Wiltwyck band uses a cowbell instead of a brake drum for the rhythm noted in Example I.
- 4) In making the drums, Kim Loy now puts them on the fire just before tuning them. He has already 'punged' them up, and on removing the pans from the fire, he splashes cold water on the blue-hot metal, and then taps down carefully on each section, to get the proper pitch. If it does not want to get low enough, he taps from the bottom till the metal is stretched quite tightly upwards again, then once more taps down, this time achieving a lower note than before.

THE STEEL DRUM: A NEW FOLK INSTRUMENT

BY PETER SEEGER

THE sixty-five mile long island of Trinidad, a British colony lying a few miles off the coast of Venezuela, is the birthplace of one of the world's newest and most unusual folk instruments, the steel drum. The drum is made by cutting off the end of a fifty-five gallon oil drum, and tempering the two foot disk until different sections of it emit distinct pitches when hit with a rubber-tipped drumstick.

It was first developed during World War II, when there was a locan ban on the traditional bamboo "stick bands," whose rhythm had been one of the joys of the year's great festival, Carnival. For two days, just before Lent, thousands of people jam the streets, dancing and parading in costume. The official reason for the ban was that stick bands had been getting into street fights, and members seriously hurt. The ban was also extended to ordinary hand drums, because of their connection with less respectable religious groups, which the official church would like to discourage.

Faced with the need for rhythmic accompaniment, ingenious young men raided the junkyards and formed rhythm bands using garbage cans, brake drums, and other pieces of metal. Someone discovered that a convex dent in the bottom of a garbage can gave off a definite musical pitch. They experimented in making various size dents, and over the past twelve years, they have constantly improved the tone and range of the instrument, until now, as many as twenty-five or thirty tones are obtained from one drum, or "pan," as it is more usually called.

Today, in a typical steel band, the melody is taken by the first pan, nicknamed the "ping pong." It is tuned to a chromatic scale extending upwards two octaves, more or less, from middle C. The second pan may sound only thirteen or fourteen tones, spaced through an octave and a half or so, upward from the F below middle C. The third pan, nicknamed the "guitar pan," may sound seven to nine tones ranging about an octave down from middle C. Bass pans produce from three to five tones each. The lowest might be two octaves below middle C. If the band is stationary, i.e., not parading, a bass player may group three or four bass pans around him in a semi-circle, until he has a complete chromatic scale at his disposal. All the lower pitched pans, together with such rhythm instruments as marracas and iron brake rims (Example 1), provide a throbbing and harmonious accompaniment for the melody of the ping pong.

Garbage cans are no longer used; since there is a large oil industry on the island, used oil barrels have become the standard. The metal is stronger and the disk bigger, allowing more tones. Since only the disk is used to make music, most of the side, and the other end with the oil bung holes, is discarded. With hacksaw, cold chisel, or acetylene torch, the wanted part is carefully cut off. A ping pong uses only five or six inches of the side of the barrel, giving it roughly the shape of a large tambourine. The second and third pans will retain seven to fifteen inches, giving them the proportions of a snare drum. A bass pan will be two or more feet deep. Often the entire length of the barrel is used for the bass, though this makes marching extremely difficult. In a Carnival parade, the steel drums are carried much the way a cigarette girl in a nightclub might carry a tray of cigarettes, with a strap going around the back of the neck (Fig. 1). The pan is held more or less horizontally, about six or eight inches below the belt. A ping pong may weigh ten or fifteen pounds, the second and third pans fifteen or twenty, and the bass twenty-five or thirty-five. During Carnival, each instrument may have two or more players who take turns using it, relieving each other every hour or two. Thus there is continuous music for the several hundred people who may be following a particular band. (Carnival is continuous for two days, the bands hardly ever stopping.)



Figure 1

The smallest practical size for a steel band would be three or four players. Most Trinidad night clubs employ bands of five or six men. The same group will augment itself with forty or fifty friends and neighbors for Carnival.

The specific steps in the process of turning an empty oil barrel into a steel pan vary. Different makers, for example, employ more or less heat at different stages. The following procedure would be typical, however.

First, a barrel is selected whose disk is free from dents. The disk is then cut off, along with the required amount of the side of the barrel. With cold chisel, hammer, and a strong arm, this will take fifteen or twenty minutes. Now the disk is pounded with a soft mallet until it is slightly concave, like a shallow basin. The center of a ping pong should be about two or three inches deeper than the sides (Fig. 2). A bass pan would only be sunk perhaps an inch. With a steel hammer, the concave surface is now smoothed free of dents. Then the pan is turned over and placed disk side down over a low bonfire. It is heated "till you can smell the tin burning," that is, until the paint burns off. This softens the metal and releases any internal stresses set up by the pounding so far. It should not get red hot; if the metal is made too soft, it can be hardened by pouring a bucket of water on it immediately after taking it off the fire. When cool, the pan is cleaned of soot and an exact pattern (Fig. 2) is pencilled on the concave surface of the disk. Different steel bandmen prefer different

patterns. The most common one consists of a series of U-shaped sections running around the edge. The open end of each U butts into the rim of the disk. A ping pong will have room for about seven small circles in the center of the ring of U's. A second pan may have room for but three in the center. The guitar pans and bass pans may have one or none in the center, since their U-shapes are bigger. It should be noted that these U-shapes are carefully graded as to size, since the smaller the enclosed area, the higher the pitch of the sound produced. With nail punch and hammer, indentations are now made every half inch along the lines. One must not strike the punch too heavily, or it will go through the metal. Too much of this can affect the tone. On the other hand, too shallow a mark is not desired either. The tone of each section must be "insulated" from the neighboring panel. Now the maker of the pan takes a hammer and smooths out the concave surface again. With the nail punch, and thousands of light strokes, he fills in the lines between the earlier holes. Finally, a groove about 1/8" wide and 1/16" deep clearly outlines each U-shape and circle. With the hammer he also keeps smoothing the main surface as he goes, since, in making the grooves, there is a tendency for the center of each panel to buckle up as the grooves go down. This should not be allowed to happen. Now starts the most difficult part of the process, which takes more time than all that has gone on before. Each panel must be tuned by tapping it back and forth with a hammer. First, he taps the section up from the bottom—the convex side. Miraculously, as it buckles up, one can hear it assume a definite musical pitch through the clanging. Now this small section will be concave on the bottom side and convex on the top. Thus the overall picture of a steel pan is of a number of small convexities arranged in a general concavity. Tapping a section up from the bottom will now raise its pitch slightly. Tapping back down from the top will lower the pitch—to a point. Actually, a given panel can usually be tuned only a few tones higher or lower than its intended pitch.

Though tens of thousands of Trinidad music lovers know roughly how to make a steel pan, having seen it done in their backyards, it takes an expert to make a good one. There are nearly two hundred steel bands in Trinidad, but each band usually has two or three men who make the pans. They know the special places to tap to change the quality of the tone. The instrument, when tuned, needs only to be decorated. The sides get a gay enamel, the disk only a steel wool polishing, and the sections are outlined in aluminum paint. For beginners, the pitches of the notes might be lettered in each section as well. Holes are punched in the side, near the rim, and a neck strap affixed.

Drumsticks are usually made by cutting eight inch lengths of chair rungs, and wrapping bicycle inner tubing about the end. Drumsticks for the ping pong need only three or four wrappings of rubber. Those for a second pan might best have five or six, and those for a guitar pan eight or ten. The bass pans are usually played with slightly longer sticks capped by large sponge rubber tips carved from a rubber ball. The purpose of the rubber is to dampen out as many of the high, jangling overtones

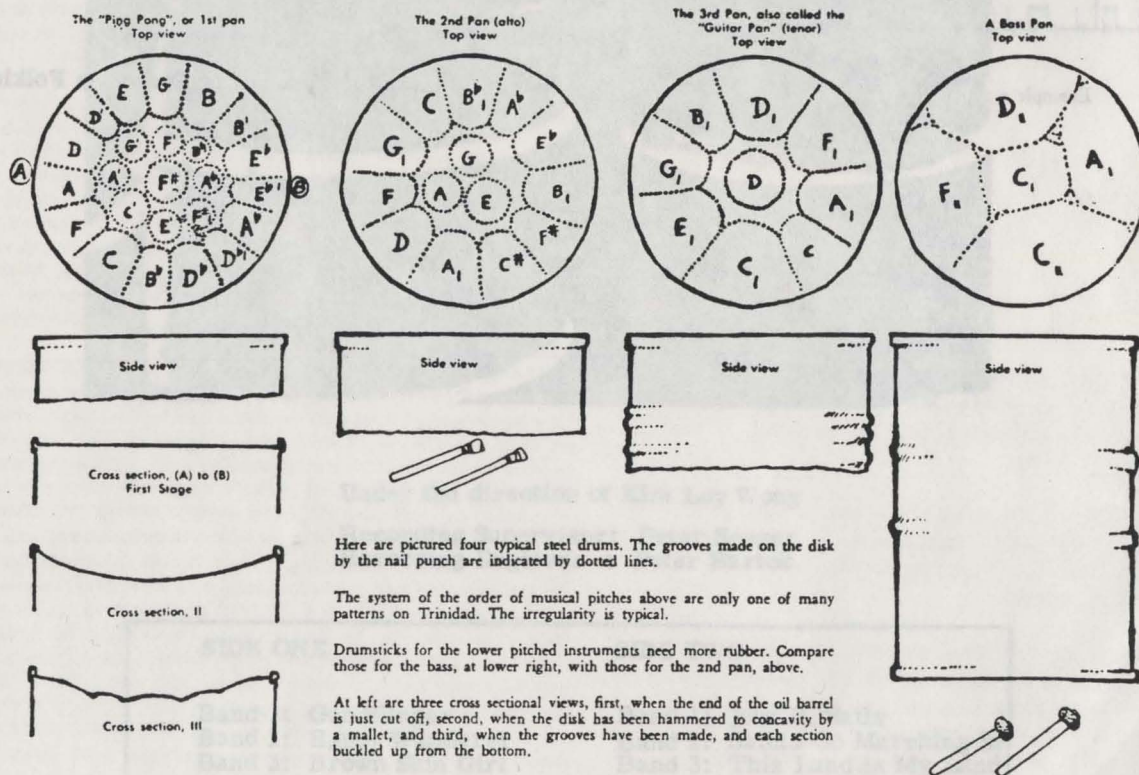


Figure 2

as possible, allowing the lower and more definite musical pitch to be heard. In spite of this, whenever one note is struck, other notes can usually be faintly heard.

There are many variants of the steel pan. Experiments are continuing which will result in still better tone and pitch. Some makers separate each U-section with a half inch or more of "no-man's-land." Others punch holes clear through at strategic points. Some use a different order in placing the notes on the drums. Consecutive scale steps are practically never placed side by side, as on the piano (Fig. 2). There is a reason for this. Each panel, when struck by the drumstick, gives off not only its own tone, but to a lesser extent the tones of its neighbors. Therefore, to minimize dissonance, neighboring panels are preferably an octave, or a fourth or fifth away, or at least a third or sixth. Even so, the overtones are unorthodox, to say the least.

What kind of music do steel bands play? Generally they fall in with the conventional popular-folk music tastes of Trinidad. The rhythms of the samba, mambo, and rumba are well known. American popular music is also picked up from the radio. Last year the steel band association held a music contest in which some groups tried playing classical music, following written arrangements. The association is thereby trying to interest composers in their medium.

The great majority of bands, however, stick to oral tradition. The ping pong usually takes the melody throughout. One ping pong can be heard above the accompaniment of a band of ten. The melody is first played straight; later it is improvised upon. One melody may be played for any length of time, from three minutes to an hour. In the opinion of many of these steel bandmen, melodic variety is not half so important as rhythmic perfection. As a jeweler will polish a stone for hours, until it attains extraordinary luster, a steel band may rehearse the same short melody almost endlessly, until all subtle counter-rhythmic effects are satisfactory. Layer after layer of rhythm is built up; on top of it all comes the melody, like the frosting on a cake—nice, but in itself not nearly so important as the whole cake.

The three lowest-pitched pans set up a rhythmic-harmonic pattern which is repeated indefinitely, with little or no variation, much like a boogie woogie bass on the piano. A typical accompaniment might go thus:

2nd PAN

3rd PAN

BASS

MARRACAS

BRAKE RIM

(Struck with a long $\frac{1}{4}$ " bolt)

Example 1

Or, here is another typical pattern, for the guitar pan:

Example 2

It will be readily seen that this is a form of music ideally suited for amateurs. With a good sense of rhythm, and stamina to stay with it, anyone can join a steel band. This may be one of the reasons why steel band music has swept over Trinidad and has rapidly spread to other islands of the West Indies.

Extreme steel band partisans in Trinidad envisage their instrument sweeping the world, and see no limits to its capabilities. There are limitations to every instrument, however, and it might be well to note here some of the present disadvantages of the steel pan. To begin with, there is little variety in timbre or tone color. Like a marimba band or a mandolin symphony, there is not much one can do towards varying the sound of any one band. Secondly, the range of each instrument is small, two octaves at most. The exact pitch and tone are uncertain. Of course, the jangling dissonance of a steel band constitutes much of its appeal, as against the comparative purity of tone in a marimba orchestra. Some say that the tone is sinful, just like the human race. The exciting sound of a steel band does not readily transmit through a loudspeaker, nor is it easy to record. A steel band can overwhelm everything and everybody around it with ringing, melodious, harmonious, jangling, dissonant rhythm. A tape recording of the same music might seem like a poor pale echo, hardly worth listening to.¹ But in spite of these drawbacks, it seems probable that the steel drum is destined to spread through still other parts of the world than the West Indies, perhaps in each country adapting itself to local popular-folk traditions. Like the fife and drum corps, or the bagpipe band, it is ideally suited for vigorous and youthful amateurs accompanying either marching or dancing.²

NOTES

¹ Nonetheless, a number of recordings of steel bands are available: *Brute Force Steel Bands of Antigua, B.W.I.*, *Steel Band Clash*, and *Jump Up Carnival in Trinidad* (101 Second St., Stamford, Conn., Cook Laboratories. All 12" LP's); *Geoffrey Holder's Steel Drum Trio* (418 W. 49th St., New York, N. Y., Riverside Records. 10" LP); *Trinidad Steel Band* (1650 Broadway, New York, N. Y., Monogram Records. 10" LP); *Steel Bands from the British West Indies* (1650 Broadway, New York, N. Y., Paragon Records. 10" LP).

² The author has also produced a fifteen minute, black and white, 16 mm. film, "Music from Oil Drums," which is available for rental or purchase from Folkways Records & Service Corp., 117 West 46 Street, New York 36, N. Y.

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