

## **The History of Steel Pan Music and its relation to Black History**

The Steel Pan has played an interesting role in black history. The steel pan, often referred to incorrectly as a steel drum, emerged in the 1930s. Metal objects including car parts, paint pots, dustbins, oil drums and biscuit tins, were originally used as percussion instruments, but at some point they began to be tuned.

When French planters arrived in Trinidad in the late 1700s they brought with them a carnival tradition and their slaves formed their own festival, fueled by drum music.

After emancipation in 1834 the celebrations became noisier and more colourful though after disturbances in 1881 the British government tried to ban the performers' sticks and drums. "It really came from the bowels of our impoverished lower classes and we are extremely proud of that," says Michelle Huggins-Watts, a Trinidadian steel pan arranger... "It's familiar, they play songs that we know, but it's also very exotic, and we like that... It also sounds like holidays, and sunshine, which may explain some of its appeal... It can sometimes have a cruise ship mentality, people think of it as a happy summery sound from Trinidad and the Caribbean islands as a whole, but it is a lot more than that. It's got a very important history... Music builds community and acts as a form of communication. Looking back centuries ago, slaves had been stripped of their cultural identity, their names, their music, so they created new music using things they found lying around. That created that rich history of percussion music."

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