MUSIC

THE E-PAN

– THE LATEST ADDITION TO THE STEEL PAN FAMILY

IT WAS THE cast-off from the petroleum industry in the island of Trinidad & Tobago. Recycled by necessity or whim, it was fashioned into a new use – a barbeque grill for a beach or river lime (party), a storage container for domestic or other commercial uses, and surprisingly a musical instrument, popularly known as the steel pan.

Converting a 208 litre steel drum which previously stored oil and oil products into a variety of musical pans – tenor, double tenor, guitar, double-second, baritone, or bass– is a feat of ingenuity and creativity for the inventors of the steel pan in the early 1930s in Trinidad. However there is a new pan product that has recently joined the pan family. Invented and developed in Toronto, Canada, the E-Pan (electronic steel pan) promises to revolutionize the art of playing pan, according to its inventor, Salmon Cupid.

An accomplished pannist, who toured with the St. Augustine Senior Comprehensive high school and the National Steel Pan Orchestra of Trinidad and Tobago, Cupid realized that when he and other pannists performed on European stages, there were acoustic and environmental challenges with making the steel pans individually audible. "I remember in Paris, we were doing a sound check. And I could not distinguish the guitar pan from the bass pan. The sound check was horrible," he said. From that time in the 1980s, Cupid realized that in these types of applications his idea of the E-pan would solve these challenges. With the pan being digital, a pannist would be able to plug directly into an amplifier. His experience in recording in Paris studios also helped in mastering the design requirements for his invention.

The E-Pan promises to revolutionize the pan industry. "Steel pan and Carnival go hand in hand, but few steel bands play all year round." said Cupid. "Years ago, calypsonians used the steel pan when they needed pan music in their performances. Then Yahama put the steel pan tone on their key boards, and instead of a pannist supplying original music, they were replaced by keyboardists using the steel pan tone," he continued.

Cupid's E-Pan is the mirror image of a non-digitized steel pan yet it can sound like a keyboard at the press of a button, a trumpet, a percussion drum kit, or any other type of instrument. It uses quarter- inch jacks and MIDI like most electronic instruments. It also has as more than 128 different tones and allows a pannist to switch from the traditional steel pan to playing the E-Pan with a zero learning curve. Now pannists can win back work in recording studios, not just playing steel pan digitally, but also win over musician lines such as keyboardists, horn parts putting the pannist a cut above the rest, said Cupid.

With the traditional steel pan, a skilled pannist with two sticks in each hand can play four notes simultaneously, he said. Normally pannists use two sticks and are therefore limited to playing two notes at the same time. The E-Pan allows a pannist to use all fingers and play ten notes or a full chord with two and a half octaves just like a keyboard. "This puts the E-Pan on the same playing field as all other major musical instruments over the world," he added.

There are other benefits of the E-Pan. First, it is lighter because of the material used in its construction – plastic, rubber, and fibreglass – making it easier to transport and less expensive for pannists and bands to tour. The prototype version gives composers the capability to record and store music in the E-Pan's memory. Pannists can mute the sound by using headsets.

Cupid has brought the tenor and double second E-Pans to market. The next E-Pan to be introduced is the double guitar followed by the bass. He is also working on agreements for noted steel pan tuners such as Guppy Brown to upload their signature tones to the E-Pan's memory. "It is my goal to have tones from the top ten pan tuners in the world," he explained.

Initially, there are mixed feelings towards the E-Pan from the traditionalists. "Some pannists have told me that they wished that they had the E-Pan earlier in their musical careers," he said. "Traditionalists feel as though the E-Pan has come to replace the traditional steel pan. I'm not trying to replace the authentic steel pan. I am trying to set the pannist on the same playing field as other musicians and at the same time, add to their versatility," the inventor explained.

"I always tell people about the applications and advantages of adding the E-Pan to the family of steel pan instruments. I tell them that the same way an electronic keyboard is part of the piano family and lives side by side, the E-pan and the traditional steel pan will coexist. Once I explain my mission, most of their fears disappear."

Cupid has received overwhelming support with his new invention from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) where he has taught for the past seventeen years. Several schools in the system have already started introducing the E-Pan into their music programs. One of the first schools to purchase both tenor and double seconds is Elia Middle School. King Edward JR Public School, another notable school in the TDSB, has also purchased the E-Pan.

With a number of patents pending and orders coming in from different parts of the world – USA, England, Switzerland - the E-Pan is adding to Toronto's and ultimately to Canada's cache for cultural ingenuity.