

GL123 Folk Arts Survey of Waukegan & Zion, Illinois

Mellotones Steel Band

Waukegan, Illinois

visited rehearsal: July 1987

performance: August 9, 1987

3) Mellotones Steel Band

This nine-piece band is "owned" by Stanley Assee. It was founded about seven years ago, and has had a number of members. Most of the musicians are from Jamaica, Trinidad, and nearby islands. There have also been Puerto Rican members. The band plays professionally and does a number of benefits performances for charity as well.

The instrumentation includes a drummer (trap set), a conga player (who uses sticks), and seven steel drummers. The lead player uses a single drum, tuned almost chromatically. Another melody player has a set of two lower pitched drums for alto parts and counterpoint. The rest of the drums are for rhythm and bass. Three sets of two drums are tuned approximately in major thirds. There are six notes for each drum in the set, plus an high octave for each note, and another octave for one of the notes in each drum. A baritone set of three drums has four notes plus octaves per drum, tuned approximately in fourths. The bass drummer stands in the middle of six drums with three notes each, tuned approximately in fourths. Technological considerations (room on the drum head) weigh more than music theory in the arrangements of notes on each drum. The drums are played with wooden sticks with hide wrapped around one end to form a ball. The alto drummer alone used two sticks in his right hand. All other drummers used one stick per hand.

The band has rehearsal several evenings a week, and a busy schedule of performances (about one a week) during the summer. Musical parts are figured out and taught by ear from one band member to another. Tony Henry, however, is the bands arranger. He writes the original scores on paper. He hopes to stop playing with the band so he can spend more time arranging.

Tony Henry did documentary recording, both audio and visual, of music, dancing, and native rituals when he lived in the Caribbean. He moved to Illinois because his wife's family lives here. He currently works in a factory and is attending college.