# Andy Narell

By Lauren Vogel Weiss

Photo by Dimitri Tolstoi

From jazz to calypso, steel band, and world music, Andy Narell has made the steel pan his life's calling. As a performer, composer, and educator, he brings the music of the pan to people all over the world.

"I was very moved," he says about receiving the news that he was being inducted into the PAS Hall of Fame. "This is the greatest honor I've been given in my life."

Although some have called him a child prodigy—he performed on *The Ed Sullivan Show* with the Steel Bandits in 1967 at age 12—Narell shuns that description. "I was just the little kid who was being featured in front of the band.

"For a long time, I was focused on playing the pan in a jazz context," he continues. "And I still am. I keep searching for new ways to use the pan—to expand my own horizons and what can be done with the instrument. But as I spend more time teaching and working with steel bands, I realize that much of what makes steel band music such a positive force is the social impact of participating. This is a musical art form that welcomes professionals and amateurs; you don't have to be a professionally trained musician to play in a world-class steel orchestra. The tradition that developed in Trinidad of amateur musicians coming together to play at a very high level is spreading all over the world. It breaks down barriers of age, gender, ethnicity, and race. Steel band music has the power to bring people together."

## FROM EAST COAST TO WEST COAST

Andy Narell was born on March 18, 1954, and grew up in Queens, New York, along with his older brother, Jeff. Their parents were involved in leftist politics and, as a result, his father, Murray, was blacklisted from being a public school teacher. "My dad got a job doing social work in Harlem," explains Andy. "From there, he moved down to the Lower East Side of Manhattan to the Educational Alliance, a former Jewish settlement house. By the early 1960s, the new immigrant population on the Lower East Side was primarily black and Puerto Rican. My dad was always looking for program activities that would interest the kids. Together with Rupert Sterling, a college student from Antigua who knew how to make and play steel pans, my dad launched a steel band program. In a short period of time, they had 20 steel bands rehearsing on two sets of pans. Then they brought it to other settlement houses and community centers on the Lower East Side. By 1962, he'd organized the first steel band festival in America."

Andy, who began taking piano lessons at the age of six, was introduced to these new instruments a year later. "My dad was pretty obsessed with the pans and decided to start a family band, even though he didn't have any musical talent," Narell says. "I started on a four-note bass [pan], but I remember looking at the tenor pan, and it made sense to me; I could play all the melodies by ear. So, as my brother, Jeff, likes to say, we promoted my dad to management! We got some friends together and started the Steel Bandits. Our first gig was playing at my school when I was eight years old." On February 18, 1963, the Steel Bandits was featured on the popular television program *I've Got a Secret*. "By the time I was ten, I had to get a union card so we could work in the hotels."

In 1966, the Steel Bandits played at the National Music Festival in Trinidad. "It was an entirely classical music competition," says Narell. "I had already seen the Pan Am North Stars when they performed at Carnegie Hall in New York in 1964. The festival was an amazing experience, and I consider it a high point in the history of steel band music." This was the same year that the Steel Bandits released a self-titled recording on Decca, which included Andy's first recorded original tune.

Murray Narell brought Ellie Mannette to the U.S. in 1967 and found him work building and tuning for various steel band programs. "Ellie was like an uncle to me," Narell says, "and he gave me my voice. Without his relentless drive for perfection, we wouldn't be where we are today with the pan." Mannette was the first panman inducted into the PAS Hall of Fame (in 2003). Andy also became friends with two of Mannette's assistants, Trinidadians Cliff Alexis (inducted into the PAS Hall of Fame in 2013) and Patrick Arnold, who later became president of Pan Trinbago.

Around this same time, Narell began playing jingle sessions as a studio musician. "What I most remember about those sessions were the breaks where people like [Lat-

Steel Bandits circa 1962; Andy Narell in lower right

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Andy Narell performing "Dis 1.4. Raf"

The Andy Narell Group, circa 1980 (L–R) Kenneth Nash, Andy Narell, Steve Erquiaga, Keith Jones, Will Kennedy

in jazz percussionist] Ray Barretto and his crew were jamming rhumba.

"In 1968, I discovered a jazz radio station [WLIB] broadcasting from Harlem," he continues. "Billy Taylor, a pianist and the greatest jazz musicologist ever, hooked me. Listening to him talk about the musicians who made the records made it all come alive, and I wanted to be like Miles [Davis], Herbie [Hancock], Wayne [Shorter], Chick [Corea], Elvin [Jones], and Tony [Williams]."

After graduating from Flushing High School in 1969 at age 15, Narell spent one semester at Queens College before he and his parents moved to Oakland, California, where Andy enrolled at the University of California–Berkeley. "I was studying to be a doctor. My family expected me to go to medical school, find a cure for cancer, and win a Nobel prize!" he says with laugh. "I took all the pre-med courses, but my heart wasn't in it, I decided I wanted to be a jazz musician and composer."

Although Narell was already teaching steel band music for the Oakland Parks and Recreation department, he decided to learn as much as he could about composition while he was in school. "There was no performance major at UC-Berkeley," Narell says, "but you had to play in an ensemble, so I played percussion in the orchestra. Counting all those rests gave me a lot of time to listen to what the conductor, Mike Senturia, had to say about the music. He studied each score and decided what everything meant and how it should be played. He was very passionate about getting the music to come alive, and I think I learned more there than I did in the rest of my music classes." This ensemble insight was something that Narell would later utilize in his work with steel bands.

"When I first arrived in the Bay Area," Narell recalls, "I made a cold call to David Rubinson, who was the top record producer in San Francisco at the time. It turned out he'd been looking for a pan player, so I played my first session for him that week! Over the next several years, he hired me to record with people like Taj Mahal, Moby Grape, Patti LaBelle, the Pointer Sisters, Phoebe Snow, and Peter, Paul and Mary."

During his college years, Andy often played pan on the streets of San Francisco. "One day I caught another break when Bernie Krause heard me playing Bach," says Narell. "Bernie, along with Paul Beaver, was one of the pioneers in programming synthesizers. He was now producing commercial jingles and needed a keyboard player/arranger. Bernie gave me an incredible opportunity to learn on the job, arranging for rhythm sections, horns, strings, background vocals, as

Andy Narell at Berkeley JazzFest (1982)

Clifford Alexis and Andy Narell

Andy Narell, Ray Holman, and Jeff Narell

well as playing synths. It was recording and production school for me.

"Through those jingles, I also met the best musicians in the Bay Area, like [saxophonist] Mel Martin. I approached him about forming a band to play original music, and that became the group Listen. Terry Bozzio was the original drummer, just before he went to play with Zappa. George Marsh took over from him and I learned a lot from him. We played free music, along with originals written my me, Mel, [percussionist] Glenn Cronkhite, and [guitarist] Dave Creamer."

In addition to playing, arranging, and recording, Narell graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in music from UC-Berkeley in December 1973. "I was also discovering Latin and Brazilian music," he says. "I saw that my way forward musically was going to go through the Caribbean. In some ways, getting out of school was the beginning of my real education."

## RECORDING AND PERFORMING

In 1978, Narell organized his own band. "I wanted to put the pan out front as the lead voice of a jazz group," he explains. *Hidden Treasure* (Inner City Records, 1979) featured Narell on pan, piano, timbales, percussion, and vocals, along with guitarist Steve Erquiaga, bassist Rich Girard, and percussionist Kenneth Nash. The album won a New York City Jazz Critics award and a place on the *Downbeat* critic's poll.

"That band stayed together for several years," Narell says. "I learned how to set up a musical situation where everybody could be creative together. During three summer tours, I also learned how to drive long hours, find the gigs without a map, hump gear every day, and lose money touring!"

Over the next few years, drummer Will Kennedy and bassist Keith Jones joined the band. When Kennedy joined the Yellowjackets and Nash left, Paul van Wageningen became the drummer and Karl Perazzo played percussion, followed by Luis Conte. "Fortunately, the albums *Slow Motion*, *The Hammer*, *Little Secrets*, and *Down the Road* reached a much larger audience," says Narell. "During those years of losing money on tours, I caught a couple of lucky breaks. When Steve Jobs decided he wanted Windham Hill, the company distributing my albums, to do the music for his commercials, his ad agency hired music producer John Trivers to deal with the artists on the label and produce the commercials. John and I hit it off, and for the next 18 months, I wrote and played most of the music for the Macintosh commercials. You can hear pan on a lot of those spots.

"The other lucky break was that Shelley

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The Birdsong Steel Orchestra playing "Pan Magic" by Nyol Manswell (arr. Andy Narell) at the 2015 Panorama Semifinals

Andy Narell and Relator teaching a master class at Birdsong in Trinidad

Manne heard my band play at a jazz festival, and he gave one of my cassettes to Larry Bunker, who played it for James Horner, who called me to play on the movie *48 Hours*. The L.A. studio scene was notoriously hard to break into, but Larry, Emil Richards, Joe Porcaro, and the guys welcomed me into the section. I played on a number of scores for James, as well as Elmer Bernstein, Maurice Jarre, Michel Colombier, Hans Zimmer, and Tom Newman."

1982 was the first (of seven to date) performances at PASIC for Narell. He presented a clinic in Dallas called "The Steel Drum: A New Voice in Percussion." Three years later, he performed with the North Texas State University Steel Band at PASIC '85.

"In 1985, I was invited to Trinidad to play the International Pan Showdown," Narell remembers. "That's when I met Boogsie Sharpe, Earl Rodney, and David Rudder [lead singer with Charlie's Roots]. I wanted to learn more about steel band arranging, so six months later I came back to play in Panorama with Boogsie's Phase II and Renegades." The following year, Narell returned to play with Phase II and Exodus. "From that point on, I started using bigger pan sections on all my records, overdubbing everything, and began to see the whole steel band as my instrument."

In 1986, Narell asked Rudder if he would sing "The Hammer" on his album. "*The Hammer* was the biggest selling album I ever did," says Narell, "which led to more gigs and a good booking agent, International Music Network (IMN)."

Another milestone in Narell's recording and performing career came in 1993. "Dave Samuels and I had been playing pan/marimba duets together since J.C. Combs at Wichita State introduced us," Andy recalls. "Dave called me one day and asked if I wanted to play with him at a benefit for the Central Park Zoo in New York City. He said it wouldn't pay much but I'd get to play with [clarinetist and saxophonist] Paquito D'Rivera, so I said yes! After just one rehearsal and one concert, we liked what was happening, so we decided to explore the idea of playing

## Andy Narell Discography

*Hidden Treasure* (Inner City, 1979)
*Stickman* (Hip Pocket, 1981)
*Light In Your Eyes* (Hip Pocket, 1983)
*Slow Motion* (Hip Pocket, 1985)
*The Hammer* (Windham Hill Jazz, 1987)
*Little Secrets* (Windham Hill Jazz, 1989)
*Down the Road* (Windham Hill Jazz, 1992)
*The Caribbean Jazz Project* (Heads Up International, 1995)
*The Long Time Band* (Windham Hill Jazz, 1995)
*Island Stories* (Heads Up International, 199) with Caribbean Jazz Project)
*Behind the Bridge* (Heads Up International, 1998)
*Fire in the Engine Room* (Heads Up International, 2000)
*Live in South Africa* (Heads Up International, 2001)
*Sakésho – It's Gonna Be Hot* (Heads Up International, 2002)
*The Passage – Music for Steel Orchestra* (Heads Up International, 2004)
*Sakésho – We Want You To Say* (Heads Up International, 2005)
*Tatoom – Music for Steel Orchestra* (Heads Up International, 2006)
*University of Calypso* (Heads Up International, 2009)
*Alive* (Andy Narell, 2011), Five films featuring the Trinidad All Stars, WDR Big Band, Relator
*Oui ma Chérie!* (Andy Narell, 2014)
*Dis 1.4. Raf* (Andy Narell, 2016)
*We Kinda Music* (Andy Narell, 2017)

Andy has also played and recorded with Bela Fleck, Marcus Miller, Chucho Valdes, Maraca y Otro Vision, Bebo Valdes, Irakere, Tito Puente, Orquestra Aragon, Pedrito Martinez, Willie Colon, Flora Purim and Airto, Chico Pinheiro, The Metropole Orchestra (Holland), The HR Big Band (Frankfurt), Sixun, Andre Ceccarelli, Steve Smith and Vital Information, Bireli Lagrene, Spyro Gyra, Dr. Billy Taylor, Nancy Wilson, John Pattitucci, Jimmy Haslip, Jerry Hahn, Sadao Watanabe, Etienne Charles, Mike Marshall and Darol Anger, Ray Obiedo, Black Stalin, Lord Superior, Andre Tanker, Kassav, Tanya St. Val, Jon Lucien, Anthony Joseph, Fra Fra Sound, Angelique Kidjo, Etienne Mbappe, Mokhtar Samba, Karim Ziad, Ray Lema, Kora Jazz Band, Jimmy Dludlu, Blick Bassy, Fatoumata Diawara, Vusi Mahlasela, Musik Y Afrika, Abderrahim Benthami, Meddy Gerville, Kepa Junkera, Philippe Lavil, Toto, Aretha Franklin, DeBarge, Manhattan Transfer, the Kronos String Quartet, and others.

more gigs." That was the birth of Caribbean Jazz Project. They spent the next three years touring together, performing about 50 concerts each year.

One of those concerts was at PASIC '95 in Phoenix. The headline Saturday night concert was held in Symphony Hall, where the ensemble played tunes from their recently-released CD. Narell, Samuels, and D'Rivera were joined by bandmates Dario Eskenazi (piano), Oscar Stagnaro (bass), Luis Conte (percussion), and Mark Walker (drums).

Another landmark in Narell's career came in 1999 when he was allowed to arrange for Panorama for the first time. "It was a huge experience for me, personally and musically," says Narell. "I was the first foreign arranger to break into the biggest steel band competition in the world. I wrote 'Coffee Street' for Skiffle Bunch, trying to make a personal musical statement and somehow fit into the format of Panorama music."

Later that year, Narell had another life-changing experience. "I was booked to play at the Arts Alive festival in Johannesburg, South Africa," he recalls, "but I didn't realize that I was the headliner. I was told that my music was popular down there, so I expected to be playing for several hundred people. When we got to the gig, there were 70,000 people there! We also played in Durban, Cape Town, and Pretoria. It was crazy; the people would erupt when they heard the first two bars of a song they loved. During the tour I met Louis Mhlanga, the great guitarist from Zimbabwe, and he's been in the band ever since, as have [drummer] Rob Watson and [bassist] Denny Lalouette. I'm also a patron and adjudicator at the International Marimba and Steelpan Festival in Johannesburg, where 2,000 kids come to play, sing, and dance every year."

### STEEL PAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

"By the mid-1990s, radio formats had changed and 200 stations stopped playing my music," Narell laments. "After Paquito and I left the Caribbean Jazz Project, I realized that the only way for me to keep playing live was to go out solo, wherever there was interest in my music, and put a band together. This was the beginning of a whole new set of collaborations. In 1993, I met Michel Alibo at the Martinique Jazz Festival and, a week later, Mario Canonge in Guadeloupe. By 1995, we were playing gigs with Jean Philippe Fanfant on drums, and they played on my album *Fire in the Engine Room*. In 2001, we decided to be a band called Sakésho, which means 'It's gonna be hot' in Creole. Those guys knew so much about Caribbean and African music; it was school for me again."

This coincided with Narell's newly found relationship with Calypsociation, the steel band school in Paris. "I taught some workshops there in 2001," he explains, "and in 2002, they commissioned me to write and direct music for a 60-piece Parisian steel band

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"The Passage" featuring Andy Narell with the Trinidad All Stars (October 2007)

Andy Narell and Mark Ford (center) and the University of North Texas Steel Band

to play at the European Steel Band Festival in Sete, France. When we finished that project, I offered to stay on and continue composing music for Calypsociation's top band, and I recorded *The Passage* with them. Calypsociation became my laboratory for steel band music experiments, and for nearly all of the music from *Tatoom*, *Oui Ma Chérie!*, and *We Kinda Music*."

At a festival in Antigua, Narell met and bonded with the great Calypsonian Relator. "Relator is the preeminent interpreter of Lord Kitchener's music," says Narell. "He's also an amazing guitarist and composer as well as an encyclopedia of calypso music. One day I asked if I could put a band together with him, and he agreed to give it a try. We performed for a pan/jazz event at Lincoln Center in New York City and Relator loved it!" This led to recording the album *University of Calypso*.

About this same time, Narell was invited to do a concert of his music with the Trinidad All Stars. "The band rehearsed five nights a week for six months," recalls Andy. "It was an amazing experience, and it coincided with an offer from French producer Francois Fevre to make a film about my work." The result was a 52-minute documentary, *Andy and the Jumbies*, directed by Laurent Lichtenstein. The film also features the University of Calypso sessions with Relator, and interviews with Peter Minshall, Rudder, Holman, and others.

Another large project and documentary followed. "I had worked with the WDR Big Band in Cologne [Germany] a few times," Narell explains. "[Director] Lucas Schmid proposed putting a steel band and big band together. I brought a 25-piece steel band from Paris, Michael Abene arranged the horns, and we gave a concert with the Köln Philharmonic featuring my music and calypsos, along with Relator and a 40-piece band behind him. The whole project was filmed by WDR-TV, and they made a documentary called *Calypso Fever*."

In 2011, Narell released the two-DVD set *Alive*, which included the two documentaries, live footage from the Köln Philharmonic

concert, and two short films made by Andy's wife, Anita Bonan. Some of this repertoire was also performed at PASIC 2012 with a 75-piece band featuring Relator, Etienne Charles, Luis Conte, Mark Walker, the University of North Texas and McCallum High School steel bands, and the University of Texas horn section.

Narell continues to produce music at an astounding pace. Last year he released *Dis 1.4. Raf*, a double album. "The first CD is all original music with my Caribbean-French quintet," Narell says. "The second CD is all pan/piano duets with Janysett McPherson, the Cuban pianist with my band."

His latest recording, *We Kinda Music*, returns to steel bands. Featuring recent Panorama pieces that he did for Birdsong, Narell also dives into the world of sampling, as well as wildlife recordings. "I've been working with Darren Dyke and Ellie Mannette for a couple of years, sampling the different voices of the steel band," says Narell. "I started working on demos with the virtual instruments, and it dovetailed into an experimental piece I was working on for my album. After 35 years, I also reconnected with Bernie Krause, who gave me my start in the studios in San Francisco." Krause has become a soundscape ecologist who founded Wild Sanctuary, an organization dedicated to recording and archiving natural and wildlife sounds around the world.

"I decided to compose music for pans playing with wildlife—what Bernie calls the Great Animal Orchestra," Andy says with a smile. "I tried to put the pans in the animals' environment and jam with them. I was composing on a piano keyboard using the samples, and realized I could do things that I couldn't actually play on the pans. So with the exception of one track playing on my 1960 Invader tenor pan, the whole piece is sampled pans. From my point of view, the sample collection is a breakthrough—something that's going to change the way the pan is used in contemporary music, which will also be useful to steel band composers."

Narell has spent decades teaching pan at high schools and universities in the United States. He has been an artist-in-residence at California State University–Long Beach, Eastern Kentucky University, Humboldt State University, McNeese State University, Miami (Ohio) University, Northern Illinois University, Northwestern University, Texas Tech University, the Universities of Akron, Arizona, Delaware, Illinois, Missouri, North Texas, Southern Mississippi, and West Virginia, and Wichita State University, as well as Calypsociation (Paris), Birdsong Academy (Trinidad), Laborie Steel Pan (Saint Lucia), Pan VIllage (Tokyo), and many others.

Sakésho featuring (L–R) Andy Narell, Mario Canonge, Michel Alibo, and Jean Philippe Fanfant

"I get energy from young pan players," states Narell. "The kids work all year practicing the music, and I come in for a few days to help them understand the music and play it better. Then we give a concert together and I solo with the band. The next day I get to go somewhere else and do it again. It's a great feeling knowing that your music and teaching has an impact on people's lives, which gives much more meaning to my life as a musician."

What advice would Narell give to aspiring percussionists? "The thing I find myself saying most often is that young players need to study a *lot* of different kinds of music," he replies. "It's not just about the technique of how to play the pan, or how to read and execute. It's about studying harmony, scale theory, and rhythms from all over the world, and finding your own musical identity. How do you compose and improvise? How is music arranged and put together? If you're not playing piano, why not? That's where you're going to learn all the harmony. You want to be a soloist? Start listening to soloists—there are so many great ones—and learn how to tell a story. The internet is an *incredible* tool where you have access to *so* much music.

"I'm continuing to find my own way and do music that's worthwhile," he concludes. "The bar was set so high by the musicians I grew up idolizing. I'm just trying to get better and hope that my work is seen that way. I want to take this instrument somewhere it hasn't been, and try to contribute something to our musical culture along the way." **PN**