

# OBERLIN STEEL



## *Alumni Association Newsletter*

Spring 2017 • Issue 3



*Members of OSteel rehearse with birdsong.*

## OBERLIN STEEL IN TRINIDAD: A DREAM COMES TRUE

By Monica Hunter-Hart '15

**WINTER TERM 2015** marked an Oberlin Steel milestone: for the first time ever, the band coordinated a large-scale trip to compete in Trinidad's renowned Panorama competition. Thirteen people (11 members and two recent alums) traveled to the city of Tunapuna to play with the band birdsong. For nearly a month, we rehearsed with birdsong by night and explored the surrounding areas by day. birdsong didn't advance to finals, unfortunately, but that didn't matter much to us—we were incredibly grateful to have had the uniquely thrilling experience of playing in semifinals, the largest and typically most well-attended phase of the competition.

The trip had been a long time in the making. Over the second half of 2014, we conducted an extensive fundraising campaign,

ultimately earning \$18,500 through grants, two crowdfunding efforts, a generous array of donations—many of which came from this wonderful alumni network—and other sources.

One of the most complicated decisions we had to make as a group during the planning process was choosing the steelband that we'd seek to join. birdsong was founded in 1973; especially since the founding of its music academy in 2004, the band has been known for its emphasis on youth education and musical experimentation. The band's commitment to the latter encouraged its initial appointment of American arranger Andy Narell in 2013 (he held the position until 2016). Narell is a controversial figure in Panorama history, in part because he's sometimes written original compositions instead of arranging

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## TRINIDAD, continued

preexisting calypso or soca songs, and especially because he composes in a low-key jazz style that utilizes modal harmonies and nontraditional meters.

OSteel weighed the benefits of pursuing a more traditional Panorama experience—i.e. a Trinidadian arranger and a more classic, energetic, and soca-oriented music style—but ultimately decided to play with birdsong. They offered a program for foreign players that would provide us with housing, some transportation, other logistical assistance, and educational workshops. That organizational help proved invaluable. birdsong was indescribably accommodating and kind, and we made some great friends within the group.

The rehearsal process was challenging and rewarding. We worked almost every night, beginning between 7 and 8 p.m. and often going until midnight (a change of pace from OSteel's biweekly, two-hours-with-extended-break rehearsal vibe). We learned the music directly from Andy or from other birdsong players instead of reading it from a sheet. The band internalized musical phrases by practicing them over and over, far beyond the point to which we had ever repeated a part in the Oberlin panyard. These processes helped us develop rehearsal practices, pan-playing techniques, and band management skills that we worked to integrate into the band upon returning to school.

Activities also abounded outside of rehearsal and were often facilitated by our birdsong hosts. We hiked up a beautiful mountain through a “Bamboo Cathedral” forest, visited the idyllic Maracas Beach, found Mount St. Benedict Monastery, and accidentally crashed a ceremony at which Trinidad's attorney general was speaking. We explored Gill's Pan Shop (from which OSteel buys many of its pans), visited myriad panyards, got a tuning lesson from Texas-based tuner Emily Lemmerman, and watched pans being made. We spent one weekend on the neighboring island of Tobago with Leon Foster Thomas, pan virtuoso and arranger for the medium-sized band Katzenjammers. Foster had done an Oberlin residency with OSteel the previous month, and we were grateful to be able to reconnect with him. A highlight in Tobago was seeing our soca hero Destra Garcia perform at a fête. We left pieces of our hearts there, liming and wining while she sang the OSteel favorite “Bonnie and Clyde.”

OSteel's experience in Trinidad enriched the band even beyond our high expectations. Some of our learning was abstract: we established personal meaning and connection with an event that is integral to the modern pan world. We developed a greater understanding of what pan means to both historical and modern Trinidad and brought that knowledge back to Oberlin to share with our bi-annual ExCo class and the greater Oberlin community. Other learning was straightforward and concrete: we got into the habit of calling the brake drum, congas, and other percussion “the engine room” as opposed to



*Peter Saudek '15 and James Luttrell '14 rehearsing in Trinidad.*

the more academic and imprecise term “auxiliary percussion.”

The benefits didn't stop there. OSteel made connections with players, tuners, directors, and arrangers; we were able to establish the band as part of the international pan community and improve its future resources. The prestige and high musical standard of Panorama helped us grow as musicians and performers. OSteel learns a full-length Panorama piece every year, both as a musical challenge and also to remain connected to pan's cultural context. Having the opportunity to learn one of these pieces in Trinidad in order to compete in the actual Panorama competition felt like a culmination of the musical and educational trajectory of the band.

We are eternally grateful to all of you who donated to our trip and enabled us to have this life- and band-altering experience. You can find birdsong's semifinals performance—the song is called “Pan Magic”—on YouTube and read more about our trip on our old blog, [oberlinsteeltrinidad.wordpress.com](http://oberlinsteeltrinidad.wordpress.com). And if you have the ability and resources, we strongly urge you to make the trip down to Trinidad for Panorama, and even compete if you can. Your lives, like ours, would never be the same.



# WHEN OSTEEL ALUMNI TALK...

**PETER MAYER '82** writes: “My wife, Jen, and I went to Trinidad in February for the final week of Carnival, J’Ouvert, and Panorama. A bucket list thing for me; believe it or not, I had never been there.”

**LINDA PAPADEMAS '85** writes: “As the oldest alum of OCC/Oberlin Steel and proud of it, I’m pleased to report that in September 2016 I squeaked out another New York Panorama, my fifth consecutive with Crossfire Steel Orchestra and arranger Kendall Williams. I’m happy to still be playing at all, let alone some of the most beautiful music I’ve ever heard. I was also extremely glad to see again—or meet in person for the first time—many other delightful OSteel alumni.”

**JOHN WERTHEIMER '85** teaches history at Davidson College. He frequently leads collaborative research projects, where students learn to research and write history together under his direction, a pedagogy that he developed while teaching the Ex-Co steel drum course at Oberlin, where students learned to play music together under his direction. On the side, he continues to write and perform music.

**KRISTIN JONES '99** is a freelance musician in Baltimore, mostly on cello and occasionally on pan. Her main projects on cello are ilyAIMY (i love you And I Miss You, acoustic grunge/rock/folk), Lulu’s Fate (trad Appalachian trio), and Music By Anthem (string chamber group mostly playing weddings/events, plus an all-electric string quartet). Recent highlights include touring with ilyAIMY (including a pit stop at Oberlin a couple of years ago), being nominated by the Washington Area Music Association for Best Contemporary Folk Instrumentalist and Best World Instrumentalist, winning the “Wammie” award for Best Contemporary Folk Group with ilyAIMY, Anthem String Quartet performances with former Grateful Dead keyboardist

## A POEM, BY ZEEV SAFFIR '08

This picture features Zeke, Noah, and me After playing with Despers, our song “Different Me.”

We came in fifth place at New York Panorama With others from Oberlin—Maya and Sarah And Michael, and Monica, Sanders, and Anne, We were a significant part of the band. Come join us next year, this is my appeal: At next Panorama let’s have more OSteel.



Top: Zeev Saffir '08 with Zeke Runyon '10 and Noah Smit '05. Bottom: Kristin Jones '99.

Tom Constanten, arranging music for the electric string quartet (currently working on music from the *Battlestar Galactica* soundtrack), an ilyAIMY collaboration with a Taiko drum orchestra on Led Zeppelin’s “Kashmir,” releasing two albums with Lulu’s Fate, and getting engaged to Rob Hinkal. ilyAIMY is working on a new album that may include Kristen playing double seconds on one track. See what she’s up to at [kristenjonesmusic.com](http://kristenjonesmusic.com).

**KAT LUNDE '11** writes: “I’m in Corvallis, Ore., working on a master’s degree in plant ecology at Oregon State University. Grad school is tough, but I’m enjoying my time here. My fieldwork has me roaming all over the Oregon Cascades and Coastal Range studying a native wildflower and an introduced moth. Otherwise, I stay busy training for my first triathlon with the University’s Triathlon Club.”

**WILL GEORGES '12** writes: “Hey all! After graduation in 2012, I joined the TFA Hawaii Corps, teaching middle school math and science on Hawai’i Island. I moved to Oakland, Calif., in 2014, where I work as a data analyst at a charter school district. I’m playing a good amount of music, drinking a lot of good coffee, and super looking forward to our five-year reunion this May!”

## MATT GOLD '13 AND ANABEL HIRANO '13

live in Chicago, where they throw famous pizza hangs and listen to Milton Nascimento records and live in a place that doesn’t allow dogs—so no dogs yet. When not doing play therapy at a pediatric clinic, Anabel still gives big drums a healthy whack, now with Ho Etsu Taiko. Matt gets to travel the world playing guitar and has strategically used this opportunity to sample a good variety of croissants.

# MUSINGS WITH BRIAN RICE '89

## OBERLIN STEEL ALUMNI ASSOCIATION:

*Please introduce yourself!*

**BRIAN RICE (BR):** I'm from Traverse City, Mich., where I attended the Interlochen Arts Academy before going to Oberlin for percussion in 1985. I now live in Oakland, Calif., with my wife, Leslie Sanders '91, and our two girls, Melody and Jordan. I am a freelance percussionist in the San Francisco Bay Area specializing in Afro-Cuban and Brazilian music, and I also teach and lecture at U.C. Davis and other Bay Area colleges.

### *What was your major?*

**BR:** I was in the conservatory for percussion and by my junior year added an independent major in ethnomusicology.

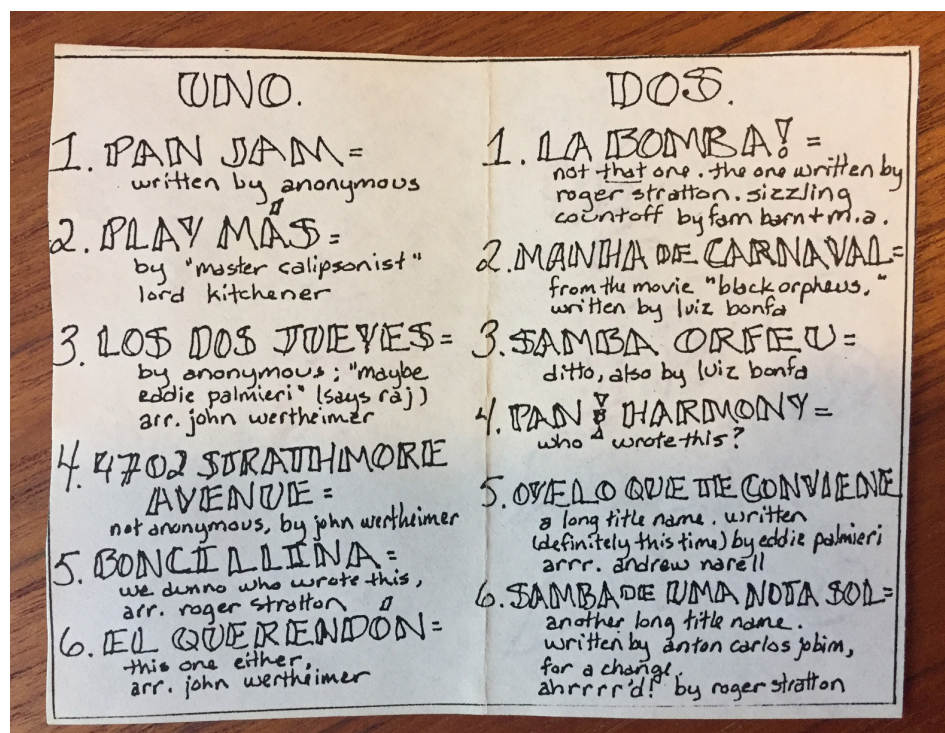
### *What years were you in OSteel/CC?*

**BR:** I joined the Can Consortium (CC) my freshman year as a percussionist. Our music history TA was teaching a listening lab, and she announced that the CC needed a conga player. At my high school, Interlochen, I had a friend who had two conga drums that he brought to school that I had jammed on a couple times, so clearly I was qualified! And that was that—I was in the band.

The CC was instrumental in broadening my interest in ethnomusicology, not just for Trinidadian music, but for other genres as well. When we were loading out for our tour to New York that winter term, someone was playing salsa music by the great Celia Cruz on a boom box that was sitting on the hood of a car. I was riveted by that box and don't remember loading anything into the van—I was hooked! What was this and where do I get more of it?

### *What did you play in the band?*

**BR:** I played congas mainly, and other percussion. At some point, someone in the band called me "King Conga." That nick-



name stuck. I can't remember the person who created that nickname—chime in out there if you do!

### *What were the repertoire highlights of your time there?*

**BR:** At that time, we didn't do a ton of panorama material. We played a lot of originals by the band's founders and early players. We played "Ackee 123," "Cecilia," and "4702 Strathmore Avenue," among others. We were definitely a grooving bunch of hippies, as I recall. We wore dashikis those first years until we got the snazzy green vests—sequins, I think. Though we didn't pack the same punch as the hard-hitting, rhythmically driving panorama parade tunes, we had a sound that was subtle, light, very musical, and very playful.

### *How did the band acquire new material to play?*

**BR:** My senior year, we had the good fortune of having Andy Narell play at Finney Chapel. He was fantastic! My housemate Josh Pawalek managed to get in contact

with him during the sound check, and Andy was free to come by the panyard to teach us "This Feelin' Nice"—a panorama favorite. Andy also came by our house for a party. It may have been after his concert. We kept him busy, and he was very accommodating.

### *How did the band get new instruments?*

**BR:** We had some older Ellie Mannette pans as well as some Cliff Alexis pans, and Cliff did our tuning. I don't remember us getting new pans, but I did help them get some new conga drums!

### *What were some gig highlights?*

**BR:** We of course played Finney steps every Illumination. That seemed to have been a tradition even before my first Illumination in 1986. We played a New York tour every year during winter term. My sophomore or junior year over spring break we went to Florida and played in the Miami and Boca Raton area. That was a really fun trip. We drove down in a van and maybe two cars. Besides the gigs, we had time to swim at the beach,



# RICE, continued

and I discovered that Meghan Matthews was a great swimmer—a real dolphin! I remember getting stung by a jellyfish. Also on that trip, someone had procured a large box of dried apples from a co-op. In the warmth of the Florida sun, the smell of apples just permeated the hot cars. It took a long time for me to eat dried apples after that.

Other gig highlights include playing at Vassar and at Wesleyan. Those were really fun for some reason—but there were so many fun ones. I do remember playing in Manhattan for a pan event where Ellie Mannette was not in attendance, but his wife was. We played, and then Rock Johnson played a three-octave “spider web pan”—a single pan with a different arrangement of notes that allowed for three octaves.

## How did playing in OCC influence your life or career?

**BR:** Playing with the band was a great musical and social experience, and I have many fond memories. It was also a great opportunity to just groove with people, so it helped me become a more natural player, and I developed more confidence by playing with them.

On the New York tour my sophomore year, several of us went into Manhattan and heard Eddie Palmieri play at Sounds of Brazil (SOBs). Playing congas was Giovanni Hidalgo, who is arguably the greatest conga player ever to grace this planet. He is more than astounding—he’s superhuman! I spent the entire concert standing in front of him at the edge of the stage with my jaw on the floor.

A few members of the band took me to the Brazilian American Cultural Center in New York. There you could purchase records of the Brazilian Carnival songs for each year. I bought several of these records, and that helped launch my interest in Brazilian music. You might not have imagined then that a visit to a record store would have that much impact, but I suppose I was open and already heading

down the path of world music. I am grateful for the ways that the people in that group influenced me.

## What’s your favorite band tradition?

**BR:** Finney steps and the tours. I’ll never forget those, and it’s so great to see the current bands play and have fun the same as we did, but with their own style and panache.

## Were you a part of any recordings with the band?

**BR:** I have some cassettes we made. One was recorded in The Cat in the Cream, called *Pancreatic Juices*. I remember the many brainstorming sessions we had thinking up names. We hand-wrote the j-cards for the cassette cases. For those of you who do not know what a cassette or a j-card is, it’s only a google search away!

I found another cassette of the Can Consortium, recorded in March 1988, entitled *This Feelin’ Nice*, also recorded at The Cat in the Cream and engineered by Chip White. I also found a *Live at Finney Chapel* recording. The cassette lists only the first initials and last names of the players, and nicknames or descriptions. Please send in corrections if you have any!

## Pancreatic Juices features:

Roger Stratton, Raj Mahal

Brian Rice, Lord King Conga

Josh Pawalek, The Troubleshooter,  
bust out!

Ben Saferstein, The Shaker Man

Meighan Mathews, Does Her Thing

Sarah Hochkiss, Hotchburn!

Allison Hinderlighter, Activate!

John Campbell, Wonder Twin Powers

Josh Boverman, Swamp Thing

Cara Coburn, Scara

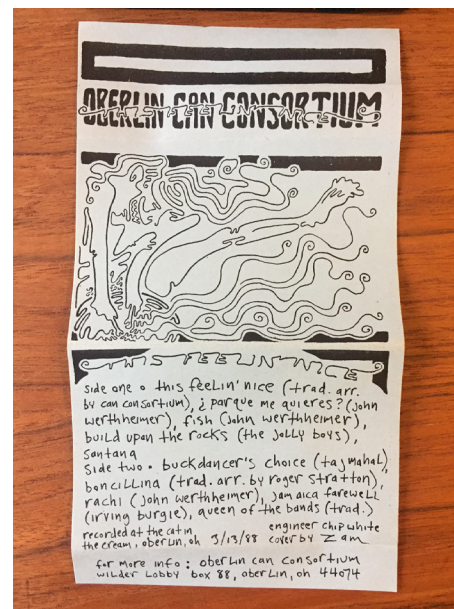
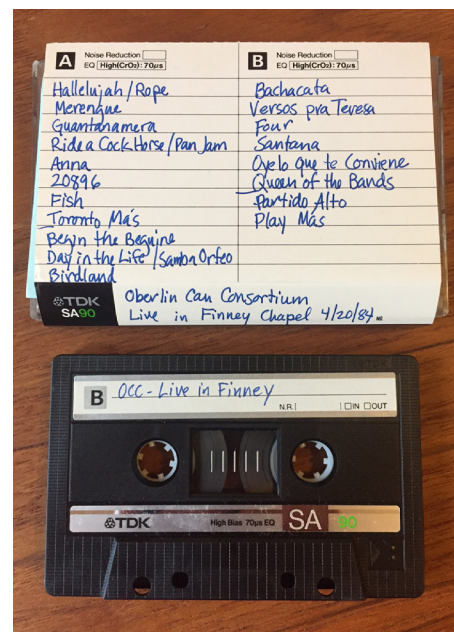
A. “Farn Barn” Farney, The Octopus

Kathy Kreilick, She is the Sun

M.A. Distler, The Marble Palace

I would love to hear from you if you feel like reaching out! You can email me at [bwrice@outlook.com](mailto:bwrice@outlook.com). Shout out to all my

band mates from ’85-’89 and especially my bandmates and roommates Josh Pawelek and Rob Laurens!



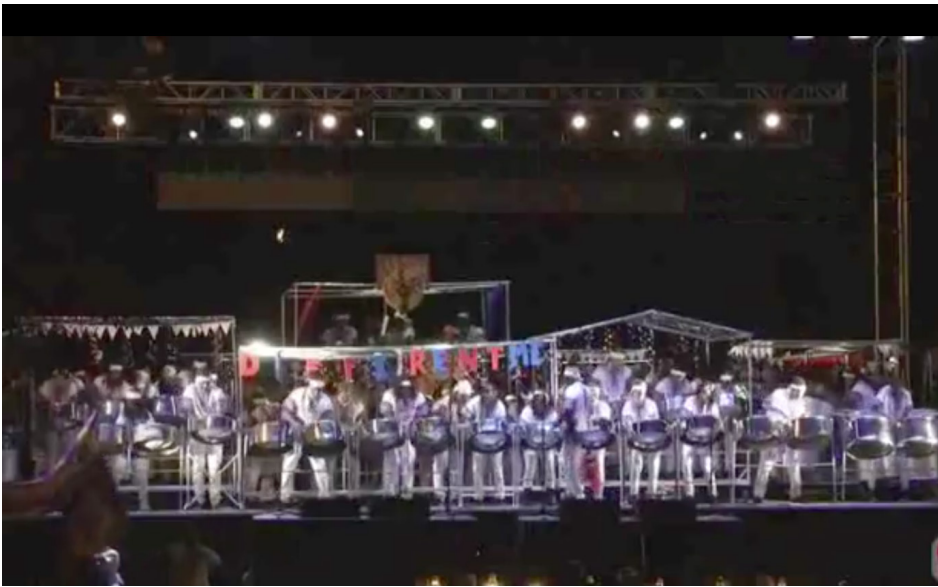


## MEET THE BAND: OSTEEL 2016-17



Top: Fall 2016 ExCo show at The Cat in the Cream. Bottom: Spring 2017 band at their first rehearsal of the semester.





*Top/Middle: Despers USA plays in New York Panorama. Bottom: Despers USA in the panyard.*

## 2016 NYC PANORAMA: OBERLIN CONTINGENT CONTINUES TO SHINE

By Zeke Runyon '10

**CONTINUING SEVERAL DECADES** of tradition, several Oberlin Steel alumni participated in the 2016 New York Panorama steel band competition in Brooklyn.

Linda Papademas '85 performed "Scene" with Crossfire Steel Orchestra under the direction of up-and-coming arranger Kendall Williams, who is pursuing a doctorate in music composition at Princeton University. 2016 marks Linda's fifth year with the band. Crossfire took third place overall with a score of 459 points out of a possible 500, the highest score the band has achieved with Williams at the helm.

A large contingent of Obies joined Despers USA for the first time this year. Michael Geraci '07, Zeke Runyon '10, Zeev Saffir '08, Noah Smit '05, and Anne Thompson '12 were joined by recent graduates Monica Hunter-Hart '15, Noah Sanderson '16, Sarah Stratton '16, Eric Xue '15, and Maya Zeemont '16. Despers USA performed "Different Me" arranged by Odie Franklin, a talented young arranger based in Brooklyn, taking fifth place with a score of 452 points.

Both Franklin and Williams, along with Brooklyn-based arranger Marc Brooks, jointly arranged for Skiffle Steel Orchestra in Trinidad for Panorama 2016 and 2017.

### LINKS

**Panorama scores and information:**

<http://panscore.com/>

**Crossfire "Scene":**

<http://tinyurl.com/crossfire2016>

**Despers USA "Different Me":**

<http://tinyurl.com/despers2016>

## STAY IN TOUCH!

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We know you want to keep in touch...but who to contact?

Post updates and links on the Oberlin Steel Alumni Facebook page whenever you want!

Send updates for the newsletter to  
**oberlinsteelalumni@gmail.com**

Email the Alumni Office if your contact info changes  
**alumni@oberlin.edu**

Check out the band's website at **www.oberlinsteel.com**.  
If you want your alumni entry to be updated,  
email **oberlin.steel@oberlin.edu**.

## FOR THE COLOR VERSION OF THE NEWSLETTER

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