

Between the Notes: Becky Bass talks steel drums with local nerd at The Parlour

Becky Bass is a talented percussionist and vocalist from the US Virgin Islands. She appears on this segment of *Between the Notes* with a musical version of the tropical escape you've likely been craving. Between her talents with steel drums and the smooth tenor of her voice, her musical style will leave you feeling refreshed and ready to tackle the world.

Here is an excerpt of her conversation with Motif's publisher Mike Ryan about the history of the steel drums and how they came to be:

Mike Ryan: How did you get into music?

Becky Bass: I was born and raised in St. Croix, Virgin Islands, so that's home. And at a young, ripe age of 2 years old, I was taught by my father to play the steel pan. "Steel pan" is the more authentic term for it. I know people have also called it "steel drums,, but steel pan is the authentic term. My father is also a musician, and he's still playing down in St. Croix at the young age of 80 years old.

MR: What does he play? Does he also play steel pan?

BB: He plays the steel pan but there are actually a lot of different types of steel pans. This one that I play is called a tenor pan. The lowest note is middle C, and it has a range of about two octaves and some change. And all notes - all keys, major, minor, can do literally anything you want. And then my father plays the double tenor - so he actually plays two. And they're actually set up very differently. The thicker the skirt, the bigger the notes are, and the lower the tone the instrument has. So this is considered the lead pan. Which is why it has all those higher notes so I can try to get through.

MR: Well I noticed during your performance, that there were certain techniques you were using to either dull the sound, or not. Because obviously when you are playing with different melodies, there are all different choices you have to make. Note-wise, but in terms of the timber, messing with the steel pan, what is it you're doing? Just so I can get some of that nerdiness out of me - I got a million questions about it!

BB: I love it! So it's actually one of the youngest acoustic instruments made today. I can play it without a microphone, and it can still be very clearly heard. And so, if you hit it - there's little depressions. In between those, if you hit them, there will be no sound at all. But if you hit them right in the middle, that's where the tone comes from. And depending on how hard or soft you hit it that can determine the tamber. So different techniques I use would be rolling, which you can hear if I stay on one note *mimics trill noise*. Or there's just hitting, and if I hit it hard, there will be more of a sharpness. But then if I hit it soft, there's more of that rounded, beautiful, lullaby tone. And there's no harshness; no sharpness. It's really how you play the instrument, and it's literally all in the wrist. Depending on how - you never wanna hit it too hard. The smaller the notes, the harder you have to hit it for a certain sound to come out.

MR: That is so cool! Now when you said that it's one of the youngest acoustic instruments, what did you mean by that?

BB: So, it requires no microphone (technically). When I'm with a band - sure. Or in this case, since there's music playing, it's good to be supported. But it was created and formed, I believe, in the fifties. So it's that young, and it's created from fifty-five gallon oil drums. That's kind of how it came to be. There's a long history for it. It was created in Trinidad and Tobago, and became a replacement for drums, since drums were taken away from Africans that were brought over and enslaved. So they found another way to communicate, using scrap metals on the island, and they found the fifty-five gallon oil drum. And from there, just started to morph and morph into what you see today.

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