

Steel Drums Classes – at the Bernhardt’s

By Sophie Braccini



Steel drums class in the Bernhardt's family room with teacher Harry Best
Photo Sophie Braccini

If you're strolling along Larch Avenue in Moraga on a Sunday morning and hear the festive, rhythmic sound of Caribbean drums, don't call the police to report another unruly Moraga party. It's Harry Best, teaching a class in the fun ethnic instrument to a group of wild suburbanites at the Bernhardt's residence.

Yvonne Lefort and Mike Bernhardt are the hosts of the weekly event. "We thought it would be a fun instrument to learn," says Lefort, "I had played piano for ten years but wanted to be in a band, and I love the sound of those drums." Lefort and husband Bernhardt love to have date nights when they learn something new together. They registered for the Best Steel Drum class at the Orinda Community Center a year ago.

Scheduling problems led

them to approach Best with the idea of holding an intermediate class that would have the objective of becoming a band. Lefort called on some musical friends. Robin Friedman sings, and plays both piano and violin. "Knowing how to read notes and rhythm is very helpful to play the drums," she says, "I felt competent quite rapidly."

Best was all for it. "I have been teaching the drums for years," says the Caribbean musician, "and the joy and enthusiasm of the players is what keeps me going." Best was born in St Lucia some years ago. He won't say how many, but confesses to having a 29 year old son. He first heard the instrument in his uncles' band and used to sneak into his neighbor's garden to practice. He came to the Bay Area to study and was invited as a student athlete; soccer

was his game.

After he graduated from UC Berkeley in Sociology, the music caught up with him. "I met another Caribbean musician from Trinidad and Tobago," he recalls, "we talked about having a friend of his come to the Bay Area to manufacture the drums. Chevron donated us oil barrels, we raised money to pay the instrument manufacturer and a few months later our first group, the "Chevron Revelers Steel Orchestra" was born."

Steel drums (also known as steel pans or pans) are musical instruments originating in Trinidad and Tobago. Steel drum musicians are called pannists. The steel pan evolved out of earlier musical practices of Trinidad's enslaved Afro-descendants. During the 1940s discarded 55-gallon steel oil drums became the preferred type of pan and, perhaps noticing that constant drumming changed the tone of the pans, techniques were developed to tune them to enable melodies to be played. Drums are constructed by pounding the bottom of the oil barrel into a bowl-like shape, known as "sinking" the drum. The drum is tempered over a fire until it is "white hot" and allowed to cool. Before the tempering, the notes are laid out, shaped and grooved with a variety of hammers and other tools.

"We have so much fun every Sunday morning," enthuses Lefort. "Weather permitting, we will re-

hearse outside, in the garden, and we hope you will soon hear us perform at an upcoming local festival."

Best agrees. "The group in Moraga is my best group, they are competent musicians and that helps to learn songs faster. But most people I teach by rote, like on the Island." In addition to the Orinda Community Center and the Bernhardt's, Best also teaches in Walnut Creek and hopes to start a new class in Moraga next fall. His present group is called Shabang. Information can be found at www.shabang.us.