Female announcer: From West Virginia Public Broadcasting.

Music.

Maryanne Reed: The steel drum is the only acoustic instrument invented in the 20th century and it’s still evolving. No longer associated just with Calypso and Caribbean music, steel drums are now found in practically all genres of music. And groups like the Sons of Steel represent the new breed of steel drum bands springing up across America. Without the aid of a PA system this six piece band fills Morgantown’s 1 2 3 Pleasant Street with sounds loud as any rock and roll band.

Music.

MR: This young North Carolina band has come to Morgantown, a special place for all steel drummers. Morgantown is home of the innovator who helped transform the drum from its primitive folk origins into a carefully tuned family of instruments.

Music.

MR: Ellie Mannette teaches at West Virginia University and runs a company that makes steel drums and sells them all over the world. But he has traveled a long and hard road to reach this current level of success. He was born in poverty in 1927 on the island of Trinidad.

Ellie Mannette: I got involved in a steel band from about age 11. As a little boy I climbed the tree and see those guys playing the trash cans and I got very intrigued with the sound of the drum and the rhythm was so haunting that it gave me goosebumps and one day I managed to climb from the tree when everybody is gone I climbed down and I went down into the yard where they had these drums and I look at the drum there. It was a can like this with top being inside out and the top being kind of a convex.

Music.

MR: These early steel drums were only capable of a few notes and were used mainly for rhythm and not melody. Ellie started making his own drums but quickly became dissatisfied with the limitations of the convex form.

EM: So I dented the drums down into the concave and put little humps on it and I could tune on top of the humps and I got three, four notes. If I wanted to get more notes then I have to increase the size of the drum. You could not get a drum to buy. The government wouldn’t sell you. The oil companies wouldn’t sell you. No way. So what you had to jump fences at night and try to smuggle drums over the fence and dogs would chase you away and all this kind of thing just to try to get a barrel to work on.

Music.

MR: From its earliest days as a British colony the government of Trinidad tried to legislate drumming into extinction. In the 1940s and ‘50s steel drum bands quickly became the lightning rod for violence and police repression, but Ellie remained focused on developing the instrument and stayed above the fray. Eventually the steel drum gained wide acceptance and Ellie’s band The Invaders became one of the top bands in Trinidad, even landing a recording contract with RCA.

EM: So the nation saw that the steel band is being born from trash and garbage and rhythm and a lot of noise and everything else. And it came into a musical instrument to some extent, some degree.

MR: Over time Ellie became less interested in performing and more interested in expanding the steel drums range and quality of sound.

EM: I was obsessed with the drum. I had visions of the drum that nobody has had. I was seeing a pattern in my head about all the design of the drum; the quality, the improved quality. I was hearing it because what I was listening to the orchestra all the time, all the great symphonies and I was seeing and hearing that in my head and I was imagining, visualizing the steel drum playing like that.

MR: In 1967 Ellie decided to leave Trinidad and come to the United States where he saw more opportunity. He taught steel drum to youth groups in the poorer boroughs of New York City. Later he traveled from college to college teaching percussion students his advanced building techniques and pushing the steel drum as a serious instrument. After several years Phil Faini invited him to come to WVU for a single semester.

Phil Faini: He enjoyed it so much that he said, I said if we could get you on to stay would you stay? He said oh yes. So that was it you know, he was sort of the cornerstone of our world music center getting the man who invented the modern day steel drum, outstanding.

Music.

PF: I call his drums the “Stradivarius of Steel”. This man builds, by far, the finest steel drum in the world. He was able to put the pitch right on; it’s a perfectly tuned instrument. It can be played with pianos and trumpets and clarinets and violins and everything.

Hammer pounding.

MR: To this day steel drums are still made from standard commercial barrels.

Hammers pounding.

MR: Making the steel drum is all hand work. Getting up to 30 different tones from a single surface makes the steel drum an engineering oddity.

EM: If you try to move the edge you go to E flat and this is the trouble right here. This is the trouble spot.

Student: Right.

Hammer tapping.

MR: The problem with the single surface is that the tuning of each note affects all other notes.

Hammer tapping.

MR: It’s taken Ellie many decades of experience, science and intuition to come up with the best methods.

EM: This area here carries the harmonic of the note. This area here carries the octave of the note.

Billy Sheeder: He’s like, like a Yoda, he’s got unrealistic expectations. He believes all this is going to happen; we’re going to be able to tune the drums better than him within a couple of years, you know, and we don’t always feel like that but he always believes that and it rubs off on us. It’s a good thing.

Emily Lemmerman: I consider Ellie one of the few geniuses I’ve ever met. And I feel really lucky to have found him at such a young age so that I can build my career in his wake.

Music.

EL: None of us will be able to understand his vision until we know every step of the process inside out, so that is what we are working towards.

BS: That’s a great challenge, is to reach that level because we don’t know how long it’s going to take to really make a drum like him.

EM: I’m in heaven to teach my art because I always feel my philosophy was, is in fact, what does it profit a man to keep what he knows to himself. It doesn’t profit you anything. What does it profit a man to keep what he knows to himself? If all the engineers and all the designers and all the builders and the creators of the world have ever kept what they knew to themselves the world wouldn’t be what it is today.

Music.

EM: I can’t believe it, after all the struggle and difficulty I have accomplished what I set out to accomplish.

Music.