

ANDY NARELL

Andy Narell has spent more than a quarter century exploring the subtleties and complexities of steel pan and grafting them to the jazz idiom. He's one of only a small handful of steel pan players in the world who are playing jazz, and perhaps the only one among that coterie to commit an entire career – live and in the studio – to creating new music for the pan in that context.

Now, with June 23, 2009, release of *University of Calypso* (HUCD3168) on Heads Up International, a division of Concord Music Group, Narell joins forces with calypso master Relator to explore the role of jazz in vintage calypso. Together, they perform 15 classic compositions by Lord Kitchener, Lord Melody, Mighty Terror, Roaring Lion, Spider, and Relator, supported by such world-class Latin-jazz musicians as Dario Eskenazi, Pedro Martinez, Gregory Jones, Mark Walker, and special guest Paquito D'Rivera.

This commitment to exploration is nothing new for Narell, who has been almost singlehandedly ushering steel pan music into the mainstream since the 1980s. After a string of critically praised and commercially successful albums on Windham Hill Jazz throughout the '80s and early '90s, Narell joined Heads Up with the release of *Behind the Bridge* in 1998, followed by *Fire in the Engine Room* in 2000. But in the midst of hammering out his career – recording in the States; playing festivals and other gigs around the U.S., Europe and the Caribbean; composing for the Panorama steel band festival in Trinidad; laying down tracks on albums, film and commercials – he was unaware of a grassroots movement taking shape in South Africa that would have a dramatic impact on his musical and cultural perspective.

The end of apartheid in 1994 – which included a lifting of economic restrictions and a transition to majority rule in South Africa – allowed residents of the major cities and outlying townships easier access to recorded music from around the world. A network of “listening clubs” sprouted throughout the region as low-income South Africans pooled their monies to buy CDs of their favorite artists. By the late '90s, Narell had ascended to folk-hero status in a fan club he knew nothing about.

Narell collided with his own destiny in the fall of 1999 during a visit to South Africa for the Arts Alive festival, where nearly 80,000 people turned out for his performance (he'd only expected to fill a few 200- or 300-seat clubs during his visit). The response to his music was so powerful and inspiring that he returned to South Africa the following spring for an extensive concert tour that reunited him with the band he'd played with during his initial visit. *Live in South Africa*, released in 2001, chronicles his two-night stand at the Blues Room in Johannesburg at the tail end of the tour.

A year later, still buoyed by the South Africa experience, Narell joined pianist Mario Canonge, bassist Michel Alibo and drummer Jean Philippe Fanfant to form Sakésho, a quartet with deep

roots in the French Caribbean. *Sakésho* – and the album of the same name, released in 2002 – is a beguiling and sophisticated hybrid that maintains a reverence for its roots while steering jazz into the hippest currents of contemporary music.

In contrast to the lean quartet setting of *Sakésho*, *The Passage*, released in 2004, featured a 30-piece Parisian steelband, Calypsociation, and special guests Michael Brecker, Paquito D’Rivera, and Hugh Masekela. In 2005, Narell followed up with another jazz record from *Sakésho*, *We Want You To Say*. The creative journey continued with *Tatoom* in 2007, as Narell merged his unique jazz writing with the power and energy of a big steelband and three brilliant soloists – guitarist Mike Stern, tenor saxophonist David Sanchez and percussionist Luis Conte.