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# Getting Started on Pans

What you need to know...and what to avoid.

Rick Henson - 2014 (revised February 2015)

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A large, three-dimensional metallic logo consisting of the letters 'P', 'S', and 'D' in a bold, sans-serif font. The letters have a silver-to-white gradient and a beveled, 3D effect. They are set against a solid black rectangular background.

PLAY STEEL DRUMS

PLAY STEEL DRUMS

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## Introduction

Thanks for taking a few minutes to read this. I hope this helps you get started playing steel pans. This is designed to be thorough enough to answer most of your questions without boring you with too many details. If I didn't answer all of your questions please feel free to email me at [rmsteelbands@mac.com](mailto:rmsteelbands@mac.com).

So, one thing I wanted to address right away is the name - Is this instrument a steel drum or a steel pan? Both are correct. However, in Trinidad and Tobago, where steel drums are from, they call it a steel pan. Or they will often call it simply "pan."

Just a little about me. I started play pans when in 1999. I had just finished music school and I was burned out. I loved music but I wasn't enjoying it any more. So, I bought a steel pan, and my life has never been the same!

A couple years later, I raided my IRA and purchased 4 more steel pans, enough to form a group. I named it Rocky Mountain Steel Bands and began teaching weekly group lessons. RMSB has grown to several bands and classes. The groups have recorded 4 CDs and performed all over Colorado and neighboring states.



Me with Mappo, famed pan tuner from Trinidad.

This experience of buying scores of instruments and teaching hundreds of students is the foundation of this ebook. It's all based on my own experience.

I hope all this information helps you play music. Even better, I hope you begin your journey of playing the most amazing musical instrument on the planet!

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## Kinds of Steel Pans

Many people do not realize this, but the steel pan is actually a whole orchestra of various instruments. There are basically 5 kinds of steel drums, these are ranked from highest to lowest sounding:

- ❖ Tenor
- ❖ Double Tenor
- ❖ Double Second
- ❖ Guitar or Cello
- ❖ Bass

**Tenor** - The tenor is the most common steel pan. In fact, the whole next chapter is devoted to it! The tenor pan is one single drum, which makes it easy to transport. Also, you'll only need to purchase one stand and one case so it's a little more affordable to get started.

Another reason many people gravitate to the tenor is because it plays the melody line in a steel band. Other instruments do a lot of strumming (one rhythm over and over again).

There are 2 main kinds of tenor pans: low tenor and high tenor. The low tenor has a C as its lowest note. The high tenor has a D as its lowest note. Both of these follow the "4ths and 5ths" note arrangement.

(I know this might be info overload, or just confusing.  
Don't worry though, it will start making more sense!)

There is also a pattern called "invader" style. You can recognize this when you see it because there is one great big note (F#), right in the middle of the pan. Those pans are rare, but just wanted you to know about them!

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**Double Tenor** - This instrument has two drums. It's also relatively rare here in the US so you're not likely to find many of these. The double tenor has a layout that makes melody line fairly easy to play. I could write 3 more paragraphs detailing exactly why but that would be boring... moving on!

**Double Second** - The double second is my main instrument. It also consists of two drums. It's generally regarded as the most versatile instrument in the steel drum family. If you are playing with other musicians you have most of the notes you'd need to play melody lines and the lower notes work well for accompanying other musicians.

**Guitar/Cello** - OK, this is where it really gets confusing! Guitar or cello steel pans usually consist of 3 drums. Oddly enough, they usually have the same note layout. The difference here is that guitars usually hang on stands and cellos will have legs instead of stands.

Also, there are other things like a "double guitar" or a "4-cello" that you may see. In smaller steel bands they will play the same part. In larger ensembles, like the ones in Trinidad, the cello and guitar often play different parts.

**Bass** - Bass steel pans consist of 6, full sized drums! So, now you'll need that cargo van. These are very bulky and many professional steel drum bands will opt for an electric bass instead.

The notes are so large on basses that only 3 fit on each drum! Also, since these sit on the ground or on individual legs, they can be arranged in many different ways!

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## Tenor Steel Pan

There are basically two kinds of tenor pans. One has a low note of D and the other goes a lower, down to middle C. Many people refer to these as a D Tenor or C Tenor, respectfully. Since the D tenor has a higher range, it is also referred to as a high tenor, and the C tenor is called a low tenor.

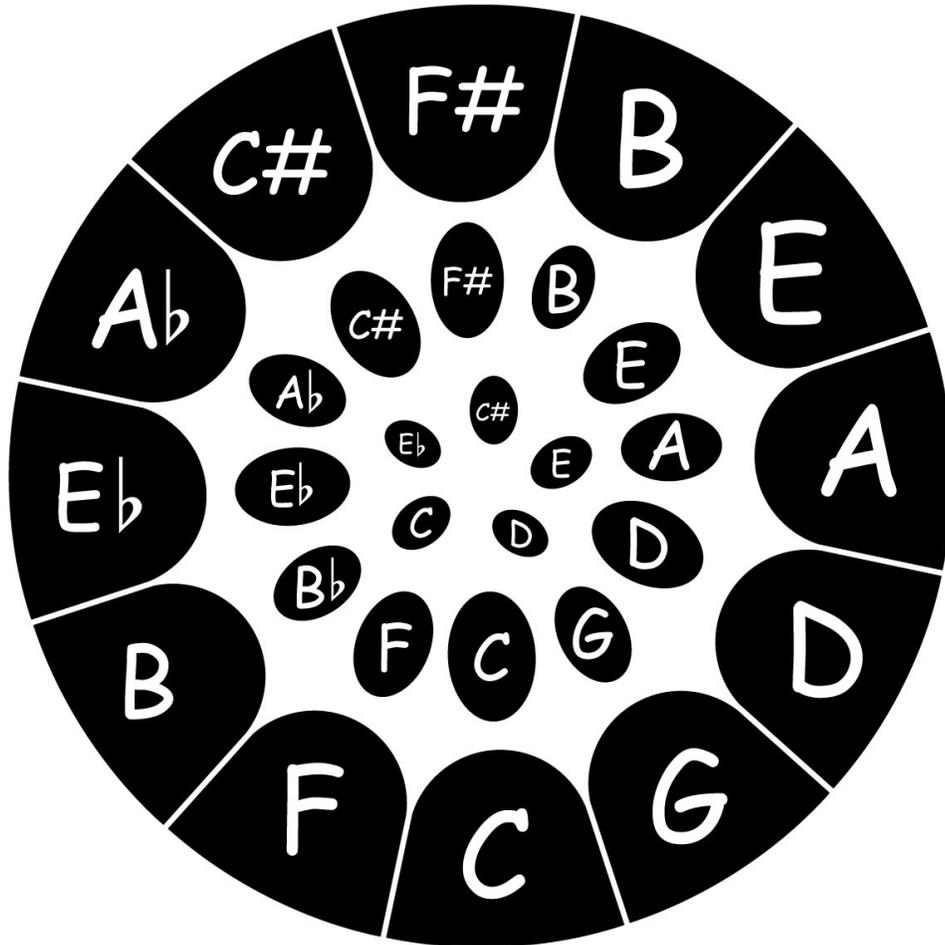
This book will refer to them as high and low tenors. The high tenor is virtually the only in Trinidad and the low tenor is the most common here in the US.

The [PlaySteelDrums.com](http://PlaySteelDrums.com) website is for either kind of tenor pan, but primarily a low tenor.

Even though these patterns are basically standardized, they are still handcrafted and unique. The pattern could be slightly different.

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## Low Tenor Note Layout



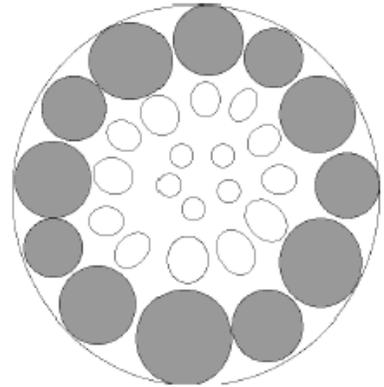
You can see there the note at the bottom, the biggest note on the pan, is a "C". This happens to be Middle C. You also see 2 other "C"s right above this one.

This can be very confusing. Here's what you need to remember. The lower notes are bigger and the higher notes are smaller.

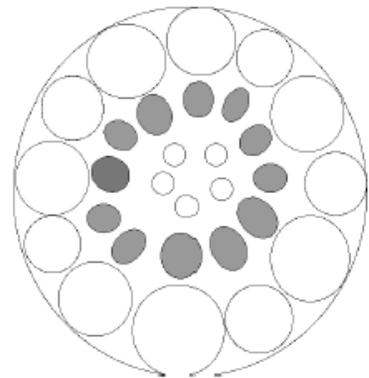
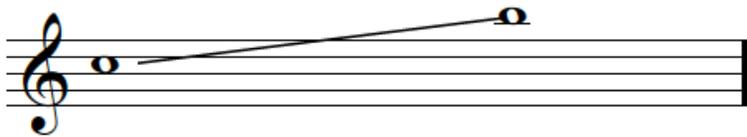
Here are some diagrams to see what I call the Outer Notes and Inner Notes, and where they are located on the staff. Basically, all the outer notes are low and the inner notes are high.

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## Outer Notes



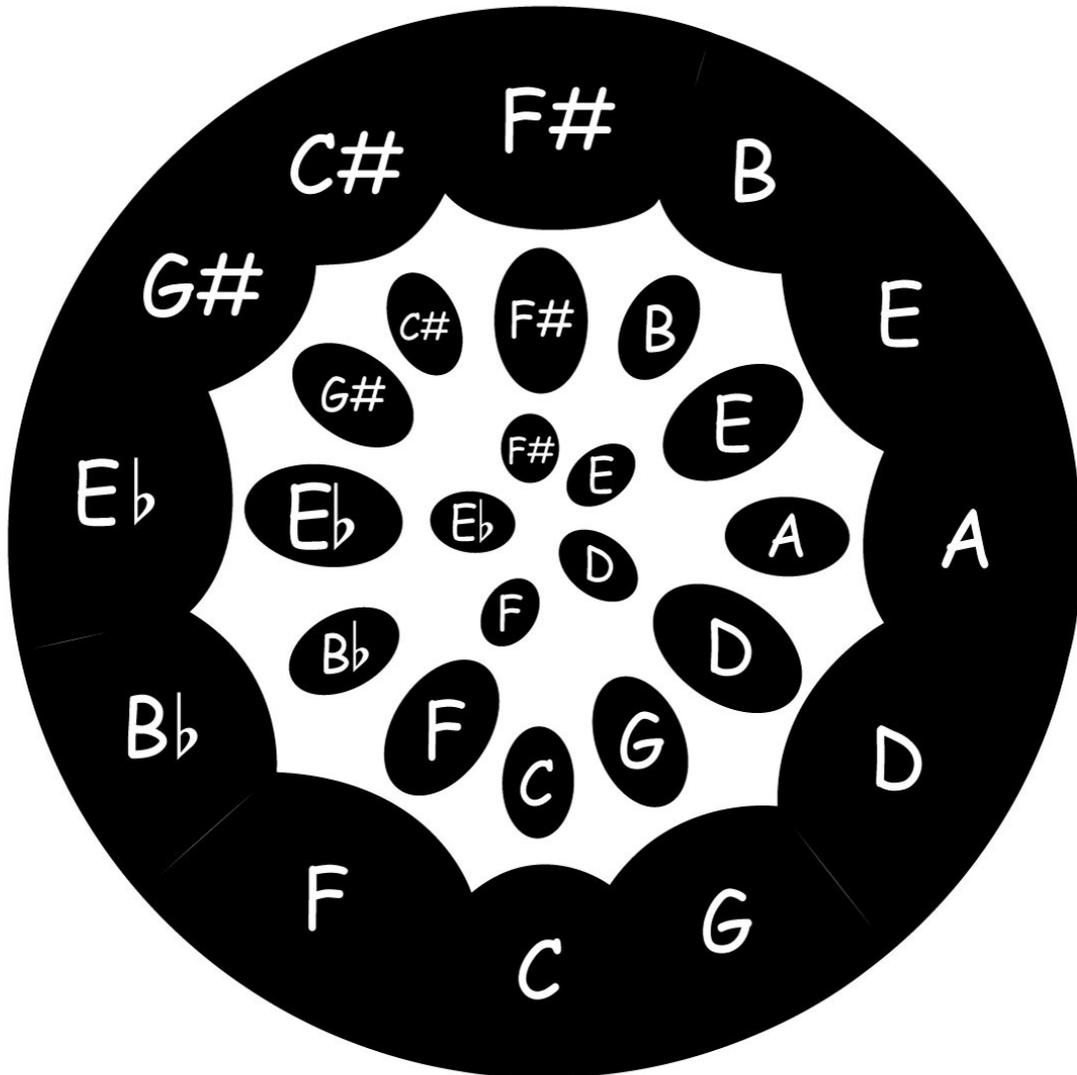
## Inner Notes



All this info is just to help you get to know your pan a little better. If you join the [PlaySteelDrums.com](http://PlaySteelDrums.com) website I make it even easier. The first lesson starts with just 3 notes!

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## High Tenor Note Layout



Here is what is important to note about the high tenor. Look at that "C" that we were just talking about. See how small it is on this pattern? That's because this pattern doesn't have Middle C. The C that is written here is actually an octave higher!

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## History of Steel Pans

The steel drums have a long and storied history with colorful characters and fantastic stories that intrigue all whom hear. First, imagine what the discovery of a musical instrument must be like. We live in a time where inventions are simply new gadgets improving on our old gadgets. But in Port of Spain on the Island of Trinidad, something special was took place.



The people who discovered steel drums were poor, inner city kids, mostly between the ages of 13-15. They wanted to make music during Carnival but couldn't just walk into a store and buy an instrument. They had to make music with whatever they could find. Earlier, in the late 1800's and early 1900's, they used bamboo. But in the 1940's, other things like biscuit tins and bottles made for good percussion rhythms.

Most people agree that Spree Simon was the first to create different pitches out of his can, or biscuit tin. The story goes that during Carnival, he loaned his instrument to a friend, Muscle Rat, who played really hard and dented the instrument. Spree tried to pound it back into shape and soon realized that different sized bubbles in the can could produce different sounds



Here are some old-time pans probably built in the 1950s.

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What happened over the next 20 years must have been incredible. These creative young kids, with plenty of time on their hands, began making these drums with different note patterns and tried to get more notes on each drum.

Ellie Mannelle, tells a great story of a pan he built during these years that really sounded great, they even gave it a name, the Barracuda! It was the first pan with 14 notes. To put more notes on a drum, you needed more space. Eventually, someone (Ellie Mannelle or Tony Williams) got his hands on a 55-gallon oil barrel.

Today, steel drums are still made with 55 gallon oil barrels. They are still basically built in the same manner. The surface is pounded in (often with air power tools today) and each note is given it's place, then that note is hammered to make a bubble and tuned. The same basic method was used 60 years ago. However, we now have a vastly greater understanding of how to manipulate the steel and have made this a science.

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## Basic Technique

**Grip** - Hold the very back of the stick, loosely between your thumb and two fingers.

**Strike the pan** very gently at first until you get a good feel for it. You will quickly notice the the low notes (the big ones!) barely need to be tapped. The little notes (the high ones!) must be struck with more force. Think about the stick moving more quickly.

Then, ALWAYS let the stick bounce off the note. Your stick has a rubber tip and should bounce naturally.

**Elbows** - It's very easy to let your elbow stick out when playing notes on the side of your pan. Try not to do this. Think about keeping your elbows and hands inside the pan.

**Drum Height** - Tough one here. It's basically a very personal choice. Start at about waist high then experiment by adjusting a little up or down to find what works best for you.

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## Buying A Steel Drum

Just a few decisions you need to make. First of all, you'll need to decide if you want a Tenor, Double Tenor, or Double Second. Then:

**Used vs New?** For most people I would recommend buying a new pan. I would only purchase a used pan if you are an experienced musician and could tell if the pan sounds good. Then, only purchase a used pan if you could go and play it in person.

However, if you see a used pan and are considering buying it I would always start by trying to get info about the instrument's history. Who built this pan and when? When was its last tuning? Then, here are some more things to look for:

- ❖ Standard note layout (like the ones we discussed)
- ❖ Sound? Play every note to see if it sounds OK.
- ❖ Also, test the sound by playing octaves (both F#s, for example)
- ❖ No Rust. Once it starts it's hard to stop!
- ❖ Does it appear to be well taken care of?
- ❖ No worries, dents in the skirt are normal!

Buying a new pan is \*somewhat" easier. There are many places in the US where you can buy or order a pan. A decent pan will start around \$1200. You'll also need a case, stand, and sticks. In all, you'll probably spend about \$1500 for a tenor.

Here's my list of favorite builders. There are others out there, many of which whom might be great, but these are all folks that I know personally, have done business with, and I completely trust.

<http://www.coyledrums.com>

<http://www.kdsteeldrums.com>

<http://www.mannetteinstruments.com>

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## Caring for Your Steel Drum

**First and foremost** - Do not play your pan in the sun. Ever. Your drum will get hot much faster than you'd expect. When the metal is hot, you could knock it out of tune when playing it. It is possible to completely ruin a steel drum this way.

**Cleaning Your Pan** - If you have a chromed pan you should use a chrome wax. There is a spray on wax called "Fast Wax" that is awesome! Wipe off any excess dirt, grime, etc, then follow the manufacturer's specifications.

If your pan is painted, Windex, or something similar this works just fine. In either case, make sure to use terry cloth towels and not paper towels.

**Belly of your pan** - This is the part of your pan that hangs below the skirt. It's where the notes are so it's the most fragile area. If you have to set your pan down, lay it on the ground, upside down. Don't set it directly on the belly.

**Moving Your Pan** - I'm a huge fan of cases. I also really prefer the hard cases to the soft, bag style cases. Also put your pans in upside down so the drum isn't resting on its belly!

**Rust** - Here in Colorado, the air is so dry that we don't need to worry much about rust. If you live in a humid place this can be a huge problem! Make sure you wipe down your pan (with a terry cloth towel) every time you play. The oils from your hands is sometimes enough to allow rust to take hold.

**Don't play too hard** - If you hit the pan too hard you can hear it - it makes a different, more growly sound. And never hit it with anything besides your pan sticks!

**Tuning** - See the next chapter..

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## Tuning

Yes, your instrument needs to be tuned periodically. My students ask me all the time, "Do I need my instrument tuned?" Every time I say, "Yes".

Please read:

I don't care how many books you've read or videos you've watched.

**DO NOT TRY TO TUNE YOUR OWN PAN.**

I don't get a referral fee from the tuners, I just think it's good advice. Most pans will sound their best after they've been tuned, and played, and tuned some more. A new pan needs to be broken in a little. Especially if you have a new pan, get it tuned!

Tuning is very difficult. There's more to it than just being "on pitch." Sometimes two notes are both in tune, but they cause interference with each other and sound bad. Tuners have tricks to fix these issues.

Last tip regarding tuning. Talk to your tuner! If there is a note that bothers you, let him/her know about it. This will help you get the sound you are looking for from your pan. The tuner might explain why it's getting that sound and what the different options are to fixing it.

Here is my short list of tuners here in the US. Yes, there are others. If you need help finding a tuner in your area, send me an email, [rmsteelbands@mac.com](mailto:rmsteelbands@mac.com).

Alan Coyle, [info@coyledrums.com](mailto:info@coyledrums.com)  
Kyle Dunleavey, [info@kdsteeldrums.com](mailto:info@kdsteeldrums.com)  
Darren Dyke, [ddpantuner@mac.com](mailto:ddpantuner@mac.com)  
Emily Lemmerman, [emlem1@yahoo.com](mailto:emlem1@yahoo.com)

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## Festivals

There are numerous festivals around the US that you can participate in. Most of these are 1 week long and feature a performance at the end. This is a great way to learn how to play pan. Getting started can be frustrating but after a whole week of playing music with others you won't be a beginner any more!

The one that I'm a part of is the **Pan Ramajay Summer Steel Drum Festival**. I'm honored to work with the other amazing faculty members like Ray Holman, Tom Miller, Alan Lightner, Jim Munzenrider and my first pan teacher, Don Prorak!



For more information, <http://ramajaypanfest.com>

The **Mannette Festival of Steel** is held in Morgantown, WV every July. It's a week of steel drums, hosted by one of the grandfathers of the instrument, Ellie Mannette. The faculty changes every year to keep things fresh.

For more information: <http://www.mannetteinstruments.com/#!festival-of-steel>

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## Sheet Music

After you've gone through my course at [PlaySteelDrums.com](http://PlaySteelDrums.com) you'll be ready to start playing more difficult music. There are many sources out there for music now. As you could expect, this is not an exhaustive list, but a list of my favorite places to go for music.

Most of these focus on music for a full steel band - tenor, double tenor, double second, guitar/cell, and bass. However, they all have some selections for solo pan as well.

<http://www.panpress.com>

<http://www.ramajay.com>

<http://www.maumaumusic.com>

<http://www.panyard.com>

Also, stay tuned to [PlaySteelDrums.com](http://PlaySteelDrums.com). We are creating additional products that you may be interested in.

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## Conclusion

I hope that I've been able to answer some of your questions about getting started on steel pan. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to send me an e mail at [rmsteelbands@mac.com](mailto:rmsteelbands@mac.com).