

# SOUTHBANK CENTRE

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## Five hundred steel pan players take over the Southbank Centre for *Steel Scenes*

New commissions and large-scale performances from bands across the country mark 75 years since steel pan first transformed British musical culture on the South Bank



L-R: Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra players in 1951 © Raymond Kleboe, courtesy of Getty Images Black History and Culture Collection; Pan players from Southbank Centre Resident Organisation Kinetika Bloco © Richard Haynes.

The Southbank Centre today announces a major new investment in the future and history steel pan music in Britain, unveiling ***Steel Scenes*** – a landmark programme combining new music and research commissions and large-scale performance, 75 years since steel pan was first heard live in the UK at the South Bank.

Bringing together more than 500 musicians and over 25 steel bands, ***Steel Scenes*** transforms the entire Southbank Centre site into a weekend-long celebration, marking 75 years since the Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra (TASPO) performed live on the South Bank during the Festival of Britain in 1951 – widely regarded as the first steel band performance in the UK and a foundational moment in post-war British musical culture.

Across **25–26 July 2026**, the **Southbank Centre's** foyers, terraces, riverside walkways and performance spaces will be transformed by mass performances, new commissions, workshops, talks and pop-up moments, with steel pan placed at the heart of the arts centre's summer of 75th anniversary celebrations. From the South Bank's Jubilee Gardens to the Royal Festival Hall, audiences will encounter steel pan music across every corner of the 11-acre site in one of the largest gatherings of performers for a steel pan dedicated event ever staged in the UK.

Alongside the artistic programme of gigs and outdoor performances, the Southbank Centre has co-commissioned new research into TASPO's arrival in Britain and the wider cultural legacy of steel

pan in the UK. Developed in partnership with co-commissioner Culture& and researcher-in-residence **Janaya Pickett**, this research project – ***PIONEERS OF PAN: The History and Legacy of the Trinidad All-Steel Percussion Orchestra*** – brings renewed scholarly and cultural attention to steel pan’s role in shaping post-war Britain’s cultural landscape and its continuing influence across communities, education and performance practice today.

**Of her research, Janaya Pickett said:** *“What began as research into the Festival of Britain and TASPO’s performance on the South Bank quickly revealed larger themes of Empire and ideas of Britishness – and British culture – that remain relevant today. Taking place in 1951, at the height of the ‘Windrush’ years, this was a crucial moment in our nation’s history. We can learn so much from reexamining the past and the legacies of TASPO’s performance, whose joy and resistance can still be felt in contemporary UK carnival culture.”*

At the heart of the weekend are two major concerts in the Royal Festival Hall, featuring world premieres and new commissions that bring steel pan into conversation with jazz, classical, electronic and contemporary music. Composers and artists across the programme include Resident Organisation **Kinetika Bloco**, Grammy Award winning duo **Blue Lab Beats**, MOBO Award winner **Soweto Kinch**, **Nabihah Iqbal**, **Delphina James**, **Marlon Hibbert** and **Jenny Gilberg**. Drawing inspiration from the trailblazing legacy of TASPO, the Royal Festival Hall will debut the formation of a brand-new, bespoke concert band: a collective uniting the finest pan soloists and players from across the UK’s premier steel bands.

Elsewhere, free performances unfold across the outdoor stages and public spaces, featuring steel bands from across the UK including **Croydon Steel Orchestra**, **Ebony Steelband**, **Endurance Steel Orchestra**, **Impact Steel Band**, **Mangrove Steelband**, **Metronome Steel Orchestra**, **New Generation Steel Orchestra**, **North Tyneside Steelband**, **Pan Nation Steel Orchestra**, **Panectar Nostalgia Steelband**, **Pantonic All Stars Steel Orchestra**, **RASPO Steel Orchestra**, **Stardust Steel Orchestra**, **Steel Pan in Motion**, **St Michaels and All Angels Steel Orchestra** and **UFO Steelband**.

A specially commissioned arrangement of *The TASPO Story* by **Sterling Betancourt MBE** – the last surviving member of TASPO – to which every band performing will add their own musical approach and will connect performances across the site, symbolically passing the music and its enduring legacy from one generation of pan players to the next.

A series of pay-what-you-can talks and panel discussions will explore steel pan’s place within Britain’s kaleidoscopic musical identity and takes an in-depth look at the landscape of pan education. By highlighting milestones like Marlon Hibbert becoming the first steelpan graduate from the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, the discussions will address how educational and professional frameworks can evolve to support a new generation of genre-defying artists.

**Deborah Yewande Bankole, Creative Producer of Steel Scenes, said:** *“Steel Scenes as a project is rooted so firmly in the Southbank Centre’s history as a site – with TASPO’s 1951 performance, widely regarded as the first live steel band performance in the UK – it’s an honour to be able to bring pan orchestras, players and the carnival arts community at large together in this unique way to celebrate our 75th anniversary. This weekend is about showcasing the dynamism and experimentalism of the instrument via new commissions that invest in its canon and legacy. We’re also incredibly proud to celebrate the deep community roots that power this art form, evidenced by*

*TASPO's historic journey and the vital resource pan groups are for young musicians today. We hope this weekend contributes to lasting visibility and value for the form, helping secure its place in formal education and arts practice."*

**Sterling Betancourt MBE, musician, steel pan arranger and the last surviving member of TASPO, said:** *"The 1951 Festival of Britain was a major event in London but it also played a huge role in the development of the Steel Band in Great Britain then spread in Europe.*

*The Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra, known as TASPO was formed of 12 musicians from different steel bands in Trinidad and, I was fortunate to be one of these 12 musicians, sadly none of the others are still with us today to witness the course of history with this 75th TASPO anniversary. I am delighted that my TASPO Story composition will now be interpreted by the many young talented Steel Bands across the UK, two generations on, and I am eager to hear their own creative versions."*

*Steel Scenes* is a highlight of the Southbank Centre's 75th anniversary programme. The programme includes Harry Styles' Meltdown (11 – 21 June), Dua Lipa's London Literature Festival (21 Oct – Sun 1 Nov), and Anish Kapoor returning to the Hayward Gallery (16 June - 18 October). The onsite activity is joined by a national programme of art, literature and music – aiming to reach 1 million people in over 40 towns and cities across all four nations of the UK.

**Mark Ball, the Southbank Centre's Artistic Director, said:** *"Steel Scenes is one of the most ambitious programmes of events we have created for our 75th anniversary year, as a mass celebration of a hugely important musical and cultural movement to emerge in modern Britain. Since the Festival of Britain, the Southbank Centre has long been a home for the artists, communities and movements shaping the nation's cultural and creative identity. As we mark our anniversary, Steel Scenes is a powerful reflection of that history, celebrating the enduring influence of steel pan music, 75 years after TASPO's landmark performance on this site, while investing in the new musical commissions for the pan players of today."*

**Steel Scenes** runs 25–26 July 2026 at the Southbank Centre. Events on-sale now, with further events to be announced. [www.southbankcentre.co.uk](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk)

- ENDS -

**Notes to editors:**

**LISTINGS**

**Steel Rising**

Fri 24 Jul, 5pm, Riverside Terrace, Free

Youth ensembles capture the power of the steel pan as a community force at a day of free performances, each bringing a fresh perspective to pan.

**Steel Sounds with Just Vibez**

Sat 25 Jul, 12.00pm, Riverside Terrace, Free

A high-energy line-up of steel pan bands from across the UK take over the Riverside Terrace, with music from traditional calypso to modern-day arrangements.

**Steel Pan Reimagined**

Sat 25 Jul, 5.30 & 8.30pm, Royal Festival Hall

Seventy-five years since the sound of the steel pan arrived in the UK, a suite of dazzling new commissions celebrates its incredible heritage and bright horizons.

## **Steel Legacies**

Sun 26 Jul, from 12pm, Jubilee Gardens, Free

In a full day of free performances on our brand new Jubilee Gardens stage, we're bringing together an incredible selection of the UK's finest steel bands.

**More events to be announced.**

## **About the Southbank Centre**

The Southbank Centre is the UK's largest multi-arts centre and engages the most diverse audiences of any performing arts organisation in the UK. Our biggest venue, the Royal Festival Hall (2,700 seats) is the lasting legacy of the 1951 Festival of Britain and the ambition and values of that project – that arts, ideas, innovation and culture can heal communities and should be available and accessible to everyone – are still our guiding principles today. The Southbank Centre is uniquely able to offer a wide-ranging, inclusive and world-class artistic programme spanning contemporary visual arts, music, dance, performance, literature, comedy and spoken word across the Royal Festival Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room, the Hayward Gallery and our free spaces. We are also home to the National Poetry Library, the National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP), two resident organisations (Kinetika Bloco and Tomorrow's Warriors) and six resident orchestras (Aurora Orchestra, Chineke! Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra, London Sinfonietta, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and Philharmonia Orchestra). [www.southbankcentre.co.uk](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk)