

# The flash in the pan

As befits their name, CaneFire put some heat back into traditional Caribbean instrument



**ERROL NAZARETH**

Rhythms N Rhymes

CaneFire couldn't have come up with a more perfect cover to capture the essence of its brand new disc.

*Pandemonium*, which also hints at the album's explosive contents, features the shadow of a guy jumping while going to town on the steelpan.

Caribbean-flavoured Latin jazz (or is it Latin-flavoured Caribbean jazz?) is what the septet specialize in and they do it with fire and versatility. The group's sound encompasses Cuban, Puerto Rican, French-Caribbean and Trinidadian styles and, on this record, Brazilian and Venezuelan sounds too. But it never sounds clinical or messy.

"Most of the album is what I would describe as controlled chaos so the title seemed to fit," Ledbetter tells me. "We're trying to be the most exciting jazz group around so through much of this album we keep the energy level pretty high."

Ledbetter says the "pan" in *Pandemonium* refers to the steelpan, the lead instrument and the key to CaneFire's sound.

"The pan is one element that defines us and so I suppose you could call it a recurring theme in our music," he says. "We have Mark Mosca, who is probably one of the three best steelpan players anywhere in the world right now. He spent years lifting Oscar Peterson and Milt Jackson solos, and his improvisational skills are just incredible. I tell people that if Oscar Peterson played the steelpan, this is what he would sound like."

Cue up the disc's opening salvo, *The Madman's Jig*, and you'll realize that Ledbetter's talk of high energy isn't mere hype.

"It would be a pretty straightforward Latin jazz piece except that it's in a composite time signature that adds up to 27/4," Ledbetter explains. "I guess I wanted to



CaneFire's new album, *Pandemonium*, melds traditional Caribbean rhythms with hot jazz.

see how high we could count. It's meant to sound crazy and to make people picture a raving lunatic — especially the horn lines behind the melody which mimic the incoherent rantings of a delusional mind.

"It was a last-minute addition to the album so it has an edge to it," he adds.

Edge is what separates CaneFire from most of its contemporaries in the Caribbean jazz scene, and it's evidenced in pieces like *Baptism By Fire*. It starts off really slow and gospel-y before the group throws some fuel and a match on the proceedings.

"It's our take on a kind of music that you hear played in Pentecostal churches in Trinidad called gospelpypso," Ledbetter explains. "But, being CaneFire, we had to turn up the heat a bit. We fuse the gospel with blazing fast soca instead of calypso, with some scorching bebop solos just for fun."

Ledbetter says he started CaneFire partly as a reaction to what he saw as "a trend towards laid-back music that I saw in most Caribbean jazz."

"There seems to be a widespread idea that once you use the word 'jazz' to describe the music it has to be very

low energy, mellow stuff," he says. "The steelpan naturally has a very soft, soothing tone and most Pan Jazz focuses on that aspect of the instrument. So, quite a lot of Caribbean jazz these days is very soft and unobtrusive — music that would fall into the category of smooth jazz."

"With CaneFire, I wanted to create a band that would bring the fire inherent in so much Caribbean music back to Caribbean jazz."

CaneFire has developed a big fan base in some parts of the Caribbean and Ledbetter attributes this to showing the

humble steelpan respect.

"We never do anything to sacrifice the integrity of its leading role in this band, and we do everything we can to showcase the versatility of the instrument and take it to some places where it doesn't usually go," Ledbetter says. "Even in Trinidad, there's a tendency to stereotype the pan, and even Trinidad's pan people will tell you that they have to fight constantly to get the pan the respect it deserves."

Visit Errol's blog at [www.musicinthemessage.blogspot.com](http://www.musicinthemessage.blogspot.com).

Now  
**HEAR**  
This!

**Errol's can't-miss list:**

**1** **Big Rude Jake's** an original and you can see him at Hugh's tomorrow night. 8:30 p.m. \$22. 2261 Dundas St. W.

**2** **Proyecto Altiplano** brings its unique fusion of traditional Chilean music, jazz and rock to Lula Sunday. 8 p.m. \$20.

**3** Feed Our Souls, a benefit for The Stop Community Food Centre, happens Monday at Wrongbar. 10 p.m. \$7-\$12 or healthy food donation. 416-652-7867.