

guys that get together, they're trying to one-up each other on the drums, whereas women try to do the more collective thing and are sometimes more withdrawn—where they could contribute more in terms of the group, they sort of hold back. They don't want to get in anybody's way. . . . I've seen everything across the board and across genders, but those are the classic things."

Both Riley and John Millen, who since 1987 has sold drums he makes under the name of Thunderheart Drums, stress that experiences in both coed and single-sex drum circles are of equal value. "There are many people who don't identify with either the men's movement or the women's movement, but just like to get together to drum," Millen says. "They don't know what all the business is about. They just like to drum and they enjoy getting together, and the idea never occurs to them that they should go off just with women or just with men to drum. So there are lots of ways people can come together and drum. And none of them seems to be a definitive way."

Still, for some practitioners the drumming circle remains "a very charged cultural space," as Rory Turner puts it. Since many of the most popular drums—particularly the high-pitched *djembe*, perhaps the most popular of all hand drums—are of African descent, the cruel irony of white people appropriating another item of African culture is not lost on Baltimore drummers.

"There are definitely problems," Riley says, such as "the fact that lots of people in the white drumming community have the resources to buy a \$200 or \$300 *djembe* imported from Ghana or Senegal or wherever. And there could be people who are heavily involved in the music who don't have those kinds of resources who are culturally connected, who are African-American and see all of these white people running around with their fancy *djembes* and they don't have a clue about how to play them or about the culture."

Such problems are why Ras Marcus of the nonprofit organization Ancestors Roots is not participating in the Rhythm Festival this year. The Jamaica-born Marcus (he refers to himself as an "African born in Jamaica") and his wife Lola Jenkins founded Ancestors Roots in 1990 to teach African culture in part through drums and songs Marcus sings in Kiswahili. His skill on what he calls "African-liberation drums" (he despises the term "hand drums") impressed BIRDS, and he played at the first two rhythm festivals. But he says this year he will not appear.

"They are an international festival, but I'm mostly of the African point of view," he says of his decision. "The African people are in a bad condition. And I have to concen-

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trate on trying to do my best to see what I can do to get my people out of the condition that they're in, in however small a way."

Historically drums have usually been seized from oppressed cultures. Drums were outlawed amongst the American slaves, and Native Americans were shot for drumming. Bonnie North believes that for former oppressors to learn from those they've oppressed is a step toward reparation.

"I think because the predominant drumming cultures are African and Native American, for those of us that are white, there is a sense of humility, there's a sense of admiration for these cultures, there's a sense of there's something really valuable here to learn" she says. "The African-American teachers that I have met are held in tremendous esteem by everyone in the community. And this is a real healing kind of thing."

Millen, BIRDS' president and producer of this year's rhythm festival, is a white man who makes drums associated with Africa, the Middle East, and Native Americans. (He also makes Irish drums). He describes his relationship to the cultures that originally produced these instruments by relating a dream in which he reached for a *djembe* underneath him and heard the voice of a black man saying, "Be careful, I'm down here too."

"I think that dream spoke to my relationship . . . as a white man to a black culture, and also my relationship as a European-ego kind of personality to my instinctual side, which we as Europeans don't live [with] very easily," Millen says. "So it spoke to me on different levels like that. But I have tried to treat Africans and the heritage from which this drum comes with a great deal of respect. And I have that respect. And I understand there is a very high level of sophistication and spiritual understanding that they bring to the drumming that I am not privy to. I can't help that, but in this country we have to do what we can to grow our own spirit."

Many of the Baltimore drumming community's most active members are nothing if not idealistic—BIRDS' official slogan is "Peace through music." To hear most talk about it, drumming is less a hobby or activity than, at least, a constant compulsion, and at most a rite closely connected to deeply held spiritual beliefs.

"Anyone who's a drummer needs to

drum, and I can attest to that," Sankofa Dance Theater drummer Salim Ajanku says. "When I went to school I went away to University of Maryland-Eastern Shore . . . and when I went there I didn't take my drum in the beginning. And I missed it. I would just sit around, just think drumming, just think drumming. I was by myself, tapping at the desk at the school, tapping here, tapping there. Really being away from drumming so long made me think about it another way."

Before every drum-circle session at St. John's Church, Sharon Kishbaugh fills the room with incense and leads the players in a meditation. Then she tells them to begin playing only "when the spirit moves them."

"What I feel drumming is all about is to heal, create, to reach your inner self, your spirits. And music, having the healing power that it does, that's what it was all about for me," Kishbaugh says. "I would witness things happening [during drumming sessions], with my friends coming in one place and being able to leave in another place in their emotions or whatever, just freeing themselves. So I just wanted to open that to people, to the public."

For Ras Marcus of Ancestors Roots, the use of the drum is so closely linked to cultural traditions that to use it in the wrong setting is sacrilegious.

"The drum should not be used loosely," he insists. "There is a conception. There is a sober, positive conception toward educating our people about their culture. And the drums should be played with that conception in mind. I am against playing drums when people around me are drinking alcohol and getting drunk and doing all sorts of things that are not in accord."

"Anyone can buy a drum," he continues. "If you have money, you can buy a drum in any drum store, regardless of your conception. You may just play like you'd have a set of musicians, go to a nightclub, and play and encourage people to buy alcohol and to smoke cigarettes. That is done. But that is not the way. That was not the purpose of African drums."

But for others drumming is merely a fun and easily accessible way to participate in music, according to Mike McCoy, co-owner of Baltimore Drum Source, a drum store. "A lot of players that come here are amateur players that just want something for therapeutic reasons," he says. "A lot of the customers [are people who] used to go to the Grateful Dead shows who are really professionals by day—might have been a doctor or a lawyer or whatever, banker—but when they go to a Grateful Dead concert, they heard these hand-drumming circles going on, and they want to be a part of it. And they get to explore something that they normally wouldn't do. They're not looking to

be a superstar or anything like that, but it gives them that little time to have fun and be a musician. Once they start playing, it doesn't matter how skilled they are—when you're tapping on a drum, you're a musician at that point."

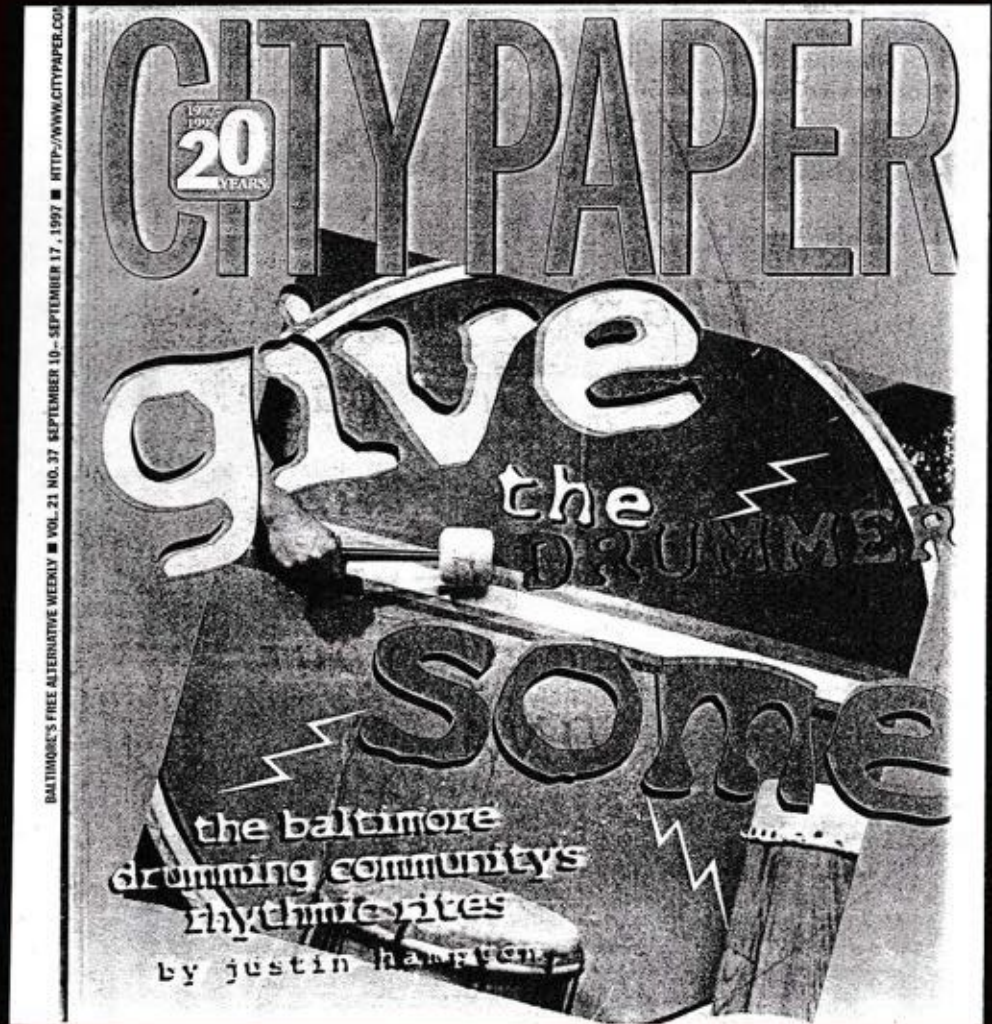
Rory Turner says he hopes the drum's vaunted healing properties and communicative abilities can help unite the socially and racially fragmented fabric of Baltimore's drumming community. Citing Babatunde Olatunji's quest to place a drum in every American household, Turner says, "I think there's a problem of recognition and respect and co-humanity in our culture. I mean, that whole thing of being able to . . . empathize with people's suffering; you're not supposed to do that, especially men in our culture. But I think that when you're playing together, there's a kind of vulnerability. If you are listening [in a drum circle] and you're trying, it's like you're there with that other person. It changes how you see people. So if that was more a part of Baltimore, if there was less of an indifference and intolerance and sort of stereotypes and divisions, yeah, I would like that."

It takes me a little while to get the hang of the rhythms the Resurgam Drummers are playing. Also, it's a humid day, and humidity can dramatically dampen the tone of a nonsynthetic drumhead, such as the one I'm playing. But I soon become enmeshed in the rhythm, listening intently to the others around me and becoming oblivious to everything but the beat. At one point I develop a bruise on my left thumb and switch to a woodblock; a drummer walks over to me to beat out a familiar rhythm on it. "That's the Latin clave rhythm," Rory Turner later tells me. "A lot of songs are based on it."

I leave the Resurgam Gallery not only with new knowledge but with a feeling of wholeness, and it surprises me to feel so refreshed after exerting myself for more than an hour. It's a feeling that is very difficult to put into words, a feeling that makes me believe the claims I've heard of the drum's almost supernatural properties. And with all the sound and fury drummers can generate, it's not the thunder that accounts for the feeling.

"The best drummer is a humble drummer," says Menes Yahudah, Sankofa Dance Theater's musical director. "You wouldn't know the best drummer, you wouldn't know because he's so quiet."

Perhaps that's because such a drummer understands the quietude from which all sounds arise. ■



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