



the baltimore drumming
community's rhythmic rites
by justin hampton

DRUMMER

At the moment, Resurgam Gallery is surprisingly barren. There's no art on the walls or installations on the floor, just a collection of various drums and percussion instruments strewn around a group of blue plastic chairs gathered in a makeshift circle. The predominant instrument is the conga—there are seven or eight here—but someone's also brought an African talking drum, a Middle Eastern dombek, and several shakers, bells, and hand cymbals.

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give the DRUMMER some

Likewise the people here, mostly men, represent different backgrounds and cultures—some are black, some white, some Latino. Some have drummed professionally; others have never taken a lesson.

On this August night things are getting off to a slow start, as some members who've been absent from the group for much of the summer catch up with the lives of their cohorts. But in about five minutes the talking ceases and what was once barren space fills with a noise and rhythm that brings onlookers in off the street to hear the sounds of the Resurgam Drummers.

Since 1990 the drum circle has met twice a month in this Federal Hill art gallery to be part of what has developed into a citywide drumming community made up of enthusiasts from all walks of life. Drum circles such as this one and those held at St. John's United Methodist Church in Charles Village and in Druid Hill Park are attended by a cadre of devoted regulars and occasional newcomers. The Resurgam Drummers have spawned a semiprofessional group called Rhythmic Rites, and the nonprofit Baltimore International Rhythm and Drumming Society (BIRDS), which on Sept. 20 will host the third annual Baltimore International Rhythm Festival at St. John's.

But at the moment any concerns over that event are far away. The drummers concentrate on listening to the sounds created by their fellow players, which I dutifully record. Then one drummer shifts to another seat, leaving the chair next to me vacant. He points to the conga in front of the empty seat and asks me to drum.

So I do. In order to fully understand the urge to drum, there's really no way around it.

The current fascination with both formal and informal hand-drumming has grown steadily since the late 80s in a variety of ethnic and other communities, from African-Americans and lesbians to Deadheads and followers of the men's movement, all using what they see as the power of the drum for their own purposes. An international Internet discussion group called the Djembe List (<http://www.cse.ogi.edu/drum/mail.html>) talks about issues of interest to drummers the world over.

But when Bonnie North discovered drumming through a group of Deadheads she knew while living in Takoma Park, such communal and sociological issues were of no consequence; she was merely taking a slow sip—it was to make music that sounded good to her ears. Now North, cofounder and former director of the Resurgam Gallery, is director of the Baltimore International Rhythm Festival.

"A drum jam is different—it's not a rehearsal, it's not a performance. It's just kinda anybody can sit in and just see what kind of rhythms you can do together, really loose," North says. "You can't just pick up a guitar and do it yourself. I tried to learn to play the mandolin, and I got so bored so fast, be-



St. John's Church drummers (from left) Tristan Manos, Gordon O'Hara, Rory Turner, Wade Thwater, Zion Kishbaugh, and Sharon Kishbaugh

cause it was just grueling stuff, you know? But the drum, you can just grab it."

She bangs a rhythm on the table to prove her point. "You can entertain yourself for quite a while and have fun," she says. "And you can get a few other people there and have a ball."

After her initiation into the drumming

drummers under one banner. This year the ante's been raised for the festival by the participation of Nigerian master drummer Babatunde Olatunji, acknowledged by many as the father of the American drumming movement. Since releasing some of the first recordings of traditional African music during the late 50s and early 60s, Olatunji has gained in-

"Anyone who's a drummer needs to drum," Sankofa Dance Theater's Salim Ajanku says. "When I went to [college] . . . 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."

world, North began to preach the gospel of rhythm to her Resurgam patrons. As a result, the drum circle sprung up and developed a core of regular attendees at its monthly jams. As the Resurgam drummers ventured outside of the gallery to share their music with others, North began to notice the unexpected effects drumming has on people. She describes one Christmas morning when the Resurgam drummers visited a nursing home:

"It just felt weird—we all were kinda wondering if it was dumb or not. But it was astounding! I think if you had taken a choir in there and sang carols, you wouldn't have gotten that response at all. But the drums, the power of the drum and the simplicity and the essentialness of it, could be felt by everybody. There wasn't one person there who didn't respond. . . . They just got so excited and they loved it so much—I mean, I can still cry about it. Now I end up believing, *Wow, this drumming has power*. There's really strength in this stuff. And that's what got me thinking more along, *What can we do besides just throw a party?* There's gotta be other things we can do with this energy."

From that seed grew the idea of a local festival devoted to drumming, and efforts to unite the growing and diverse community of

international attention for his musical skill and humanitarian efforts—most notably from former Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart, with whom Olatunji has toured.

The Nigerian master's appearance at the upcoming festival is highly anticipated by virtually everyone in the local drumming community. Gerard Moylan Torruella, a Rhythmic Rites member who has studied with Olatunji, appears to be only half-joking when he says, "I think in some ways Baltimore will never be the same after its visit from Babatunde."

Olatunji's appearance at this year's Rhythmic Festival has already helped legitimize for some the concept of a festival consisting of nothing but drumming all day.

"People still think it's kind of silly. Definitely," North says. "I called the city to check on our permits—I said, 'This is the Baltimore International Rhythm and Drumming Society.' [They said], 'What? What is that?'"

Such bureaucratic reactions notwithstanding, the city has taken notice, giving BIRDS a grant for a proposed six-week drum class for inner-city kids. The students would be taught how to make their own drums and would play them in a course-closing performance. The proposal reflects North and her peers' con-

cept of drumming as a vehicle for community service. "We look to the festival to kind of create awareness of what we're trying to do, awareness of drumming and rhythmic music as a real tool for healing energies in the community, bringing different types of people together in a joyous way," she says. "And hopefully to amass some funds, to make money for the organization to use for these other endeavors. That's the sort of game plan."

Festival organizers hope to repeat what they consider the rousing success of last year's festival, which North estimates more than 1,000 people attended.

"What happened last year was a blessed thing," says Rhythmic Rites and BIRDS member Rory Turner, who teaches cultural anthropology at Goucher College. "We were blessed by good weather, we were blessed by the spirit of the people that came. And we're going to try to nurture that same kind of thing. And who knows? It's sort of in our hands, but it's sort of not in our hands. If too many people come, it will be hot and sweaty and that would suck. And if too few people showed up, that would suck too. But it's like the loaves and fishes; if the spirit's there, there will be abundance."

Resurgam's is only one of many drum circles in and around town. Circles such as the one at Live It Not Diet Café in Towson or Sharon Kishbaugh's long-running circle at St. John's Church meet regularly and welcome players of every skill level. And for those who feel the desire to further explore drums, the Baltimore-based Sankofa Dance Theater offers classes on playing African hand drums. But the lack of a readily identifiable geographical center for the drumming community can make it hard for a novice to dive in.

"That central gathering place—I haven't found it yet in Baltimore," says Kishbaugh, who before moving to Baltimore in 1993 participated in drum circles in California and New York. "In [Berkeley,] California, they were outdoors, and they were just in Berkeley Square, you know? And people came and they knew it was there forever and it would probably be there forever, and the same thing up in New York in the different parks. . . . Here, it took a lot more looking around for it and seeking people out. And then, once I started the circle, I found out that there were other ones that were going on. But most of them are like the one at St. John's. Although it's open to everyone, you have to know about it, it's on specific days, it's at specific times, and it's for two hours. It's not just a real open kind of jam."

Divisions exist between the various factions of local drummers. Joanne Riley, who founded and until recently led the all-female drumming troupe Girls Just Wanna Have Drums, expresses annoyance at what some call "thunder drummers"—those who try to drown out others in a drum circle—and "airy-spacey drummers" who introduce New Age elements. But the main division seems to be between male and female drummers; many circles are gender-restricted, particularly those made up of lesbians and members of the men's movement.

Many women drummers say they are discouraged from drumming when they try to start out, and drummers generally note a style difference along gender lines. For men, Riley says, "it's a competitive thing. It's just the way people are raised. Some men are not at all competitive, but men mostly have that beaten into their heads. So you have a bunch of