Drumming to the Rhythms of Life

As a wave of "rhythm consciousness" undulates across the continent, drumming instructors devoted to personal transformation are offering what once would have been our cultural birthright—the chance for everyone to participate in the healing power of percussion. by Anne Cushman

A thunderous Nigerian *ashiko* beat rattles the redwood rafters. The giant lecture hall echoes with the boom of congas, the warble of talking drums, the clang of cowbells, the click of claves. Hundreds of open palms rise and fall, smacking against cowhide and goatskin stretched over resonant wooden chambers. Hundreds of bare feet stamp and shuffle. The rhythm shakes the walls, quivers the bones, vibrates deep in the guts. Faces alight in ecstasy, eyes closing in trance, 200 people throb to the same pulse.

Just two hours ago these people were strangers, awkward and a little nervous as they eyed the alien instruments arranged in a circle in the conference hall. This convocation of teachers, principals, guidance counselors, and other education professionals had gathered here at the Asilomar Center in Monterey, California, for a week-long conference on educational theory sponsored by National Training Associates, a research and consulting group dedicated to the restructuring of the American school system. Their skepticism was palpable: What did this evening seminar entitled "Village Music Circles" have to do with the future of American pedagogy? Most of them weren't musicians. They weren't even particularly *interested* in drumming.

Drummer Reinhard Flatischler (center) performs with the international percussion ensemble Megadrums.

But now the alchemy of rhythm has transformed them into a tribe. These 200 nonmusicians are playing together as a giant ensemble, holding a communal beat, improvising a song that's uniquely theirs. They've been fused into one pulsating organism, transported to the timeless realm of the shaman. At the center of their circle, like a cross between a medicine man and a demented cheerleader, gyrates an elfin man in a rainbow-striped beanie, urging them on. "Forget your metronomes—dance to the pulse of the village," he shouts. "Let the rhythm heal you. This is rhythm church!"

The man in the beanie is Arthur Hull, an evangelist of the drum, whose primary mission in life is to preach the gospel of rhythm. As his business card proclaims, Hull specializes in "community building, team building, spirit building," using drumming to meld strangers into tribes. He's led his "village music circles" around the world, in settings ranging from Fortune 500 corporations to inner-city high schools. His clients have included AT&T, General Electric, Levi Strauss, and the Canadian National Defense Headquarters. He's used drum circles to build team spirit among managers at Motorola, to ease tensions between rival street gangs, to improve communication in Wall Street investment firms. "I know how to *get you there*, whoever you are," Hull proclaims. "Autistic kids, computer executives, air traffic controllers, strategic planners for the defense department—I don't care. I can help you bring spirit in."

This may sound like the latest in a wave of increasingly desperate corporate-training devices. But the fact is, percussion has been used to strengthen communities and empower individuals for tens of thousands of years. "A village without music is a dead place," says an African proverb. In traditional African societies, drumbeats marked births, deaths, circumcisions, plantings, harvests, marriages, funerals—all of the natural rhythms of life were celebrated by a unique riff. In his book *The Healing Drum*, African musician Yaya Diallo writes that his Minianka tribe "would not think of tilling, sowing, weeding, or harvesting in their fields without the appropriate musical support." Even in European cultures—not particularly noted for their rhythmic sensibilities—soldiers have always marched to war and buried their dead to drumrolls. And in tribal societies around the world, the drum has always been the shaman's express train to the spirit world.

Whether we're conscious of it or not, none of us is a stranger to rhythm. "Rhythm is already in your life, because if it weren't there, you would be dead," Hull proclaims. Press your finger against your neck, and you'll feel it; sink into deep silence, and it echoes in your ears. Steady or erratic, feeble or strong, racing in terror or passion, slowly ticking in deep sleep—no matter who you are or where you go, the throb of your own heart is your constant companion, bearing you through life on a ceaseless current.

From the moment of conception, when our cells begin to divide and multiply in a womb that quivers to our mothers pulse, to the last fibrillation of our own dying heart, humans are deeply rhythmical creatures, inextricably woven into an intricate web of pattern and pulsation. We're a bundle of oscillating brain waves and palpitating cells, stitched together by the ins and outs of our breath. We're perpetually dancing to circadian rhythms of sleeping and waking; metabolic rhythms of eating and elimination; hormonal rhythms of ovulation, puberty, menarche, and menopause. These personal beats, in turn, are inextricably linked with planetary cycles of day and night, the waxing and waning of the moon, the changing of the seasons, the movements of the stars.

For tens of thousands of years, human beings have responded to the constant pulsation of life with a spontaneous outpouring of music. There has never been a society without some form of unique rhythmic musical expression—it's as fundamental a hallmark of humanness as language. From the bone rattles and scrapers of the Paleolithic era to the electronic drum machines of the late 20th century, from African talking drums to Tibetan temple gongs, people have used percussion to play themselves into the song of life, to synchronize themselves with the beat of the cosmos.

PHOTO ON PREVIOUS PAGE: SUZANNA MILLMAN, PHOTOSHOP: LAWRENCE WATSON. PHOTO THIS PAGE COURTESY REINHARD FLATISCHLER

But in modern Western society, most of us live divorced from personal, natural, and community rhythms. Our lives are dictated by clocks and day-at-a-glance planbooks, not sun and seasons. We know it's morning because our digital alarm is beeping; we know it's fall because the new Macy's catalogue has arrived. The pulse of the Earth continues, of course, but it's hard to feel it when we're tearing about in automobiles through a world paved over with concrete, bathed in the speedy, ubiquitous buzz of the 60-hertz electrical current. Our hearts continue to beat, but it's hard to hear them when our ears are bombarded with the roar of traffic, the shriek of sirens, the babble of the TV.

And as we've lost touch with the natural rhythms of our bodies and our world, we've also lost the age-old human habit of making music as a community. In the typical American suburb, neighbors don't usually convene in the streets in the evening to play drums and dance together. "The breakdown of community in the West has meant the loss of our rhythmic rituals," says percussionist Mickey Hart, drummer for the rock band The Grateful Dead and the author of *Planet Drum* and *Drumming at the Edge of Magic: A Journey into the Spirit of Percussion*. "It used to be that we'd play our drums, dance our dances, make our music together—that's what comes naturally to us as a species. But this tradition has been ripped and yanked from our lives." Instead, we ingest electronic rhythms, passively and often in isolation. We ride the subways with our Walkmen on, encapsulated in a private beat created for us by professionals. Teenagers at rock concerts still experience the transcendent ecstasy of surrendering to a pulse, but for most of us even such secular rituals were abandoned with adolescence.

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In fact, in Western music in general, the element of rhythm has been left relatively undeveloped, taking a back seat to the more genteel elements of melody and harmony. Rhythm has gotten bad press in Christian societies, which have linked it to pagan rituals, Satanic forces, and the idolatrous rites of the "dark continent." As Hart bluntly sums it up, "White people have a problem with rhythm. They think it's uncivilized."

But all that may be changing, as a new wave of "rhythm consciousness" sweeps across the country. In a movement that started on the west coast and is gradually working its way east, small drumming circles are springing up, oriented not toward performance and musical virtuosity, but toward personal transformation, consciousness expansion, and community building. Drumming goes hand in hand with the blossoming men's movement, the surging interest in shamanism and Native American spirituality, and the increasing popularity of "world beat" music. The Berkeley, California-based men's drumming troupe The Sons of Orpheus has led rhythm-based rituals in settings as traditional as San Francisco's Grace Cathedral.

Hart, whose 1991 album *Planet Drum* won a Grammy award for "Best World Music Record" and was number one on Billboard for 26 weeks, recently donned a suit and tie to testify before a Congressional committee on drumming's therapeutic benefits for the elderly. A few months later, over 1500 drum-wielding fans crowded into a gymnasium in Marin County, California, to participate in a sweaty, bone-rattling, two-hour megajam to raise money for Hart's fledgling research organization Rhythm for Life. When Raven Recording, producer of Gabrielle Roth's primal drum albums, released their first percussion-centered album in the mid-1980s, "we couldn't get our music in the new age stores because of the drums," says coproducer Robert Ansell. "Now, of course, drums are all the rage."

At the start of this decade, Nigerian drum master Babatunde Olatunji predicted that by the turn of the century there would be a drum in every household in America. That forecast may be a trifle optimistic, but the trend *is* dramatic enough to have caught the eye of Remo Belli, CEO of the Remo Drum Company, the country's leading manufacturer of drum heads. "Things are changing very dramatically," Belli told the *Musical Merchandise Review* in early 1992. "A major 'personal percussion' market is developing without any encouragement whatsoever from the drum industry."

Arthur Hull leads a community "celebration circle" in Santa Cruz, California.

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More and more Americans, it seems, are happily banging away on African djundjuns, Egyptian tars, Irish bodhrans, Brazilian cuicas, and the rest of the international collection that make up Remo's new line of personal percussion products. We're drumming in nursing homes, kindergartens, corporations, and therapists' offices. We're discovering that drumming can enhance creativity, improve physical and mental well-being, and open a secret stairway to the treasure chambers of the psyche. As human beings have done for thousands of years, we're using percussion to bond with our friends and colleagues, to express our joy and our rage, to transcend and transmute our pain.

And in this rhythmic reawakening, we're being helped by a new generation of drumming instructors—people devoted not to technical virtuosity, but to spiritual healing. Through workshops, books, and instructional audiotapes, these teachers are formally offering what once would have been our cultural birthright—the chance for everyone to participate in the healing power of rhythm.

"If you think the angels are playing harps—well, that's your problem," says Mickey Hart. "For me, the angels are playing on great big cylinder drums."

Village Music Circles

The new style of drum instruction is epitomized by Hull's "village music circles," in which he awakens the spirit of rhythm in students who range from professional drummers to self-styled "rhythm dorks." To the chagrin of his Mormon family, Hull has been a drumming fanatic since childhood ("I started drumming in the womb," he says), a natural rhythmist whose earliest memory is of lying in his crib singing along with the drips of a leaky bathroom faucet. He has performed with masters such as Olatunji and played on Gabrielle Roth's latest album, and his popular courses at the University of California at Santa Cruz have helped fuel a powerful grassroots drumming movement in northern California. Last year, Remo Drum Company sent him on a five-city tour, to get the communal drumbeats going in locales like Nashville, Houston, Manhattan, and Iowa City (and, incidentally, to ignite consumer interest in Remo's hand drums). This spring, Interworld Music will publish his new instructional book, *The Beginning Beginner's Guide to Endrummingment*.

But Hull's most extraordinary contribution to the drumming scene is the inroads he has made into the bastions of corporate America. "The basic elements that make a corporation function are the exact same elements that make a drum circle function—like cooperation instead of competition, for example," he claims. "But in a drum circle, we don't just talk about it. We actually put people in a small, emotionally risky situation where they want to become a part of something, and where they get in-the-moment, direct feedback from the reality of the music they're playing—if they're fitting in or not, if they're contributing or not, if they're listening or not."

Hull's hallmark is his working metaphor of a small village in which every person's role is equally vital. In a village music circle, each person learns a simple rhythmic pattern, which can be expressed via voice, clave, drum, or any other percussive device. When these patterns are played together as an ensemble, they form a complex song. "This beautiful, intricate pattern is something that no one of us can play alone. We surrender to this power and this beauty, in order to become part of something much bigger than ourselves," Hull explains.

The mind-altering power of rhythm, says Hull, breaks down distinctions in race, gender, class, job description. Suddenly the CEO and the janitor are linked in an intimate, primal beat; the black kids are improvising riffs with their Hispanic rivals. "We're connecting together beyond our intellect, in a primal, kinesthetic dance. The subsonics of the rhythms penetrate right into the bone, right into the heart. The rhythm moves us into this magical place where we are all sharing the same song—and when we're there, time stops."

Management trainers love Hull's music circles because they provide a dramatic, visceral experience of cooperation, interdependence, and teamwork. "The success of your village concept was astounding," raved an official for the Canadian National Defense Headquarters in a glowing letter. "I could not believe my eyes as I saw around me a group of people who, one week ago, had not seen the need to form a team gradually transform itself into a village over a two-day period."

Not only that, but the drumming sessions apparently stimulate a heightened alertness, creativity, and receptivity that enhance the participants' ability to benefit from other learning activities that may be on the corporate agenda. Once tacked onto the tail end of management seminars as a sort of frivolous dessert, Hull's sessions are now frequently scheduled at the very beginning, to help establish an optimal learning environment.

But Hull's underlying goals go far beyond increasing corporate productivity. "My underlying mission in all the different things that I do, with all the different kinds of people, is to help them discover the rhythm that already exists in their lives," he says. "It could be experiencing the rhythm of their lovemaking. It could be noticing the pattern on someone's shirt, or the way the leaves grow off a plant, or the rhythms of the waves hitting the shore. My underlying objective is to help wake up the child inside, who hears and sees and feels rhythm every day."

Hull seems like a gleeful, zany child himself as he launches his evening seminar for National Training Associates. Like a hyperactive elf, he prances and leaps in the center of our giant circle, one minute collapsing to the floor in exaggerated despair, the next minute erupting into uproarious, infectious laughter. A former actor and street mime, he's not afraid to be totally ridiculous as he bypasses traditional teaching to get his students to *play*. "Don't try to learn anything—it's just going to get in your way," he commands. "Let's just have fun."

Within a few minutes, he's got us divided into sections, shouting out nonsense ditties: "Bedeep bedeep!" calls one group; "Honk! Honk! Honk!" responds another; while two more groups, as counterpoint, howl "deep-dope" and "pa!" "I think I'm missing the point," a woman next to me comments dourly.

But the point becomes apparent as Hull hands out cowbells, claves, and bells of different pitches, saying, "If you can sing it, you can play it!" In a few minutes we're playing our ditties on the bells, our simple parts chiming together into a group song. Then, giving us no time to doubt our musical abilities, Hull is distributing his traveling kit of congas and talking drums. By the end of the evening, carried along by the irresistable tide of Hull's enthusiasm, our 200-piece band is thunderously improvising on an assortment of ethnic rhythms; and the woman who thought she was missing the point is grinning ear to ear and gasping "I could go on all night!" "If I'd told them I was going to *teach* them any one of these rhythms, we'd have wasted the whole evening trying to learn the first part," Hull confides later. "I just bypass the brain and get straight to the music."

As people get to the music, something happens to them, he says. "It's like they've been asleep, and they wake up. No matter where and who you are, whether you're rich or poor, whether you're dying of some disease or you've got everything you need and are happy and satisfied—there's a special light that lights up when you connect yourself with the rhythms the world has to offer you. It makes life more. It makes you more a part of your own life."

Percussionist Arthur Hull has used drum circles to build team spirit among managers at Motorola, to ease tensions between rival street gangs, to improve communication in Wall Street investment firms.

The Forgotten Power of Rhythm

This special light is what German rhythmist Reinhard Flatischler refers to as "the forgotten power of rhythm"—the capacity of patterned sound to transform our bodies, minds, and spirits. Flatischler has devoted his life to ferreting out what he calls "rhythm archetypes," the fundamental patterns that underly all music and that spring, he says, from the deepest recesses of human consciousness. In his studies with master drummers and shamans of India, Africa, Korea, Cuba, Brazil, Thailand, and Japan, he was not only seeking musical virtuosity (although he has certainly attained this as well, as evidenced by his masterful drumming performances and his Megadrums project, in which he assembles and tours with percussion ensembles composed of master musicians from around the world). He was also looking for healing from the asthma that had plagued him since childhood. "Every disease is a failure of rhythm, in one form or another," he says. "But in our society, we've lost the old unity of musician, dancer, priest, and healer. This artificial division of music and healing is not to our benefit."

Out of his quest grew Ta Ke Ti Na, a kind of "rhythmic bodywork" through which groups and individuals can awaken and explore the rhythm archetypes in their own bodies. He details the introductory levels of this system in his new book, *The Forgotten Power of Rhythm*, which is accompanied by a CD or audiocassette of

Ta Ke Ti Na facilitators Reinhard Flatischler and Heidrun Hoffman play a duet.

PHOTO: COURTESY REINHARD FLATISCHLER

rhythmic exercises that build on the inner experience of heartbeat and breath. But by far the best way to experience his work is in person, by attending one of the Ta Ke Ti Na workshops he conducts with his partner, dancer and drummer Heidrun Hoffman.

Recent research indicates that musical rhythms—what Reinhard Flatischler calls the rhythm archetypes—may actually be hard-wired into the circuitry of the brain.

At a Ta Ke Ti Na workshop, participants learn to use their own bodies as percussion instruments, "playing" complex polyrhythms with stamping feet, clapping hands, and voices raised in a patterned stream of syllables Flatischler terms "rhythm mantras." (Ta Ke Ti Na itself is named for one of these mantras.) In one typical exercise at a recent San Francisco workshop, we begin by standing in a circle, stepping our feet through a six-beat pattern to the steady pulse of a giant Brazilian parade drum as we chant the syllables "gam ba la, gam ba la." As that rhythm penetrates our consciousness, Flatischer leads us in layering on a new one, clapping our hands in a nine-beat cycle while our feet continue to follow the six-beat rhythm of the drum. As if this weren't complex enough, Flatischler launches a call-and-response chanting dialogue with those who can keep up with it, based on yet another rhythmic pattern. Finally, as counterpoint to our multidimensional song, he begins weaving in the haunting wail of a South American berimbau, a stringed bow with a percussive gourd attached to one end. Its melody is designed to challenge all of our rhythms, to see if we can be shaken off the beat.

Flatischler's delight in his work is evident—with his tangled mane of blond curls and intense blue eyes, he looks like a beatific lion as he pushes us to our musical edge. "Don't worry if you fall out of rhythm into chaos," he urges us. "Chaos is essential to allowing inner knowledge to emerge."

The ultimate point of this challenging rhythmic game is to force the conscious, analytical mind to let go, by presenting it with a task that is far too complex for it to handle by itself. "You are in a realm where the mind has no chance—there's no way you can control and monitor all these beats," says Flatischler. Each successive rhythm must sink below the surface of our being, where it can be experienced and integrated by the body and the deepest layers of our consciousness; only then can a new rhythm be added on top of it. Eventually, he says, this practice "establishes the very deep silence and emptiness in your mind that Zen, yoga, and all such paths are looking for."

You don't need musical experience to do Ta Ke Ti Na—"having a heartbeat, everyone on the planet is deeply rhythmical," he says. It's not important how fast you learn the rhythms, or even that you grasp them at all. Some people are able to pick up the polyrhythms easily—others initially have difficulty even keeping their feet in step with the basic beat of the drum. What's more important is the attitude with which you lose the beat and find it again. Can you fall out with a big smile and come back in? Can you happily participate by shuffling your feet to the beat, while all around you other people seem to be playing more spectacular riffs?

Of course, this game quickly becomes a telling metaphor for your daily interactions. "The way you fall out and come in in Ta Ke Ti Na is exactly the same as the way you fall out and come back in in the rhythms of your daily life," Flatischler says. Eventually, he says, the participant learns to hold to his or her own rhythm, while listening to the rhythm of somebody else—a skill which proves useful outside of the workshop as well.

Typically, he says, people grasp the polyrhythms all at once—in a flash, they go from hopeless confusion to effortless stomping, clapping, and singing, with what Flatischler describes as "an incredible coming-home feeling." Flatischler attributes this mini-satori to the presence of the rhythm archetypes within our consciousness. On some level, he says, we already know these polyrhythmic patterns. The feeling of "six and nine" (a movement or sound pulsating six times while another simultaneously pulsates nine times), of "two and three"—these qualities, he says, exist within us, longing to be activated.

In fact, one of the tragedies of Western culture, he says, is that we have been rhythmically impoverished. Western music is largely based on cycles of two, three, and four. "We forget that every number has its own quality. Seven or five or three—it's not merely more or less, it's *different*. A seven-beat cycle has an entirely different quality—it touches you differently," Flatischler explains. For example, while a three-beat rhythm will soothe you and draw your attention inward, a two-beat or four-beat cycle will rev you up—contrast a waltz with a march. "Seven, nine—they're qualities that have disappeared out of our lives, because when we turn on our sound

machines all we hear is 'boom, boom, boom, boom' in two or four. These different rhythmic qualities have just vanished from our experience. But they still exist within us, and if you fall into them and experience them in your body, it will feel to you like coming home."

Flatischler himself attributes his own healing from asthma to his homecoming to these rhythm archetypes. And as we clap, stomp, and sing in his Ta Ke Ti Na workshop, the emotional and spiritual healing is palpable. After a day of playfully exploring the complex beats, we're finally fused in a haunting, multilayered song, in which everyone is participating at his or her own level of ability. There are no outsiders in this rhythmic experience. We're swaying, chanting, stomping, clapping—our very organs seem to be throbbing in time to the music. Some people have tears streaming down their faces; others are laughing helplessly as the song takes over, entrancing and entraining us in its pulse, moving us into timelessness together. As the music fades out and we lie down on the floor, the beat continues in our bodies, merging with the gentle thump of our own hearts, reminding us that this, after all, is where musical rhythms ultimately begin.

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Rhythm for Life

Why does the work of people like Flatischler and Hull have such a powerful effect? Investigating that question through the methodology of Western science is one of the missions of Rhythm for Life, a nonprofit research group that was created in the wake of Mickey Hart's testimony before the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging. After proclaiming his faith in the benefits of drum circles for the elderly, Hart linked up with representatives from the National Association for Music Therapy to form a team that would study and propagate the healing power of rhythm.

The mission of the Phoenix-based Rhythm for Life is threefold, according to executive director and music therapist Barbara Crowe. First of all, it will cultivate community drumming. As Hart explains, "It will take drum circles into old age homes, nursing homes, prisons, and schools, and teach folks how to make their own rhythms, empower themselves, and reestablish community through rhythm-based activities."

Its second goal is to advance the use of drumming as therapy. Trained percussionists will work with music therapists to develop specific treatment interventions for a variety of psychological and physical disorders—recreating, under the auspices of Western medicine, the ancient unity of musician and healer.

The third objective is to sponsor behavioral and biomedical research into the effects of rhythm on body and mind. Says Crowe, "We have 40,000 years of anecdotal evidence that rhythm alters consciousness, and certainly as music therapy professionals we have seen positive reponses over and over and over again. Now it's just a matter of talking a language that the scientific community will accept."

Last June, Rhythm for Life launched its first research project, an investigation of the effect of drumming circles on Alzheimer's patients in a Veteran's Administration hospital in Topeka, Kansas. According to Crowe, the medical establishment generally assumes that once Alzheimer's sets in, a steady decline is inevitable and irreversible. However, anecdotal evidence from music therapists indicates that when patients participate in regular percussion sessions, their decline is slower. "They seem to maintain some of their personality for longer, to have more normal interactions with their family members. The drumming brings out responses that aren't seen at any other time," says Crowe. "For example, a client may be babbling delusionally, perhaps talking to people who aren't there, but after a period of focused rhythmic activity, he becomes quite lucid and responsive."

PHOTO BY SKIP LAWRENCE 1992, COURTESY FREDRICK NEWS-POST

Seniors participate in a Rhythm for Life drumming circle.

Crowe characterizes the initial results of the Topeka experiment—still in progress—as "very positive and exciting." While the data has not yet been statistically analyzed, the observational reports claim that—to the delight of family and friends—

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