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The Energy, Rhythm, Harmony and Joy of African Drumming

By ERIN TEXEIRA

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On a dark sidewalk beneath a freeway overpass in Palms, a young woman heads toward muffled drumbeats pulsing from a lighted storefront.

A three-foot drum of wood and goatskin tucked under her arm, she enters the store. African masks and jewelry clutter the room and traces of incense fill the air.

And, everywhere, there are drums, lots of drums, in Yoruba House.

She heads toward the rhythmic throbbing in the back rooms, where over the next few hours, she will pound and caress and tap her instrument alongside dozens of other drummers.

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Some have a spiritual aim: to give thanks for the new moon, the start of the month's life cycle. Others are renowned African drumming masters and some are professional musicians expanding their horizons.

But most are simply curious students and casual free spirits looking for a fun evening.

“We really like the energy here,” says Viva Coles, a Berlitz translator who has come to Yoruba House, at 3264 Motor Ave., at the urging of a co-worker.

Adds Anita Champion, a holistic health counselor, “When you start drumming, so many things happen. You go into a different state of consciousness. I come to release everything.”

Whatever brings them here, all sit tall in chairs, arranged in a circle in a dimly lit room draped with huge swaths of African kente fabric. They clasp drums between their knees and, for a few pulsing hours, enjoy a bit of Africa on Los Angeles’ Westside.

Yoruba House has been in business for nine years, offering instruction in djembe drumming, African dance and drum-making. Classes run eight for \$100, with Saturday night drum circle admission \$15.

The house also is used as a meeting place for Africans and their friends, and as a spiritual home for those who practice Ifa, an ancient metaphysical, nature-based religion that originates with Nigeria’s Yoruba people.

Co-owners Carole Zeitlin Adeyemi and husband Ayo Adeyemi make most of their living selling African artifacts and percussion instruments in the store. But their hearts are in drumming; it’s how they met, and they insist that it can be for everyone, no matter their spiritual bents or musical talents.

“I think the best thing about drumming is that it takes you out of your head,” says Carole, a native New Yorker whose husband is from Nigeria. “You cannot think and drum at the same time unless you’re really, really good. It’s the most direct way to get into a meditative state.”

Evidence of that state abounds on the night of the new moon ceremony.

The circle begins about 8 p.m., with half a dozen participants, and grows to about 25 by 9:30. For the next few hours, it’s impossible to speak for all the deep, throbbing beats bouncing off the walls in the windowless room. Dozens of hands fly over skins, heads bobbing in the rhythm.

Some faces reflect intense concentration. Other people close their eyes and tilt their faces skyward as if in prayer. Most are smiling brightly. They look serene, even ecstatic as they throw their shoulders and wrists into the movement.

BUM-ba-bum-bum,

BUM-ba-bum-bum,

BUM-ba-bum-bum.

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They play the beat over and over and over until they stop thinking about it, stop worrying how they look. They feel their way into the rhythm, grabbing each new beat and hanging on for the ride.

They will drum for hours, until their fingers ache and their palms sting. A bowl of shea butter--the product of an African tree--is passed around to massage into the aches.

The instructors do their thing, dancing around the circle to guide drummers, who trickle in and out through a curtained doorway.

For beginners, they say: Lay your thumbs along the rim, rest your other four fingers together, straight, tips of both hands touching.

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Tilt the drum slightly away from your midsection and tap the center to get deep tones, the edge for higher pitches.

More advanced? Push yourself to follow the elaborate beats of Ayo Adeyemi and Dele Adefeni, both master drummers.

Catch them if you can. Their hands fly like the spokes of a speeding wheel, a blur of movement and sound.

The rhythms twist and turn, escalating. The group sometimes plays together awkwardly, sometimes with remarkable synchronicity, like a team of puppeteers handling a wriggling, many-limbed creature: the rhythm.

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It is constantly changing, led now by this drummer wielding sticks before a chest-high drum. The next minute, someone else takes the lead, then anyone inspired to try a new groove.

BUM-pause-ba-bum, BUM-pause-ba-bum twists into to BUM-bum-bum-bum then another and another. It turns and evolves and dances on.

“Ooooweeeeee,” calls Carole, smiling and urging the group as she walks the circle. She has a waist-high drum strapped to her body and slung between her knees.

Sessions can go for 15, 20, 30 minutes. At the end of one, instructors lead the group in a Yoruba chant.

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Ayo calls out to the group: “What is it that we’ve come for? Unity, right?”

Heads bob in agreement.

One of Yoruba House’s first successes came just after the 1992 riots, when the Adeyemis put the word out about a drumming- for-unity weekend. Hundreds of every color and creed came together to release some of the tension permeating the city.

Folks drumming on this night also seem to come from every walk of life. Some are students wearing cutoff jeans and T-shirts. Others are professionals in wire-rimmed glasses. Several folks wear African clothing and tie-dyed garb.

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Some bring their own drums, some rent them at Yoruba House for \$5 a night.

One woman is a middle school teacher, another works in an office in Century City, another is an animator. An uncommon number of the men, Carole says, are computer workers who need a release from work stress.

After a short break, the drumming starts again. It’s a soothing, dreamy beat.

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Within a few minutes, I write in my notebook, “I’m suddenly sleepy, like a baby being rocked.” I find out later it’s during a rhythm meant to induce a trance-like state. And, yes, I beat a borrowed drum--my first time--and it was great fun, though I’m pretty sure I was pretty bad.

For others, the beat has the opposite effect. Champion, 57, of South Pasadena, sets her drum aside to sway and rock her hips in the center of the circle. Another

woman joins her, then a man, then others.

They dance barefoot, in long skirts. They toss their hair this way and that, feet stamping, arms waving, leaping, swaying.

“I kind of like watching some of these people,” admits Joe Trevino, who chuckles at the gyrations in front of him. “I mean, it’s pretty funny.”

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But Trevino, of Hollywood, also has come for serious purposes: He’s a percussionist in a local band called Circle the Cat. Trained as a congero--a Cuban-style drummer--he comes to Yoruba House to learn African drumming.

As the beat goes on into the night, the lone child in the room resists her mother’s attempts to get her home. It’s well past her bedtime, but she’s begging to stay longer.

“Drumming is totally fun,” says Elisabeth Mutel, 10, of Brentwood.

She adds with a smile, “It’s spiritive.”

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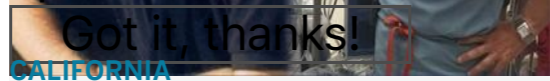
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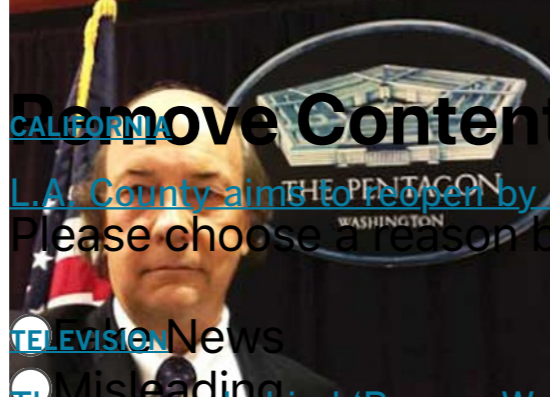
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